



**INTERVIEW**

# Elizabeth Eckford Reflects on Little Rock

Excerpts from an interview conducted by Joe Bubar of Scholastic in 2017

**SCHOLASTIC:** The day before you went to Central High, how did you feel?

**ELIZABETH ECKFORD:** I was nervous because I was really shy, and I was going to a new school, and I was going alone.

**Did you expect that something bad might happen?**

I knew that anybody doing something like that for the first time would hear some ugly things, but I thought that after the students got to know me, they would accept me. I didn't expect a mob of people. I thought that the National Guard was there to protect us, but they weren't. After three attempts to cross their lines I finally understood that they were there to keep me out. At that time a crowd of people were behind me so I couldn't go the direction I had come from. But the area was familiar to me. I had seen them break ranks to let white students through. Central has a lot of entrances so I tried at the corner and I was blocked I went down further and again I was blocked. Some point they closed ranks and other points they crossed rifles. And a third time they directed me across the street.

**Why did you sign up to be one of the first black students to attend Central High?**

I wanted to be better prepared for college. In a segregated system, there's no such thing as equality. The white kids always had more courses, more labs, more everything.

**What did it feel like to walk up to school that day and see the National Guard blocking the entrance and a mob of white people telling you to go home?**



**Elizabeth Eckford** is harassed as she tries to enter Central High on Sept. 4, 1957.

**'It was absolute terror... I was afraid for my life.'**

It was absolute terror. There were photographers and reporters walking in front of me, and these people were on my heels screaming at me—screaming ugly, ugly things. I was afraid for my life, because people were threatening me. I felt like I had no help while I was walking. I didn't know anything about the call to meet up with others. Two of the older reporters who were there tried to comfort me, and the crowd got angry at them for that. At some point they threatened to lynch me, to get a rope. It was frightening. A white woman started confronting the crowd, saying they should be ashamed, that she wanted her little girl to

## Q&A with Elizabeth Eckford (continued)

go to school with Negro boys and girls, and with every statement she made, they became angrier and angrier.

### **Obviously the action in that famous photo is taking place behind you, but can you describe your thoughts and emotions in that photograph?**

It took a few years before I realized that photo was going to continue to be shown. And in 2000, Associated Press said it was one of the 50 most iconic photographs of the 20th century. And I think it's because it's really good photojournalism. The girl behind me, who was screaming at me, was forever branded a racist. I met her in 1996 or 1997, but she had called and apologized in 1963.

### **Did things get even worse once you started classes?**

Once we got into school, we were escorted by the 101st Airborne Division. Each of us was assigned a soldier guard who followed us in hallways but did not go into classes. It was hard to go back to school every day. There were taunts, and other things were said. Very quickly, a group was organized to knock us about in the school. And that continued from September 25 to the end of the school year.

It was hard to go back to school every day, because the principal told us to not bother our teachers and to report incidents to the vice principal. But he said he wouldn't act



Elizabeth Eckford in 2011.

**'They knocked us down stairways, one boy tried to throw acid in a girl's face'**

on anything if it was not witnessed by an adult. The soldier guards followed us several paces behind, so in most instances they were not able to prevent things from happening to us. Several times, three black boys were knocked down and they were being kicked, and the soldiers pulled [the attackers] off the boys. When students were taken to the office the principal would give them a talking-to in most instances and send them back to class.

During the year, there were about 100 suspensions, but most of the group remained intact. They knocked us down stairways, one boy tried to throw acid in a girl's face, we were slammed into walls.

### **What do you think is the legacy of the Little Rock Nine? Why do you think it's still important for kids today to learn about it?**

All day long I was isolated. We didn't see each other, except for lunch period and gym, and people didn't talk to me if they didn't say hateful things. But there were two students who reached out from the beginning and continued to talk to me in a kind way. I tell students that when they see someone being harassed that they can help by acknowledging them, treating them as a human being, treating them like they want to be treated. If they just reach out and give them that verbal support, it would mean a lot to somebody who is alone most of the time and being hurt by the people around them. •

## Questions

- 1. Why did Elizabeth Eckford volunteer to help integrate Central High?**
- 2. What surprised her about the presence of the National Guard when she initially tried to help integrate Central High?**
- 3. What happened to the people who tried to defend Eckford outside Central High?**
- 4. Once Eckford and her fellow black students got into Central High, how were they treated?**
- 5. What is Eckford's advice for students who witness harassment or bullying?**