Melba Pattillo

Melba Pattillo and eight other teenagers became the first African-American students to attend Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas 50 years ago this September. This year, a new visitor center and a festival will mark the anniversary.

Relive Melba's amazing, historic, and often terrifying experience. Then write how you would feel in her situation.

**Big Decisions**

The year is 1954. Melba Pattillo is twelve years old, smart, and black. She has good teachers in her all-black school in Little Rock, Arkansas. But nothing else is nearly as nice as in the white children's schools. Melba's school is freezing in winter. Her books are old and worn. Schools for black children are supposed to be "equal" with those of white children. But they're not.

Then, on May 17, 1954, the United States Supreme Court rules that separate public schools are illegal. The justices say that communities like Little Rock must let black children go to school with white children.

On that very day, Melba is attacked by a white man. "You'll never go to school with my kids," he snarls. Luckily, Melba is saved by a friend before the man can make good on his threat.

The next year, in May 1955, Melba volunteers to go to the all-white Central High School. She is not afraid, even though she has seen firsthand that some white people are ready to use violence to stop integration. Two years later, in September 1957, she's enrolled as a student at Central High.

Melba is now fifteen years old. Her life is about to change forever.

### First Day

It's September 4, 1957. Melba and her mother are driving to school. They're nervous. It's sure to be a tough day. Ever since news reports identified Melba as one of the black students who will be entering Central High, her grandmother has been staying up nights — a shotgun in her lap — to guard the family.

Melba's mother parks the car and they hurry toward the school. Then they see it — a huge, raging mob of white people. Angry voices scream, "TWO, FOUR, SIX, EIGHT, WE AIN'T GONNA INTEGRATE!"

There are also soldiers with guns and bayonets. Governor Orval Faubus has called out the Arkansas National Guard. He is not going to let integration take place.

As they try to sneak away, Melba and her mother are chased by a group of white men brandishing ropes. One man gets close enough to rip the sleeve of her mother's blouse. Another takes a swing at Melba with a tree branch.

Melba and her mother are lucky. They make it home alive.

**Inside — Briefly**

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| Governor Faubus and the Little Rock School Board go to court to stop integration at Central High School. Thurgood Marshall, a lawyer famous for working for the NAACP, argues for Melba and the other students. The judge rules that integration should continue.  | http://teacher.scholastic.com/barrier/hwyf/mpbstory/img/i_mob.jpg |
| On September 23, 1957, Melba finally steps inside Central High. She enters through a back door, with local police and state troopers guarding her. There's a screaming mob outside again today. Still, she has made it inside. It's a short, terrifying school day. Just before noon, the mob breaks through the barricades. They threaten to take over the school and hang the black students. The police know they're outnumbered. They've got to get those nine kids out — now!Melba and her friends are led to the basement garage. Crouching low in the back of a car, Melba is driven to safety. It's the third time she has nearly been killed over integration.  Integration is the Lawhttp://teacher.scholastic.com/barrier/hwyf/mpbstory/img/i_soliders.jpgIn 1957, Dwight D. Eisenhower is president. He had been the top U.S. general in World War II. Dwight Eisenhower expects orders to be obeyed.President Eisenhower warns Governor Faubus that he'll send U.S. troops to Little Rock. Integration is the law — and it will be enforced. The day after the mob takes over Central High, the president orders soldiers from the 101st Airborne Division to Little Rock. Melba also gets a personal message from the president. He says that she and the other black students will be protected at Central High.http://teacher.scholastic.com/barrier/hwyf/mpbstory/img/i_ike.jpgOn September 25, 1957, with soldiers all around her, Melba climbs the front steps of Central High School and walks through the main doors. There are more troops in the halls. She meets Danny, a soldier who will walk with her from class to class.Melba Pattillo will finally start her junior year of high school. **Fighting to Learn**

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| Melba has grown up in a religious home. She has been taught to treat others with respect. She can't believe the kind of treatment she receives each and every day at Central High School. Melba is called ugly, cruel names. She's kicked, tripped, and spit on. She's pelted with eggs, and dodges sticks of dynamite.  | http://teacher.scholastic.com/barrier/hwyf/mpbstory/img/i_students.jpg |
| She has acid thrown in her face. She is threatened over and over with death. By early December, Danny and the rest of the 101st soldiers leave. Her protectors are gone. Melba is on her own. The threats and violence get worse.But there are a few small acts of kindness from white students. One, a white boy named Link, becomes Melba's secret friend. He warns her of plots to harm her.  |

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### Becoming a Warrior

Melba first volunteered to attend Central High because she wanted to go to a better school. For years, she listened to black cooks and custodians describe this amazing school. Central High has typewriters, a home economics room with a real kitchen, and other wonderful things that Melba never had in her all-black high school.

But in the months Melba spends at Central High, her goal changes. Attending this school is no longer just about an opportunity for her. It's about an opportunity for her race.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. meets with Melba and the other members of the Little Rock Nine. He tells them they are "fighting for generations not yet born." At age sixteen, Melba becomes a fighter for the right of African-American children to get the same education as white children.

### Endings and Beginnings

It is May 27, 1958. Eight of the Little Rock Nine have made it through the year. Melba makes it. On this day, Ernie Green becomes the first African-American student to graduate from Central High School.

For many Americans, Melba and the other students are heroes. They travel to New York, Washington, D.C., Chicago, Cleveland, and other cities, to receive awards for their courage.



But back in Arkansas, Governor Faubus is still determined to stop integration. In September 1958, he closes all the high schools in Little Rock.

Melba waits to see if she will get her chance to graduate from Central High. She waits a whole year. By September 1959, the schools are still closed, and it has become too dangerous for her to stay in Little Rock. The Ku Klux Klan says it will pay $10,000 to anyone who kills Melba.

She goes to live with a white family in Santa Rosa, California. Melba finishes high school, attends college, and becomes a reporter for NBC-TV.

### Reunion



It's September 25, 1997. Melba and the other members of the Little Rock Nine are together outside Central High School. They are surrounded by a crowd of people. Once again, Melba climbs the steps leading to the main doors. Forty years ago, President Eisenhower sent soldiers so she could walk up these stairs. Forty years later, President Bill Clinton is beside her. He leads the country in honoring the courage and sacrifice of Melba and her fellow students. Thanks to them and many others, children of all colors at Central High — and in thousands of other schools — learn together and get along.

Today Melba is a writer. She has written a book about her experiences at Central High School called *Warriors Don't Cry*. She also just published *White is a State of Mind*, a book about her life after arriving in California in 1959.

Melba Pattillo Beals is also a mother. She has one grown daughter. In 1995, at age 52, she adopted two four-year-old boys.

# Interview with Melba Patillo Beals

**Following is a transcript of the January 31, 1995, live chat with Melba Pattillo Beals, one of the nine black students who integrated Little Rock Central High School in September, 1957.**

**OnlineHost:** Good afternoon! Today Scholastic is honored to welcome an important figure in the integration of American public schools, Melba Pattillo Beals. She's a featured guest during January's special event, entitled "Honoring Dr. King." As a teenager Melba Pattillo was one of nine black students who enrolled in Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, amidst protests from the governor and much of the white community. The confrontation grew, until finally, President Dwight Eisenhower ordered thousands of federal troops and the National Guard to surround the school and ensure the safety of these nine brave students.

**Comment:** From Bay Farm: It is so difficult not to give in to public and peer pressure as a teenager, let alone facing hundreds of people in a confrontation. Your experience may help students face their own issues and resist the pressure around them.

**Question:** We wondered how and why you were "chosen" as one of the students who would enter Little Rock's Central High School in 1957?

**Melba Beals:** I was chosen because I lived in the area of the school, because I had good grades, because I seemed to be even-tempered. At the first round of selections, I actually volunteered. I was selected by the Little Rock School Board, which sent out a call for students in the area who wanted to go. And from that original pool of more than 100 students, they selected 16, and I was one of these. The NAACP was pushing legislation that forced the school board to integrate.

**Question:** What made you take a stand as a 9th grade student?

**Melba Beals:** I felt that if what my parents said was correct — that God loved me equally with all the white people — then I deserved to have what everybody else had. I deserved to go to whatever school I chose. I trusted 100% that God would take care of me, because I was doing the right thing. Therefore, God was my courage.

**Question:** Why didn't you tell your parents you'd signed up for Central High School?

**Melba Beals:** I didn't tell my parents because I wasn't totally certain at that point that anything would come of their offer to integrate. There were so many forces against it. I knew that by reading the newspaper. So, I didn't want to frighten or upset them because I wasn't sure how they'd react. I thought I'd wait until this was a reality. Eventually they learned that I signed up by watching the evening news — they mentioned my name. It resulted in their anguished response...as I'd anticipated. They were so very afraid. They were terrified of what people might do to us for daring to want to go to school with their children. Even though my mother had integrated the university, there seemed to be much more hostility toward black children integrating with white children.

**Question:** Can you describe your feelings as you walked up the sidewalk that historic day?

**Melba Beals:** The first day I approached Central High School, my heart pounded in my ears. My face was hot; I was so frightened about what would happen to me. I still remember that. My skin was stinging. I was right, because the very first day I was chased away by men carrying ropes, men from the white segregationist mob who threatened to kill me.

The second time I went to Central High School, I was also frightened because I could see this huge mob gathered directly across the street from the school as I entered the side door. I couldn't help wondering what would become of me. By noon, I had to be secreted out because the mob was overrunning the school — rushing towards us, rushing past the policemen, who were throwing down their badges and some of them were joining the mob. It was a mess.

When I entered the school protected by the 101st Airborne soldiers, sent by the President to enforce the law and hold off the segregationist mob, I felt proud to be an American. I felt hopeful that integration could work. And that it would work almost immediately. I thought to myself, if they just get to know me, if they understand that I'm smart, I'm clean, that I wear nice clothes, that I polish my saddle shoes, and I sing, they will understand that although my color is brown, I am no different than they are.

**Question:** Were you ever actually accepted by the other students?

**Melba Beals:** In the beginning, a few of the white students reached out to us. They smiled, they wanted to talk to us. They actually tried to befriend us. But as September turned into October, these few souls were crushed in the machinery set up by segregationists to separate us, to torture us until we left the school. Physically and mentally tortured us. So within a short amount of time these white students had to cut off from us to save themselves. Otherwise they, too, would be ostracized by the segregationists. They had to turn away from us. This was the case throughout the year.

**Comment:** We think you were brave to go to a white school.

**Question:** How did your friends, who did not enter the all-white high school, treat you?

**Melba Beals:** My black friends eventually turned against us too, because their families were being punished by the white people who didn't want us to integrate the school. We nine students were eliminated from the normal stream of activities at the black high school because we weren't there. As time passed it became easier to ignore us. We were trouble in their eyes. I was very lonely. There were times at Central High School that I pinched myself to see if I really was there. Because no one talked to me, no one acknowledged my presence.

My grandmother India — who had been a maid — thought that my integrating Central was a way of assuring that I wouldn't be a maid too. It was a way of demanding that I would be treated equally and have equal opportunity, a life that she never had. So she would talk to me and say that I was chosen to perform this task by God, and if I denied that I had to do it — if I did not comply — then I would suffer in many ways...in my own heart, and in my belief in God. These beliefs were a central part of my upbringing.

**Comment:** Thanks for sharing your experiences with us. You are an inspiration to us.

**Question:** How unequal was your all-black school?

**Melba Beals:** The teachers in my all-black school were dedicated and committed to making our education as good as possible. Central High School was seven floors high and two blocks square, with state-of-the-art equipment. Built in 1940s, It would stand up against any high school in the U.S. today in terms of its equipment. It was ranked very high in the nation — one of the tops in the country.

My own high school — Horace Mann — was one story high, one tenth as large, and no comparing the equipment. Central High had typewriters, kitchens for home economics, early models of computers, extraordinary musical instruments, extraordinary physical ed. equipment, and an enviable scholastic program. Still today, many of its students are Rhodes scholars. That was true then, and it is now. I was just there recently. I was astounded to look at the physical plant. Even though it was built so long ago, it resembles a European castle, and has not changed much since I was there. But now it's 60% black.

When I went back with all the students in 1987 (Bill Clinton called a reunion), it reminded me of those days when I walked the stairs so helpless, so powerless, awaiting attack at any moment by some ruthless student who would throw an egg, or trip me up, or call me nigger. When I got to the top of the stairs I saw a young black boy wearing wire-rimmed glasses, slight of stature. He bowed and said, "Welcome to Central H.S. I'm the president of the student body." Of course, I was quite tearful. Climbing all those stairs, seeing him. I hadn't been up those stairs in 40 years. So when he stepped out, I was expecting something other than this black child. This had been my dream, my vision. This was why I had endured all the pain and physical punishment — so this boy could stand there and say that. It was amazing.

**Comment:** I read your book and think you are a marvelous writer. I loved, too, how you gave your mom credit for encouraging that love!

**Question:** Did you ever think about quitting school?

**Melba Beals:** Every moment of every day. If someone called me names or spat on me, or kicked me in the shin, or walked on my heel, I thought I couldn't make it one more moment. But each time I would go home, and my grandmother would point out that what I was doing was not for myself, but for generations yet unborn. She would tell me that I would be OK, and turn me right around and send me back. She would also inspire me, explain to me why I would want to go back.

I never quit. Our goal was to make it through the year. We did. At the end of the year the governor closed all of the schools in order to prevent integration. But eventually in 1962, he would have to open the schools, and two of our nine students went back and graduated.

**Question:** At that time did you realize the significance and impact of the event?

**Melba Beals:** I did not. At the time, all I wanted was an equal education, the right to go to the local movies, and the right to eat in a restaurant. I had no idea of the significance of my struggle during that horrifying year. I just knew that something was happening inside me, and I would never, never, be the same again.

**Question:** How did this event change your future?

**Melba Beals:** Because of Central High School I had to leave Little Rock and my family, because the Ku Klux Klan had a price on my head — $10,000 dead and $5,000 alive. I was 16, going on 17 years old. I went to Santa Rosa, CA, taken in by Dr. and Mrs. George McCabe, who I still call mom and dad today. I have two sets of parents — I'm very blessed.

That's why I don't want anyone to believe that I have hatred in my heart for white people, or that I condone any division of the races. I do not. I would not be alive today were it not for the white people who risked their lives for mine, including a white policeman who drove us from the school, a couple of the white officials within the school, a couple of white ministers, news reporters, and people who traveled to Little Rock — Quakers — who set up safe houses and tutoring schools. They taught us nonviolence and how to protect ourselves. In the end, these white parents in Santa Rosa nurtured me, made me whole again, took me to college, and walked me over the bridge to adulthood.

I finished high school in California. Montgomery High School — an integrated school. Because the Klan had this reward out for us, and because the governor closed the school, the NAACP put a call out across the country for safe houses, and the remaining black students were sent to these. So how my life was changed was by leaving my family and moving to another place.

I would later become a journalist because I watched and understood that if not for the white journalists who saw and reported fairly on the events at Central High School, I would not be alive today.

**Comment:** Melba, this is beautiful and you are doing a fabulous job — an amazing feat, online.

**Question:** Do you still associate with any of the black students you started Central with?

**Melba Beals:** Absolutely. I'm hoping to see them in a couple of weeks. Two of them left the country forever because they were so frightened by events. We've all talked regularly by phone over the years.

**Question:** Did you know or ever meet Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. or Rosa Parks?

**Melba Beals:** A couple of times I met him. I'd love to meet her. Dr. King came to Little Rock during our troubles. Just being in the room with him was a meditative experience. It was incredible. He was so centered, so certain of the path, that it encouraged us to stick with our program.

**Question:** When you visit schools today how do you feel when you see all races learning together?

**Melba Beals:** It brings joyful tears to my heart! I laugh, and I say to myself, "You see, there is a God." There are solutions to all of our problems. The answer is time; it takes time to make things happen. But integration is proof that all of our dreams can come true. When I was a child I never would've thought that this would ever have happened.

And for all those people who are negative and want to look at the glass as half-empty, and who want to say that the "Brown" decision didn't make any difference and we haven't made any progress — I say YOU'RE WRONG. We have made progress. Because I've come a long way. It is a long, long way from being a little girl who grew up in Little Rock and sat in the back of the bus, and drank from water fountains marked colored, and went to a black school in an apartheid society, to my California home where I am free! A long way, so I say let's go forward. We've done a whole lot in my lifetime, we can do a lot more. Everything is possible to those who have faith and belief.

I just want to say also, that we all need each other, love is the answer, and that any time you look at another human being, the same God that exists in you, exists in them, and no matter where they came from, who they worship, or what they wear, you owe them eye contact, consideration, and a smile...at the very least.

I appreciate the opportunity to talk to you, and thank you very much for hearing me. The greatest gift you can give anyone is to listen, and to care. And that's exactly what you're doing.

**Online Host:** Many thanks to Melba Beals for joining us this afternoon and for sharing her life and work. We appreciate this special opportunity to speak with you. And thanks to our audience for your great questions!



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