

from Through My Eyes

Ruby Bridges



About the Author



In November 1960, **Ruby Bridges** (b. 1954) became the first African American child to attend an all-white elementary school in the South. She founded the Ruby Bridges Foundation in New Orleans in 1999—its motto is “Racism is a grown-up disease and we must stop using our children to spread it.”

BACKGROUND

In 1954, the U.S. Supreme Court declared that separate schools are “inherently unequal.” There was huge resistance to change, so much so that in 1957, more than 1,000 army paratroopers were called to protect nine black students scheduled to attend a white high school in Arkansas. Throughout the 1960s, the federal government had to force many Southern school districts to comply with the law.

NOTES

One Year in an All-Black School

- 1 **W**hen it was time for me to start kindergarten, I went to the Johnson Lockett Elementary School. My segregated¹ school was fairly far from my house, but I had lots of company for the long walk. All the kids on my block went to Johnson Lockett. I loved school that year, and my teacher, Mrs. King, was warm and encouraging. She was black, as all the teachers in black schools were back then. Mrs. King was quite old, and she reminded me of my grandmother.
- 2 What I didn’t know in kindergarten was that a federal court in New Orleans was about to force two white public schools to admit black students. The plan was to integrate² only the first grade for

1. **segregated** (SEHG ruh gay tihd) *adj.* separated on the basis of race.

2. **integrate** (IHN tuh grayt) *v.* open to people of all races.

that year. Then, every year after that, the incoming first grade would also be integrated.

- 3 In the late spring of my year at Johnson Lockett, the city school board began testing black kindergartners. They wanted to find out which children should be sent to the white schools. I took the test. I was only five, and I'm sure I didn't have any idea why I was taking it. Still, I remember that day. I remember getting dressed up and riding uptown on the bus with my mother, and sitting in an enormous room in the school board building along with about a hundred other black kids, all waiting to be tested.
- 4 Apparently the test was difficult, and I've been told that it was set up so that kids would have a hard time passing. If all the black children had failed, the white school board might have had a way to keep the schools segregated for a while longer.
- 5 That summer, my parents were contacted by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). The NAACP is an old and well-respected civil rights organization. Its members work to get equal rights for black people.
- 6 Several people from the NAACP came to the house in the summer. They told my parents that I was one of just a few black children to pass the school board test, and that I had been chosen to attend one of the white schools, William Frantz Public School. They said it was a better school and closer to my home than the one I had been attending. They said I had the right to go to the closest school in my district. They pressured my parents and made a lot of promises. They said my going to William Frantz would help me, my brothers, my sister, and other black children in the future. We would receive a better education, which would give us better opportunities as adults.
- 7 My parents argued about what to do. My father, Abon, didn't want any part of school integration. He was a gentle man and feared that angry segregationists might hurt his family. Having fought in the Korean War, he experienced segregation on the battlefield, where he risked his life for his country. He didn't think that things would ever change. He didn't think I would ever be treated as an equal.
- 8 Lucille, my mother, was convinced that no harm would come to us. She thought that the opportunity for me to get the best education possible was worth the risk, and she finally convinced my father.

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- 9 *Ruby was special. I wanted her to have a good education so she could get a good job when she grew up. But Ruby's father thought his child shouldn't go where she wasn't wanted.*

10 *There were things I didn't understand. I didn't know Ruby would be the only black child in the school. I didn't know how bad things would get.*

11 *I remember being afraid on the first day Ruby went to the Frantz school, when I came home and turned on the TV set and I realized that, at that moment, the whole world was watching my baby and talking about her.*

12 *At that moment, I was most afraid.*

—Lucille Bridges

My Mother Breaks the News

13 When September came that year, I didn't start first grade at William Frantz. The lawmakers in the state capital, Baton Rouge, had found a way to slow down integration, so I was sent back to my old school. I didn't know I was ever supposed to go to school anywhere else, so being back at Johnson Lockett was fine with me.

14 All through the summer and early fall, the state legislators fought the federal court. They passed twenty-eight new anti-integration laws. They even tried to take over the public school system. The Louisiana governor, Jimmie H. Davis, supported the segregationists. He said he would go to jail before he would allow black children in white schools. He even threatened to close all of the public schools rather than see them integrated.

15 The federal court, led by Federal District Court Judge J. Skelly Wright, unyielding³ in his commitment to upholding the law of the land and in his dedication to equal opportunity for all Americans, would block the segregationists again and again. J. Skelly Wright struck down the state's new anti-integration laws as unconstitutional. School integration would proceed. Praise the Lord!

16 The judge couldn't enforce his order in time for the start of school in September, but he set a new deadline for Monday, November 14.

17 The anger all across New Orleans convinced Judge Wright that things might grow violent. He asked the U.S. government to rush federal marshals to New Orleans to protect the black first graders.

18 There were four of us in all. There was a fifth girl originally, but her parents decided at the last minute not to transfer her. Three of the remaining children, all girls, were to go to a school named McDonogh. I was the fourth child. I was going to integrate William Frantz Public School, and I was going alone.

19 On Sunday, November 13, my mother told me I would start at a new school the next day. She hinted there could be something unusual about it, but she didn't explain. "There might be a lot of

3. **unyielding** (uhn YEEL dihng) *adj.* not giving way to pressure.

people outside the school,” she said. “But you don’t need to be afraid. I’ll be with you.”

- 20 All I remember thinking that night was that I wouldn’t be going to school with my friends anymore, and I wasn’t happy about that.

November 14, 1960

- 21 My mother took special care getting me ready for school. When somebody knocked on my door that morning, my mother expected to see people from the NAACP. Instead, she saw four serious-looking white men, dressed in suits and wearing armbands. They were U.S. federal marshals. They had come to drive us to school and stay with us all day. I learned later they were carrying guns.
- 22 I remember climbing into the back seat of the marshals’ car with my mother, but I don’t remember feeling frightened. William Frantz Public School was only five blocks away, so one of the marshals in the front seat told my mother right away what we should do when we got there.
- 23 “Let us get out of the car first,” the marshal said. “Then you’ll get out, and the four of us will surround you and your daughter. We’ll walk up to the door together. Just walk straight ahead, and don’t look back.”
- 24 When we were near the school, my mother said, “Ruby, I want you to behave yourself today and do what the marshals say.”
- 25 We drove down North Galvez Street to the point where it crosses Alvar. I remember looking out of the car as we pulled up to the Frantz school. There were barricades and people shouting and policemen everywhere. I thought maybe it was Mardi Gras, the carnival that takes place in New Orleans every year. Mardi Gras was always noisy.
- 26 As we walked through the crowd, I didn’t see any faces. I guess that’s because I wasn’t very tall and I was surrounded by the marshals. People yelled and threw things. I could see the school building, and it looked bigger and nicer than my old school. When we climbed the high steps to the front door, there were policemen in uniforms at the top. The policemen at the door and the crowd behind us made me think this was an important place.
- 27 It must be college, I thought to myself.

The First Day at William Frantz

- 28 Once we were inside the building, the marshals walked us up a flight of stairs. The school office was at the top. My mother and I went in and were told to sit in the principal’s office. The marshals sat outside. There were windows in the room where we waited.

That meant everybody passing by could see us. I remember noticing everyone was white.

29 All day long, white parents rushed into the office. They were upset. They were arguing and pointing at us. When they took their children to school that morning, the parents hadn't been sure whether William Frantz would be integrated that day or not. After my mother and I arrived, they ran into classrooms and dragged their children out of the school. From behind the windows in the office, all I saw was confusion. I told myself that this must be the way it is in a big school.

30 That whole first day, my mother and I just sat and waited. We didn't talk to anybody. I remember watching a big, round clock on the wall. When it was 3:00 and time to go home, I was glad. I had thought my new school would be hard, but the first day was easy.

Going Home

31 When we left school that first day, the crowd outside was even bigger and louder than it had been in the morning. There were reporters and film cameras and people everywhere. I guess the police couldn't keep them behind the barricades. It seemed to take us a long time to get to the marshals' car.

32 Later on I learned there had been protestors in front of the two integrated schools the whole day. They wanted to be sure white parents would boycott⁴ the school and not let their children attend. Groups of high school boys, joining the protestors, paraded up and down the street and sang new verses to old hymns. Their favorite was "Battle Hymn of the Republic," in which they changed the chorus to "Glory, glory, segregation, the South will rise again." Many of the boys carried signs and said awful things, but most of all I remember seeing a black doll in a coffin, which frightened me more than anything else.

33 After the first day, I was glad to get home. I wanted to change my clothes and go outside to find my friends. My mother wasn't too worried about me because the police had set up barricades at each end of the block. Only local residents were allowed on our street. That afternoon, I taught a friend the chant I had learned: "Two, four, six, eight, we don't want to integrate." My friend and I didn't know what the words meant, but we would jump rope to it every day after school.

34 My father heard about the trouble at school. That night when he came home from work, he said I was his "brave little Ruby."

4. **boycott** (BOY kot) v. refuse to buy, sell, or use a product or service as a form of protest.

- 35 *Leaving the school each day seemed even more frightening than arriving in the morning.*
- 36 *I always drove to work and kept my car on the playground behind the school building. The police had turned the playground into a parking lot because it was the only area they could protect.*
- 37 *On leaving school in the afternoon—even with a police escort—you were always fearful of how the people gathered along the sidewalks might choose to protest that day as you drove past them. The New Orleans police were supposed to be there to help us, but they very much disliked being the ones to enforce integration, so you never could be confident of their support and cooperation.*

—Barbara Henry, Ruby's First-Grade Teacher