

Elizabeth Eckford: Central High in 1957 'was not ... a normal environment'

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(CNN) -- Elizabeth Eckford recently sat down with CNN and recalled the events of the 1957-58 school year, when she and eight other African-American teenage students were chosen to attend Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, as part of that city's court-ordered directive to desegregate its schools.

CNN: Why did your parents let you go to Central High School?

ECKFORD: After much persistence on my part. And my older sister constantly talking to them. We're talkers, we are. We were from a really, really strict, old-fashioned environment. We weren't allowed to argue with our parents, but we were always encouraged to discuss things. And my sister could not be worn down. She just kept asking, and I kept asking. And that was unusual for me. Usually, when my parents said no, I would just accept that. Mother didn't say no this time. She said, "We'll see." And so I kept asking, which is really, really, really different than what my parents were accustomed to me being. And actually, the decision wasn't made until August (1957).

CNN: Why were you so persistent?

ECKFORD: Even though we were a working-class family I'd always been told that I ought to, should, and would go to college. And, in a segregated environment I knew that ... what was available to white students was more than, and better than what was available in a Negro school. See, the dual school system, was never, it was separate, but it was never equal.

CNN: Can you describe September 1957, when you initially tried to enter the school and were eventually permitted in? What was the atmosphere like for you in Little Rock, as you approached the school?

ECKFORD: On the first day at Central High School, September 4, 1957, I rode by myself. And after having been turned away by the National Guard three times, I stepped into the street.

I walked two blocks from the bus stop and the crowd surged forward and they were right on my heels so I had to go to where I knew there was another bus drop. To a teenager, it seemed like a really, really large school. I felt that at least I'd see some familiar faces because a lot of my neighbors went to that school.

And so, the crowd became angry. They were taunting me and they were following me. That's what you see in the pictures from that day. When the crowd first surged forward, I actually looked into the crowd for help (laughs), because I was accustomed to looking to adults.

My mother, unfortunately ... local radio was very irresponsible, there were fantastic reports that I'd been injured, and I was not physically injured. I went to the Negro School for Deaf and Blind where mother worked in a laundry room, and ... she'd been told some awful things. So when I walked in she was praying.

My dad had heard some awful things. And he had gone out ... looking for me. My mother was in the basement of the school, in the laundry room. Her back was to me, I could tell she was praying.

My mother was extremely overprotective. So how in the world is it she allowed me to go back to the school? I didn't tell my folks what was happening on a daily basis. I knew my mother wouldn't let me stay if she had known, but she had to have known. It was not only unpleasant, but it was difficult. Really, really difficult. I'm now aware of what an awful price my mother had to have paid.

CNN: And that first day at Central, when you and the other students were finally allowed in the school?

ECKFORD: There was a period of uncertainty where the president of the United States was talking to the (Arkansas) governor, trying to convince him to remove the guardsmen, which the governor put there as a barrier.

The guardsmen kept the demonstrators off the school grounds. They admitted white students through their ranks but they kept us away, the Negro students.

So there was uncertainty. It was after an injunction [that] the governor withdrew the National Guard. And the local police set up barricades and tried to maintain order outside the school. We slipped in a side door of that two-block wide school on September 23. After perhaps an hour and a half, two hours before the crowd outside realized we were in the school and before most of the students heard that we were there. We went in the school ... students were already in class. We had been registered during summer by the counselors.

So that, when they found out we were in school, some students panicked so badly, there were some that actually jumped from second-floor windows. The crowd became infuriated. There were three black reporters outside among those, what started out on the first day (September 4, 1957) as 100 or less people out there, by September 23rd had grown to at least 1,000. Angry people who now were a true mob when they found out we were in school.

And there was a melee. They were beating the press. They beat three black reporters. Two of them ran, one refused to. So, the most dramatic pictures from the Crisis -- as what we refer to of our time here -- are pictures of that one lone black reporter being beaten repeatedly; kicked and throttled, knocked down.

And, I really think it was those photographs, the impact of those photographs internationally, during a time of the Cold War, when, the actuality of some of what America didn't talk about, was shown to the world, that that is what made the president act, take federal control of the Arkansas National Guard, and send paratroopers to Little Rock. And they dispelled the mob. They escorted us into school ... on September 25.

There's this paradoxical photograph I remember from that time. It's a picture of a convoy, a military convoy coming across the Broadway Bridge from North Little Rock to Little Rock. And in the background is this large billboard that says, "Who will build Arkansas if our own people do not?"

CNN: And the atmosphere at school for you that first year?

ECKFORD: You know about the Plague of the Three Monkeys? Hear no evil, see no evil and do no evil? All of the students who said, that we see nowadays, that say they went to school there? Say, "Wasn't me, wasn't me. I wasn't one of those attacking you." (shaking head)

We were physically assaulted every day. The principal's rule was that, no matter what was reported, he wouldn't act on any reports if a teacher didn't corroborate what we said happened. So, in essence, students had free reign to attack us every day. It was a coordinated group of about 55 students who attacked us out of 1,900 students at the school.

A lot of people think, "We didn't know what was going on." People around me that I saw didn't react to what they saw or what they had to have heard. They turned their backs. It was impossible to have a friend. This was not anything like a normal environment. Anybody that would talk to us got a lot of pressure.

There's two students I want to talk about that persisted in talking to me in speech class. Actually I was a very, very shy person, but I felt comfortable, felt that I belonged in that one class. At the end of the day, two people treated me like a human being. (starts to cry). And when they just ... they persisted in talking to me every day like any other student. They didn't ask me something to see what "it" sounded like. They just talked to me.

I didn't know what happened to them. I knew something had to be happening to them. I didn't find out until 1996 what had happened to them. There was a boy and there was a girl. The boy was a senior, and there's a

graduation picture of him standing next to Ernest Green (one of the Little Rock Nine) and a bunch of students in the background looking at them and talking about them, just 'cause he was standing near Ernest Green.

But I found out in '96, because I had talked about these students over the years. In the '60s I started naming them. So, they had heard about me, and what it meant to me.

One girl named Ann Williams I found out didn't live in Little Rock. She said her family lived on a farm outside the city, and that her father had to hire armed guards for their home.

And the other student is Ken Reinhardt. Ken was harassed. He'd been knocked down, one time, he said, right in front of the gym teacher and the gym teacher did nothing.

There have been one or two students who've acknowledged seeing in the boy's gym, in the shower room, that the Negro boys were hit with hot, wet, knotted towels. Broken glass on the shower room floor.

I remember the few times we were scalded in the shower room. I didn't hear a peep from either girl on either side of me. We had open stalls in the shower. So they'd been warned.

Anyway, school ended May 28, 1958.

CNN: Can you recall the last day of school for you that year?

ECKFORD: I don't even know if I was there the last day. We had finals to do back then, and they were scheduled on a different day, so we only came to school on a day we had to take a test. But whatever that last day was, it was wonderful that that was the last day, because it was hard going to school each day.

It was hard, going back every day. It was hard, trying to stay there all day.