Ernest Green

from *Freedom's Children: Young Civil Rights Activists Tell Their Own Stories*

By: Ellen S. Levine

Adapted by Fishtank Staff

Page 41

Ernest Green was one of the Little Rock Nine. He was the only senior in the group.

Page 42

In the spring of 1957, the Little Rock school board finally agreed to desegregate grades ten through twelve. It was going to occur at Central High School [an all-white school].

We all knew Central. And in many cases the course books that we used were hand-me-downs from Central. You could tell because they had Central students' names in them. You didn't have to be a rocket scientist to figure out that the building, the course curriculum, the laboratory facilities, all of that was significantly different from what we had at Horace Mann, the black high school.

In Little Rock you never thought of yourself as being "Deep South." Deep South was going to Jackson, Mississippi, or Birmingham, Alabama. The year before we went to Central, both the city buses in Little Rock and the public libraries were integrated without any problems. The university had accepted some black students, and while it was difficult, they were surviving and doing their course work. So my expectations were that there would be words and taunts, but over a period of time that would blow over. I didn't think there'd be anything I couldn't handle.

And it seemed to me an opportunity to participate in something new. I knew it was going to be a change in Little Rock—I was smart enough to figure that out—but I didn't realize it was going to have impact beyond Little Rock.

In the spring of '57, before we left school for the summer, each teacher gathered names of interested students. I put my name in, and that's where I left it. I don't think anybody really focused a great deal on it. If I got in, fine. I talked with my mother about it. She said if I wanted to go and I was accepted, she would support me.

People like my mother and my grandfather, who was a postman and had attempted to vote in the Democratic primary, really are the backbone of the southern resistance. They didn't take a high public position, but in many ways expressed their indignation, their anger, and

Page 43

attempted to turn things around. My mother and my aunt were part of a lawsuit in the 1940s that filed for equal pay for black and white teachers.

We kids did it mainly because we didn't know any better. But our parents were willing to put their careers, their homes on the line. To me that says a lot.

Some time before school started, we learned there were limits on what black students were going to be allowed to do. You knew that you weren't going to play football, be in the

band or the class play, go to the prom. I had been in the school band for five years from seventh grade through eleventh. Tenor sax. But this was an important enough breakthrough that all of these other activities, well, you could give them up.

> *For the first three weeks of the school term, Governor Faubus ordered the Arkansas National Guard to surround Central High to keep the black students out. Finally, a federal court judge ordered Faubus to remove the troops. The students were quietly brought into the school through a side door, while a riotous mob attacked black and white newspaper reporters nearby.*

I never expected it to be life-threatening, which it was initially. I didn't have any real sense of how dangerous it could have been until we got home. We were in this huge school. I didn't hear any of the mob outside. When we were whisked out of school back to our homes, we sat there and watched it on TV. This is real, I thought. This is no day at the beach.

The whole period has been cast in such a monochrome color that you don't get any of the tension and discussions going on in the black community. I'll never forget that afternoon. There were lots of black people who didn't think this was such a terrific idea. They saw it as disruptive, upsetting their personal lives. This neighbor of mine said, "You kids are crazy. The federal government is never going to support you. You're going to be out there by yourself and never get back into the school." Now that was a real fear because I wanted to graduate that year.

President Eisenhower sent in the troops that night. There is an air force base about ten or fifteen miles from Little Rock. They were flying in a thousand paratroopers and support equipment. Lots of planes, probably a hundred or better, because they sent them in with all of their support materiel and jeeps and helicopters. I slept through all of that. Some people go hyper at crises. I usually get calm before and then I get hyper after I realize what I have done. So that night I didn't hear anything.

The next day we were picked up by the army at our individual houses and taken to Mrs. Bates's house, which was our gathering spot. From there we got into a station wagon. It was a convoy. They had a jeep in front, a jeep behind, and armed soldiers in each of them. I think there were machine-gun mounts on the back of the jeeps.

There were nine of us, and a station wagon was not very big. You had the driver, an officer in charge, and then us. We were all kind of squooshed in, riding along making jokes about it. There was no traffic, and no people were in front of Central. They had blocked off the school at least a half a block away. Nobody could enter without appropriate passes. I guess in army terms, they really had secured the area.

A helicopter was hovering overhead. You could see the news cameras across the street. And as we got out of the station wagon, a cordon of soldiers surrounded us. They marched, and we kind of strolled along, walking up the steps. Central is big, really built more like a college campus. The school is a couple of blocks long. A series of steps lead up to the front, which is

Levine, E. S. (2000) *Freedom's children: Young civil rights activists tell their own stories*. Puffin Books.

very imposing. It was real drama going from the station wagon to the front door of the school. It probably took us four or five minutes just to walk up to the front of the steps.

Most people didn't believe Eisenhower would ever use that much force to get us back in school. I thought that that was important, but I had no idea of the importance of it beyond my
Page 45 particular situation. Also, we had been out of school for three weeks, so all of us were getting a little itchy about getting further behind in our course work.

Every day the troops would bring us to the school. Initially we each had a paratrooper who would wait outside the classroom to escort us to the next class, so that we were never alone. All the troop personnel at the school were white, even though the army was integrated at that time. The black men were kept back at the air force base. I've run into both black and white men who were in that 101st Airborne Division assigned to Little Rock. Each of them that I met has said how proud he was to be assigned to that duty.

The officers had sidearms in the school. The first day or so they had rifles inside the school. When Governor Faubus said Arkansas was occupied, that was true.

The army regulars and the 101st Airborne Division were withdrawn by November. Only the federalized Arkansas National Guard remained.

The first month with the troops and all of the media attention had been the point of high euphoria. In fact, conditions in the school were fairly tranquil. You had this great show of force. And also the most avid of the segregationists were boycotting classes at that point. When the segregationists realized that we weren't leaving, they started coming back. And when they came back, all hell started breaking loose. From around Thanksgiving until about March or April, it really was like having to fight hand-to-hand combat. It was trench warfare.

As they withdrew the troops from inside the corridors, you were subjected to all kinds of taunts, someone attempting to trip you, pour ink on you, in some other way ruin your clothing, and at worst, someone physically attacking you. I never had ink thrown on me. I got hit with water guns. We got calls at all times of the night—people saying they were going to have acid in the water guns and they were going to squirt it in our faces.

Page 48 Over six hundred students were graduating, and there were honors and scholarships and all that. It's the irony of my class that no matter what any of the others did that night, they were all going to be overshadowed by one event—my graduation. I mean, they could be magna cum laude and have 59,000 scholarships, but that wasn't going to be the hook that people were going to remember.

We sat in these seats, and I had a space on both sides because nobody wanted to sit next to me. To get your diploma, you had to walk up a set of steps, across a platform, and back down. I had on this cap and gown. When they called my name, I was thinking, With all this

attention, I don't want to trip. I just wanted to make sure I could stick my hand out to receive it and not fall on my face. No cosmic thoughts. Just very, very micro.

There was applause for every student. When they called my name, there were a few
Page 49 claps in the audience, probably from my family. Mostly there was silence. It was eerie, quiet. But it was as if none of that mattered. I think the fact that it was so silent was indicative of the fact that I had done something. And really all nine of us had. Even though I was the one receiving the diploma, I couldn't have done it without the support of the others.

Afterward I went to where my mother, my aunt, and my brother were. Dr. Martin Luther King was sitting with my family. I knew he was speaking in Pine Bluff at the black college, but I didn't know he was going to come up to Little Rock for my graduation. I had never met him before that. He had a plane to catch, so we just spent a brief period of time together.

At this point, I'm a high school graduate of sixteen. I've gotten a load off of my shoulders, and I clearly was not interested in cosmic issues. I wanted to go meet my friends. We were having a party over at the house and celebrating.

I had the broader view a few days before. I remember reading in the paper that my graduating was going to be a real milestone. I thought to myself, This is great, but I want to do something else in life besides graduating from Little Rock Central High School. What do I do from here?

Little Rock, I think, became symbolic for a lot of things. It was one of the most televised of the desegregation cases. It was made for TV. It was good and evil. It was about as black and white as you could make life. You had nine kids who were innocent enough they couldn't have harmed a lot of people, and you had Governor Faubus playing the heavy. You had real drama.

One thing that I think is very important is this: while the nine of us may have been preselected, there really are nine, ten, thirty, forty, fifty kids in every community that could have done that. It wasn't that nine people fell out of the sky in Little Rock. We were all ordinary kids. You really do have the ability to do a lot more than either you've been told or you've been led to believe by your surroundings. If given the opportunity, you'd be surprised at how much you can do, how much you can achieve.

Levine, E. S. (2000) *Freedom's children: Young civil rights activists tell their own stories*. Puffin Books.