

Book by former student-body president aims to correct record on Little Rock

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LITTLE ROCK, Ark. (ABP)—Ralph Brodie has been waiting for 50 years to tell his side of [the desegregation crisis at Little Rock Central High School](#). A lot of his classmates have been waiting, too.

“The main thing ... is that the student body of Central High in 1957-58 had a class full of extraordinary students who, both academically and athletically, would have been the envy of any high school in the country in normal times,” he said. “And, in extraordinary times, we really should look at them and be proud of their conduct, despite the fact that there might have been 50 or 60 kids in a 2,000-student body who caused problems.”

Brodie referred to the segregationist students who ceaselessly harassed the nine African-American students who integrated the school Sept. 25, 1957. He was the student-body president that year.

Media coverage of the crisis surrounding the event—exacerbated by a formerly moderate governor who played to segregationists due to electoral pressures—gave the white citizens of Little Rock a black eye from which the city is only now starting to recover, residents say.

“With the media, we’re looked at as white, Southern and presumably racist,” Brodie, now a Little Rock tax attorney, said in a recent interview.

But, with the help of co-author Marvin Schwartz, he has compiled accounts from scores of his schoolmates in order to tell their stories, which he believes history has largely ignored. Titled *Central in Our Lives: Voices From Little Rock Central High School 1957-59*, the book was published by the Butler Center for Arkansas Studies.

Brodie, a lifelong member of Pulaski Heights Baptist Church in Little Rock, said the turmoil of a year unlike any other continued after reporters left Little Rock and the nation’s eyes had turned to other news, like the Soviet Union’s launch of Sputnik.

He began collecting his classmates’ memories after their 40th reunion, nearly 10 years ago. He said he was surprised to hear white students recount stories of many small gestures of kindness toward their black schoolmates.

“There are a number of positive stories. I didn’t know these happened until 10 years ago,” he said. He noted that school officials had instituted a strict no-discussion policy in class regarding integration or the crisis itself, in order to avoid further turmoil during the school day.

For instance, Brodie recounted that one of his football teammates became the physics laboratory partner of the only senior among the Little Rock Nine, Ernest Green, when Green was allowed to enter the school three weeks after the term started. The teammate, Steve Swofford, and another class member helped Green get up-to-date on his assignments. Brodie

helped facilitate a reunion between Green and his old lab partners immediately after a 50th anniversary commemoration at the school Sept. 25.

His book recounts many such tales, including a female classmate who initially befriended Green. Segregationist students took note of her friendliness, she said, and threatened her father's business with a boycott. After that, she resorted to maintaining her friendship with Green only by telephone.

His classmates had lots of these kinds of stories, Brodie discovered.

"Individually, they probably don't amount to much, but collectively, it tells a tale of a student body where kids were willing to reach out, and then they ultimately suffered the consequence of reaching out," he said.

While quick to note that what white students endured doesn't compare to the Little Rock Nine—"this isn't a competition in suffering"—Brodie said such stories prove that the students weren't all virulent racists.

And, Brodie added, even the students who were ideologically segregationists but did not harass the black students or disrupt the school day should at least be looked upon kindly for allowing integration to proceed.

"Desegregation was just another rule change, so it wasn't any big thing for most of us," he said, noting that Central High then—as now—was one of the best public schools in the nation. Brodie estimates that the troublemakers numbered 50 or 60, while others estimate the group was as many as 200 out of nearly 2,000 students.

Schwartz, a New York native who settled in Arkansas as an adult, said the stories the book tells show a school filled mainly with good citizens who were tainted by the historical record. The work "draws a portrait of a

student body that was really, exceptionally well-groomed young people. They had a good sense of equity and fair play. Plus, they were exceptionally motivated to better themselves.”

What many members of the Little Rock Nine have recounted over the years, however, is the paucity of the acts of kindness described in the book.

“The majority of (white) students turned their backs, and the message ... it seemed to me, is that they really didn’t care about what was happening to us,” said Elizabeth Eckford, one of the Nine, in a press conference prior to the 50th anniversary event. “Today, some of those people say that they were kind to us, that they were welcoming to us. I think that they want to be seen as understanding, as good people.”

But Eckford and other members of the Nine have told several stories of white students who befriended them.

Also, Brodie and Schwartz both noted, administrators and the school board bowed to segregationist pressure by instituting several policies banning the black students from extracurricular involvement. Because they couldn’t be on integrated sports teams or get to know black students outside of the classroom, Schwartz said, white students at Central missed many opportunities for camaraderie-building.

“These were kids with whom the body of students at Central High had no previous encounter, no shared cultural history,” he said. “So, they were virtually strangers. There was no animosity to them [among most white students], but there was no shared history.”

Brodie said school board officials also feared expelling the worst of the troublemakers because segregationist students had been offered legal support by local anti-integration groups. Because of that, many students who tormented the Little Rock Nine were able to keep up a reign of terror that school officials otherwise would not have tolerated.

Such circumstances, he said, added up to tarnish the reputation of most of his schoolmates, not to mention a school and city that had, before the crisis, been considered by some as models of progress in the South.

A photograph of Eckford taken by Arkansas Democrat photographer Will Counts at the beginning of the crisis is arguably one of the most famous images of the civil-rights movement. It features Eckford, barred by Arkansas National Guard troops from entering the school, hounded in the street by a jeering white mob. Discernible in the crowd directly behind Eckford is the face of Central student Hazel Bryan Massery. Massery's mouth is contorted in rage, as Eckford suffers silently behind large sunglasses.

Brodie laments that that photo has become the defining image of Little Rock Central High School for much of the world.

"Many times a photo will be taken to mean a lot more than it suggests—for example, the landmark photo of Hazel Massery yelling at Elizabeth Eckford—that girl represents to all the media and all the public all Central High students," he said. "That wasn't the way the whole student body acted, nor was that what happened on the inside of the school."

Brodie contrasts that image with one the same photographer took a month later, after the black students finally made it inside Central for good. It shows students standing outside during one of the many bomb threats the school experienced that year. Among the crowd is black student Minnijean Brown Trickey—shown laughing and talking with her classmates.

"They should show both of those images side-by-side," Brodie said.

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