ANALYZING PRIMARY SOURCES

Three Voices From Little Rock

The integration of Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, left its mark on everyone who experienced it. Read these firsthand accounts of three teens who lived through those turbulent events in 1957. Then answer the questions that follow.

Ernest Green
one of the Little Rock Nine

In early August, the newspapers ran the names of the nine of us who were going to Central. And I’ll never forget what happened when I went to work the next day. This young [white] guy, he was about my age, his folks were members of the country club where I worked as a towel boy, and he came up to me and said, “How could you do it?” I said, “What do you mean, how could I do it?” He said, “You seem like such a nice fellow. Why is it you want to go to Central? Why do you want to destroy our relationship?” For the first time it began to hit me that going there was not going to be as simple as I had thought when I signed up.

Craig Rains
a white senior at Central High School

My first thought [after hearing that Central was to be integrated] was not that we were going to have to go to school with blacks—that didn't bother me—but that we were being told by the federal government to do something and we didn’t have any say-so in that.

[On that first morning, he is raising the flag outside the school when he sees Elizabeth Eckford surrounded by the hostile crowd.]

I was just dumbfounded. . . . I thought, Well, I can’t believe people would actually be this way to other people. I began to change from being somebody who, if I had my way, would have said, “Let’s don’t integrate, because it’s the state’s right to decide,” to someone who felt a real sense of compassion for these [black] students.

Melba Pattillo Beals
one of the Little Rock Nine

The [federal] troops were wonderful. . . . [But] they couldn’t be with us everywhere. They couldn’t be with us, for example, in the ladies’ bathroom, they couldn’t be with us in gym. . . . You’d be walking out to the volleyball court, and someone would break a bottle and trip you on the bottle. . . .

After a while, I started saying to myself, Am I less than human? Why did they do this to me? What’s wrong with me? . . . [But gradually] you just mellow out and you just realize that survival is day to day, and you start to grasp your own spirit, you start to grasp the depth of the human spirit and you start to understand your own ability to cope no matter what. That is the greatest lesson I learned.

Questions

DIRECTIONS: Fill in the circle of the best answer.

1. How were the Little Rock Nine selected?
   A. Their parents nominated them.
   B. They had the best grades.
   C. They signed up (volunteered).
   D. They were chosen by lottery.

2. Where was Craig Rains when Elizabeth Eckford tried to enter Central High?
   A. in a classroom
   B. in the crowd of jeering white students
   C. raising the flag outside the school
   D. watching the scene through a window

3. Melba Pattillo Beals says that the federal troops couldn’t protect the black students from what?
   A. abuse by white students
   B. being expelled from Central High
   C. learning valuable lessons
   D. tripping on the volleyball court

4. Who did Rains originally think should decide whether to integrate schools?
   A. each school’s faculty and administration
   B. the federal government
   C. the state
   D. the students

5. Which statement best describes Ernest Green’s reaction when the white teen confronted him?
   A. He didn’t remember the white teen.
   B. He expected that the white teen’s parents would support Central High’s integration.
   C. He was surprised that the white boy would think that he was doing something wrong.
   D. He thought that the white teen was going to be angry.

DIRECTIONS: Answer these questions here or on a separate piece of paper.

6. What does Rains give as his reason for objecting to Central High’s integration?

7. What do you suppose the white teen at the country club meant when he asked Green, “Why do you want to destroy our relationship”?

8. How would you explain the “greatest lesson” that Beals says she learned?

9. How does Rains’s thinking change as a result of his experience? Have you ever had a similar change of attitude?

10. Are you surprised by Beals’s description of the way the Little Rock Nine were treated at Central High? Why or why not? Why do you suppose the black students continued to attend school in spite of such treatment?