

Interview with **Melba Pattillo Beals**

November 30, 1985

Production Team: A

Camera Rolls: 370-374

Sound Rolls: 1330-1331

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**Note:** These transcripts contain material that did not appear in the final program. Only text appearing in ***bold italics*** was used in the final version of *Eyes on the Prize*.

00:00:02:00

[camera roll 370]

[sound roll 1330]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: TAKE ONE.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: LET'S SEE. OK AND MARK.

[sync tone]

INTERVIEWER: OK WHAT I'D LIKE TO FIRST DO IS I'D LIKE TO GET YOU TO DESCRIBE TO ME LITTLE ROCK. YOU'RE BACK THEN, YOU'RE ABOUT TO GO INTO HIGH SCHOOL, YOUR ABOUT—YOU KNOW, YOU PROBABLY HAVEN'T THOUGHT ABOUT WHAT MIGHT HAPPEN IN YOUR LIFE. I'D LIKE TO GET AN IDEA OF THE LITTLE ROCK THAT YOU EXPERIENCED AS A YOUNG PERSON BEFORE YOU'VE GONE TO SCHOOL.

Pattillo Beals: Little Rock was separated, my world was for the most part black. Part of my family is white, my first cousins, etc. and those people I would go to town with occasionally and do things with, but for the most part my world was black. I went to a black high school called—first, Horace Mann, and then, I just went to school every day. My mother was a school teacher. I, I lived with my grandmother. My parents were divorced. So, I, my life consisted of school and church, you must make good grades, you must polish your saddle shoes. There were no parks. The, my one big desire had been to ride a merry-go-round and swim in a pool. And, I couldn't do that. There was a park there called "Fair Park" and we

would go there, sometimes. But I couldn't use the pool. And I kept wondering why, you know, that I couldn't do that. And going on rides on Sunday with my mother and we'd go past always Central High School, because it was a castle, looked like a castle and I always what was inside of it. So it was my life, it was very simple. A lot of reading, a lot of family kinds of things, a lot of Bible reading with my grandmother, a lot of memorizing Bible verses—very simple, very, very southern.

00:01:45:00

INTERVIEWER: FOR, FOR YOUNG PEOPLE THAT DON'T KNOW THAT LIFE THERE, OR WHAT IT WAS LIKE WHEN YOU WERE YOUNG, AND MANY PEOPLE, AT THAT TIME, DID THINK THAT LITTLE ROCK WAS SOMEWHAT WHAT YOU MIGHT CALL PROGRESSIVE TYPE CITY. SPEAK TO ME MAYBE, MAYBE AN ILLUSTRATION SO THAT SOMEONE WHO MIGHT NOT HAVE A GOOD SENSE OF THAT TOWN. SAY YOU'RE SPEAKING TO A YOUNGER—YOU'RE TRYING TO GIVE 'EM AN ILLUSTRATION OF WHAT IT MEANT TO BE A YOUNG BLACK GIRL IN LITTLE ROCK.

Pattillo Beals: It meant that if you went to Woolworths, and you wanted—

INTERVIEWER: —START AGAIN.

00:02:14:00

Pattillo Beals: —you know, if you were a young black person in Little Rock and you went downtown with your parents on Saturday and you wanted a sandwich and you went to Woolworths, there was a counter and you couldn't eat, at first you couldn't eat at all at the counter, you just watched and then secondarily, they built a, a railing so that you could eat on one side. I think the essence of it is it meant that if you had to go to the bathroom, there were the white ladies bathroom and the black ladies bathrooms. And I remember one day getting—I was really curious as a child and I wanted to know why if I gotta go potty do I gotta go down these stairs and way away. And so one day, I wanted to go to the bathroom and I decided that I wanted to know what was in, a white ladies bathroom that I couldn't see, you know. So I went in there and, here are all these cops banging on the door, you know, and everything was carrying on, my mother was screaming, “Don't, don't kill her!” It was a big scene, you know. And there was nothing but toilets in there. The essence of life if you were young in Little Rock was that the life was separate and you were always frightened. I was always, always, always, frightened. If you were in the black community, it meant that you had no protection. By and large there were no black cops, no black busmen, no black mailmen, your, your—you were on a separate reservation. And, if you depended on the police department for safety, like my father was a very big man and I can remember when I was very little somebody was getting lynched, I think an Asian, and they would come to get the men, the black men out of the community to prevent the lynching or to help him get out of town in the middle of the night. So, my life as a child was se—secreted shadows, the Bible, joy with my family. Limits, I always felt limits, see, you, you always feel like, frightened like I couldn't be protected. My uncles and my father couldn't really protect me if

there were a confrontation with whites. I remember an incident where I think, black children were trapped in a car, and because, the police had taken the parents away for some miniscule thing like a ticket or something. So life was limited, you know, within the boundaries allowed. There was somebody over you, somebody in control. You were in a bottle and somebody else had the stopper.

[wild audio]

Pattillo Beals: I said no. [laughs]

[cut]

00:04:40:00

[sync tone]

INTERVIEWER: YOU SAID THERE'S A GUY—

Pattillo Beals: Yeah, I said no. I'll talk to you now, but never on camera. I don't talk about this on camera.

INTERVIEWER: [laughs] NOW, OK.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: WE'RE ALL SET.

00:04:52:00

INTERVIEWER: SO FOR THE CAMERA WOULD YOU PLEASE TELL ME, WHY, WHY DID YOU WANT TO GO TO CENTRAL HIGH? WHY, AS A YOUNG BLACK GIRL, UNDERSTANDING ALL THE THINGS GOING ON IN, IN LITTLE ROCK AND YOUR POSITION THERE, WHY DID YOU WANT...

Pattillo Beals: OK, let's take the heroism away right now and understand that Little Rock was a quiet reservation. And there was no thought on my part, no thought on any of our parts that when we went to Central High School it would trigger this terrible catastrophe. I wanted to go because they had more privileges. They had more equipment, they had five floors of opportunities. For me, I understood education before I understood anything else. From the time I was two, my mother said, "You will go to college. Education is your key to survival," and I understood that. And it was a kind of curiosity. It was not an overwhelming desire to go to this school and integrate this school and change history. Oh no, there was none of that. There was just, be, fun to go in this school I ride by every day. I want to know what's in there. I don't necessarily want to be with those people, I assumed that being with those people would be no different than being with the people that I was already with. I had no idea, none whatsoever, until the adventure started that it would be this way. And my getting into Central High School was somewhat almost of an accident. I simply raised my hand one day when they said, "Who of you lives in the area of Central High School?" Then, that was

two years before, in 1955, and, they said, you know who has good grades, and I had excellent grades. It was an accident of fate.

00:06:27:00

INTERVIEWER: OK. WITH THAT ACCIDENT OF FATE IN MIND, WHEN DID YOU FIND OUT YOU WERE ACCEPTED, HOW DID YOU FINALLY REALIZE THAT YOU WERE GOING TO BE ONE OF THOSE THAT WAS GONNA GO DOWN AND INTEGRATE THE SCHOOL?

Pattillo Beals: I was sitting in Cincinnati, Ohio with my mother on a couch and Walter Cronkite came on television and said, in late August, that Central High School was going to be integrated in Little Rock, Arkansas, that they were already beginning to have difficulty with the White Citizens' Council nee [sic] the Ku Klux Klan, and that, these were the children who were going and he mispronounced my name. My maiden name is Pattillo, and he said, these are the kids who were going and my mother said, what did you say? And that was it, my mother started making phone calls back. I was not involved in this. Then, then, you know, we came back to Little Rock and I began to be involved in the preparation that the NAACP was making to go to Central High School. But before that I had no real consciousness that I was gonna go.

00:07:22:00

INTERVIEWER: DID YOU HAVE A FEELING AT THAT TIME IN TERMS OF WHAT, IN TERMS OF YOUR OWN PREPARATION—WHAT WERE YOU FEELING AT THAT TIME TO GET YOURSELF—AT THAT TIME BEFORE YOU WENT IN, BEFORE YOU EXPERIENCED ANY OF THE RESISTANCE INSIDE THE SCHOOL OR OUTSIDE, AT THAT TIME, WHEN YOU FOUND OUT YOU WERE GOING, WHAT WAS, WHAT WAS THE FEELING THAT YOU WERE CARRYING AROUND?

Pattillo Beals: Just you—apprehension, some. But, but—

INTERVIEWER: GIVE ME A LITTLE BACK—WHAT?

Pattillo Beals: You know, we would, we would meet and discuss, you know, what might go on. We met with, some members of the school board, we, we just had little community meetings with the Quakers, with various people, to try to set a premise for communication. And so, all, you know, I like new things, I like exciting things, I really have a perchance [sic] for excitement. I like it, you know. If it's new, let's go for it, you know? So, I wasn't feeling anything, I was feeling like, OK, this is gonna be an adventure. I'm gonna meet new people and do new things. I'm gonna see something I didn't see before, do something I didn't do before. So it's cool, you know. I just—was prepared and sort of I could feel you know, my internal self gearing up for something that would be new. No inkling that I faced a holocaust, no inkling that I faced a holocaust—none whatsoever.

INTERVIEWER: CUT FOR SOME DEBATE

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: YEAH.

00:08:34:00

[cut]

[sync tone]

INTERVIEWER: LET'S GO TO THAT FIRST DAY AND WHAT YOU ENCOUNTERED WHEN YOU GOT TO SCHOOL.

Pattillo Beals: Arrangements, prior arrangements had been made that each of the children would come to Central High School as individuals, with their families or whatever. Some carpooled. We were to meet at a specific point. No one anticipated, although there had been radio announcements of mobs gathering, sporadic fighting, or what-not, no one anticipated that there would be a mob in front of the school. The school, you must picture, is this castle so therefore the front of it is a block long and within that block parameter [sic], it was filled with layers and layers and layers of red-faced angry people. And I came up behind this group of people on the opposite, you know, just across the street from Central High School to see Elizabeth Eckford walking across the street with the mob jeering at her. And at first, you know, I was standing on tippy-toes, trying to see what everybody in front of me was looking at. You know, what was going on, had there been some accident? Why were all these people there? Why, you know. All those questions in my mind. Angry, angry people, it sounded like—you know when you go to a football game or rodeo, just angry, angry crowds of people. And we walked up behind these people, my mother and I. My mother was behind me, and, they were jeering at Elizabeth who was across the street and all of a sudden one of 'em [sic] turns and says, "Now we got us a nigger." And it was at that point that my mother said, "Get to the car, don't wait for me, don't stop, Melba, just go for it." And I could not drive. She said, Get to the car, and so we were driving this Chevrolet and, the guys had their, had their t-shirts off and they had ropes, and they, they were sweating and, I just remember all these faces looking at me and I remember thinking—'cause at first you know, when these people turn around, you want to say, hi, how are you? You know? You don't understand that what they're turning around for is to kill you. And so, I, I just, I backed up in astonishment, you know, like with both my hands up and my mother just screamed at me, she said, "I tell you, get to the car now! Listen to me, leave me if you have to, get to the car!" And she was just screaming at me to get in this car, we both got in the car, she jammed the car into reverse and we backed down this mob. And that was my first day at Central High School.

00:10:49:00

[cut]

[wild audio]

INTERVIEWER: GIVE ME—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: WE GONNA RUN OUT JUST IN TIME

INTERVIEWER: OK.

[cut]

00:10:52:00

[slate]

[change to camera roll 371]

[sync tone]

INTERVIEWER: WHAT I'D LIKE TO JUST PICK UP WITH, TALKING ABOUT THIS—SEEING THESE PEOPLE TURN AROUND, STILL, YOU KNOW, HOW OLD, HOW OLD ARE YOU? YOU'RE, YOU'RE SEVENTEEN AT THE TIME? FIFTEEN, SIXTEEN—

Pattillo Beals: Oh no, I'm fifteen at the time.

INTERVIEWER: FIFTEEN?

Pattillo Beals: Yeah. Fifteen years old.

INTERVIEWER: FIFTEEN AT THE TIME. AND YOU SEE THESE PEOPLE TURN AROUND AND LOOK AT YOU. WHAT DO YOU REALLY—AT FIFTEEN, WHAT DO YOU REALLY SEE IN THEIR FACE?

Pattillo Beals: Anger, more anger than I've ever seen.

00:11:20:00

INTERVIEWER: GIVE ME THE WHOLE THING.

Pattillo Beals: You know, when I look at the people and they turned around, I saw anger, more anger than I've ever seen anywhere in my life. And I felt real pain because I hadn't done anything to them. And it was an anger I didn't understand. But it was a lethal anger and something inside me said, you're in danger, you know? And it was painful. It was like, you know, what did I do? Why don't they like me? What's wrong with me? Why don't I measure up, why do they want to kill me, what have I done that somebody could want to kill me? And so, I backed up in defense, but, I remember almost stumbling. It was sort of like I was in a, in a tunnel and I wasn't really, you know this can't be my reality, this is a bad dream, you know, why are they doing this? Of course, I had always been afraid of the white people in Little Rock and I knew that I knew my, my parameters. I knew the line not to step over and I had

not stepped, in my estimation, over that line. So, what was gonna happen to me, I was just, just, incredible arms reaching out, eyes looking, red-faced anger. Just, you know, get her! Kill her, hang her, we got us a nigger! We got us two niggers! And, that was me they were talking about, that was my mother they were talking about. But my mother, my mother, see, was, was sane and was, was, was on top of it because it was her shouting, her yelling that kept me conscious of what I was doing. And so, I, I obeyed her, you know, without thought. And that's how we saved our lives, that's how we got to the car.

00:12:55:00

INTERVIEWER: SO NOW, NOW YOU'RE, YOU'RE—YOU'VE GOTTEN INTO THE SCHOOL. CAN YOU DESCRIBE TO ME BEING IN THAT SCHOOL, AND GIVE ME SOME ILLUSTRATIONS IN TERMS OF INCIDENTS, BUT AT THE SAME TIME KEEP, ALSO HELP ME TO UNDERSTAND HOW IT'S AFFECTING YOU, HOW YOUR FEELING ABOUT ALL THIS?

Pattillo Beals: A little bit of time passed, before we, we, you know we went back to the school. Couple days as I remember and I was by now scared, truly, from the top of my head to the tip of my toes, frightened, with a kind of fear that I can not even explain to you: a wrenching, horrifying, desolate kind of fear. There's nobody here but me, and my Grandmother said, "There's God there." So, my Grandmother taught me to say the 23rd Psalms.

INTERVIEWER: CAN I STOP YOU FOR A SECOND. CAN WE CUT FOR ONE SECOND?

00:13:50:00

[cut]

[sync tone]

INTERVIEWER: YOU'RE IN SCHOOL NOW. WHAT YOU'RE FEELING NOW, WHAT'S HAPPENING?

Pattillo Beals: OK, the first time, the first day, I was able to enter Central High School, what I felt inside was stark raving fear—terrible wrenching, awful fear, a fear that I cannot explain to you. There are no words for how I felt inside. I knew I was into a space that I had never been, and I knew no pain, I'd known no pain like that because I didn't know what I'd done wrong. You see, when you're fifteen years old, and someone's going to hit you or hurt you, you want to know what you did wrong. And although I knew the difference between black and white, I didn't know the penalties one paid for being black at that time. So I was a child. And I remember walking through the glass—grass to the car to go to school thinking, I'm going to get water on my saddle shoes. Because my grandmother always made me polish my shoes. And I remember looking at the ground and thinking, oh, if I could just turn back, you know. But we went to school that day and, I went in a car with Elizabeth Eckford, with,

Terry, with a bunch of other kids, and, *we entered the side of the building* again, the sounds like at a football game. *Thousands of people out front. And we were entering the side, and I could just get a glimpse* of this group *and in the car I could hear, on the car radio*, I could hear *that there was a mob. And I knew what a mob meant, and I knew that the sounds that came from the crowd were very angry. So, we entered the side of the building, very, very fast.* Even as we entered there were people running after us, there were people tripping other people. And once you—once I got into the school, into Central High School, it was very dark, it was like, a deep, dark castle. And my eyesight had to adjust to the fact that there were then people all around me. Children, youngsters, some were in class ‘cause they brought us in like later, during the middle class and we were met by school officials and very quickly dispersed our separate ways. And there is, has been never in my life any stark terror or any fear that’s akin to that.

00:16:08:00

INTERVIEWER: OK, BEGIN TO NOW TELL ME THE KINDS OF HARASSMENT, THE KINDS OF ATTACKS THAT YOU YOURSELF WERE INVOLVED WITH AND, AND AGAIN, GIVE ME THAT SENSE OF BEING FIFTEEN, FIFTEEN WHEN THESE KINDS OF THINGS HAPPENED TO YOU AND WHAT IT MEANS.

Pattillo Beals: OK. [pause] The first day that we went to school, the kinds of things that I endured were—parents got in the school, and parents were kicking, parents were hitting, parents were throwing things. You would get tripped, people would just walk up and hit you in the face. And you couldn't hit back, we'd been instructed by this time that any attempts to hit back to respond, to call a name in response would mean the end of the case. So, by now we were savvy warriors, we were beginning the journey towards becoming the warrior that would make the trip through Central High School. And so, I had to shift my head into a new space. My grandmother would say to me, you know, turn the other cheek, and understand what it meant to be the Christ. And that was what I would have in my mind. And, you know, anything that was possible to happen, did happen. This now, is the area, this is the first day that we go in without the troops. So the, the greatest feeling I had was one of a lack of protection. There was nobody to resort to. There was no help, there was no one on my side, I was on my side. And the only way to get through it was to count on myself.

00:17:45:00

INTERVIEWER: TELL ME THE STORY ABOUT SAYING THE LORD’S PRAYER AND HOW YOU HAD TO FIND THINGS LIKE THAT KIND OF THING—

Pattillo Beals: Well, they separated us.

INTERVIEWER: HOLD ON, HOLD ON.

Pattillo Beals: They said to us, the school officials said to us—this is harder than I thought it was going to be. The school officials said to us, you want integration, we'll give you integration. We will separate you, and so indeed, in a school of 2500 or so, they sent us nine



different ways. My home room was, I believe as I remember 313. So it meant that I had to go up, by myself, three flights of stairs. And the only way I could get up those stairs was to say the Lord's Prayer repeatedly. And, that's, that's how I got there. I could not look to my left or my right, if I was hit I had not to respond. Some of the times, in this first day, I was escorted by a teacher, and, so I, you know, I, I would say the Lord's Prayer and I would get to my class and I would sit down. Then you're in an enclosed classroom and you think to yourself, things are going to be better, but there not because the teachers, nobody was prepared to control this crowd so now you're in a class with maybe 20 other people and you get a different kind of harassment. You get a controlled harassment, you get, name-calling, you get, the beginnings of what we were to endure later on. This first day, we're still talking about this first day, was only the first li—layer of this, this iceberg that we were going to be able to penetrate later on.

INTERVIEWER: OK LET'S CUT.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: YEAH.

00:19:17:00

[cut]

[sync tone]

00:19:24:00

INTERVIEWER: AND WHAT IS THAT? WHAT'S THE DANGER AND HOW DO YOU GET OUT OF IT?

Pattillo Beals: I'd only been in the school a couple of hours and by this time it was apparent that the mob was just, over running the school. Policemen were throwing down their, their badges and, ***the mob was getting past the wooden sawhorses because the policemen would no longer fight their own in order to keep, to protect us.*** And so we were all called into the principal's office and there was great fear that we would not get out of this building. We were trapped. And I thought, OK, so I'm going to die here, at school. And I remember you know, thinking back to what I'd been told that understand the realities of where you are and pray. And at one point, someone in this crowd, this crowd of adults were panicked. This is the other thing that I could see is that even the adults, the school officials were panicked like no protection. And somebody made a suggestion, a couple of the kids, the black kids who were with me were crying ***and, so, someone made a suggestion that if they allowed the mob to hang one kid,*** while they were hanging the one kid, ***they could then get the rest out. And a gentleman, whom I believe to be the assistant chief of police said,*** uh-huh, which one? ***How are you gonna choose? You're going to let them draw straws? He said, I'll get them out. And we were taken toward the basement of this place, and we were put into two cars—grayish-blue colored Fords—and the man instructed them, he said that once you start driving, do not stop.*** And he told us to put our heads down. And so, the guy revved up the engine and there was a whole, you know, there was a couple—there was an hour that elapsed

as they got the gas together and got these cars. This guy revved up his engine and he came up out of the bowels of this building and as he came up, I could just see hands reaching across this car. I could hear the yelling. I could see guns. And he was told not to stop. You hit somebody you keep rolling, 'cause the kids are dead. And he did just that, he didn't hit anybody, but he certainly was forceful and aggressive in the way he exited this driveway because people tried to stop him and, he dropped me off at home. And I remember saying, thank you for the ride, and I should've said, thank you for my life. And I came in the front door that day and, my grandmother and my mother were beginning to say then that you will not go back. But, that was when Eisenhower sent a man from Central Intelligence Agency so here in the middle of the night, [wild audio] by this point, the local ministries were guarding—

00:21:47:00

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: WE JUST RAN OUT.

Pattillo Beals: You what?

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: JUST RAN OUT.

Pattillo Beals: OK.

INTERVIEWER: OK—

00:21:52:00

[slate]

[change to camera roll 372]

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: OK IT'S ALL YOURS.

00:22:05:00

INTERVIEWER: OK. TELL ME ABOUT THAT.

Pattillo Beals: The next time I went to Central High School, I was accompanied by the 101 Airborne Division. Want me to start again?

INTERVIEWER: YEAH GO AHEAD.

Pattillo Beals: The next time I went to Central High School, I was escorted by the 101 Airborne Division—members of that, troop and they were in uniform. I went in a jeep; there was a jeep behind me with a turret gun and one in front. Actually, we were in a station

wagon, there were two jeeps accompanying us, and there were helicopters overhead. And, I went not through the side doors, but up the front stairs, **and there was a feeling of pride and hope that, yes, this is the United States; yes, there is a reason I salute the flag; and, it's, it's going to be OK**, you know? **If these guys just go with us the first time, it's going to be OK. The troops, however, did not mean the end of harassment. It meant the declaration of war.** The troops, the presence of the troops certainly without them I would not have lived, and wherever they are, my God, you know, I hope you're all happy because I wouldn't be alive today without them. But, it didn't mean that—see they could not come into the classroom with us for example, for most of the time unless we were having a really big crisis. And kids would do things like, in the study hall in particular, walk by and drop a lighted piece of paper on your books. We changed books as much as 3 or 4 times a week. You go to your locker and there would be ink all over everything you own. I was walking down a hall one day with my personal guard's name was Johnny Black at the time, and somebody spewed I think it was the one time, somebody spewed acid in my eye. They walked up to me with a water gun, they do that often, and you'd expect water, that'd be cool, this time I got acid in my eyes and everything went flying and I had long hair and he took my braid and he slammed my head beneath the water faucet. And when I got to the doctor, they said, he had saved the quality of your sight, if not your sight. You'd be walking, you'd be on the first floor and three floors up somebody would drop a li-, lighted stick of dynamite down your head. **The troops were wonderful. You know, there was [laughs] some fear that they were dating the girls in high school, and that—I don't care what they were doing, they, they were wonderful.** They were disciplined, they were attentive, they were caring, they didn't baby us, but they were there. I remember one time asking one guy, you know, what we're gonna do if they rained this dynamite on us as they usually did, and he said, I'm gonna pick you up and I'm running like hell. And he did, and I was a big girl, so I mean, they cared. For the first time I began to feel like there is this slight buffer zone between me and this hell on the other side of this wall. **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, in gym, you'd be showering in gym and someone would turn your, your shower to scalding. You'd be walking out to the volleyball court and someone would break a bottle and trip you on the bottle. I have scars on my right knee from that.** Anything that you can think of that one human being could possibly do to another they did. And this is what was frightening to me, because there were things that had never entered my mind to do to another human being. And after a while as a child, I started saying to myself, am I less than human? Why did they do this to me? What's wrong with me? And so you go through stages even as a child, you know. First you're in pain, then you're angry, and then you try to fight back and then you just don't care. You just, you can't care. You hope you do die. You hope that there's an end. And then you, you just mellow out and you realize that survival is day to day and you start to grasp your own spirit. You start to grasp the, the depth of the human spirit and you start to understand your own abilities to cope no matter what and that was the greatest lesson I learned.

INTERVIEWER: SPEAKING ABOUT—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: WE'D BETTER CHANGE BATTERIES

00:25:56:00

[cut]

INTERVIEWER: YOU READY?

[sync tone]

Pattillo Beals: Shush. OK, we're rolling.

00:26:06:00

INTERVIEWER: JUST, IN TALKING ABOUT THE TWO SIDES AND THAT BUFFER IN THE MIDDLE, YOU'VE GOT PEOPLE WHO ARE ANGRY AND WANT TO HURT YOU, THEIR WHITE FACES. YOU GOT THESE AIRBORNE GUYS WHO COME IN, THEY'RE ALSO WHITE, HOW DO, HOW DO YOU TRUST THEM THAT THEY'RE GOING TO BE THERE FOR YOU?

Pattillo Beals: 'Cause they should—

INTERVIEWER: TALK ME, TALK TO ME AS A FIFTEEN YEAR OLD NOW.

Pattillo Beals: As a fifteen year old, you know it was a war. And you, you did have, you had the troops and you had all these kids and all these parents, all these white kids in this school. And at first, as a fifteen-year-old, you don't understand what's wrong with you. I was bright. I could talk faster and better than they could, and I was certain my IQ was much higher than 100% of 'em [sic]. And I was informed, and I was together and I knew it. My mother was a teacher, I knew who I was. And I wondered, what's the matter with me? You know, what's going on here? What's, what's-so, first you know, it's like you're a stranger in a strange land. And, you doubt yourself. First of all, you first start to doubt yourself. Then you wonder you know, how you got in this movie, what's, what's God doing with you. And, and there's a whole lot of stuff that goes in your head, a lot of pain. The kids who were there, some days, they would say, like this one, this one girl's name was Sammie Dean Parker, see I've never forgotten the names, the other guy that tortured me the most was named David Sontag. Sammie Dean would say, come sit with me today, we're going to salute the flag together. This is in home room. We're going to do so and so together, that be one day. The next day, you'd come in and she'd shoot an ink gun at you, or she'd throw a rock across the room at you, or she'd call you nigger as you walked in the door. You, you know inside I had to learn to trust somebody, I had to learn to get a point of sanity, my point of sanity was my religion, was God. As far as the troops were concerned, I was always scared that they wouldn't, and, and frightened of how they would. I was frightened, but after awhile they proved themselves in the sense that they would stand up and they proved—my own bodyguard in particular proved to me that when the chips were down, he would help. On the other hand, there was always that little teeny thought in my mind that there are nine of us, 2500 of them, maybe a thousand troops billeted in the backyard, actually billeted there. What would happen if all of those folks would decide that they didn't like me? So that always lurked, that thought always lurked in my mind. But you have to, I had to after awhile establish some point of sanity, you

gotta trust somebody, somewhere somehow, because you're going nuts anyway, you know. And the way I did it, the way I handled it was to kinda joke about it and, but you're going nuts, it's crazy, you know. Why are you here? What are you doing here? At fifteen years of age, you don't have the emotional equipment to understand that you're OK and that's what you've got to understand most of all is, I'm OK, you know, this guy doesn't like me, but I'm OK.

INTERVIEWER: NOW—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: I'M GONNA RELOAD.

00:29:03:00

[cut]

[sync tone]

INTERVIEWER: ELEVENTH GRADER, STILL FIFTEEN YEARS OLD, WHAT KIND OF, WHAT KIND OF LIFE DID YOU HAVE—SOCIAL LIFE ESPECIALLY, AT THAT TIME? YOU KNOW. AT THE SCHOOL AND OUTSIDE THE SCHOOL.

Pattillo Beals: My—the eleventh year at my high school was not good. I had no social life. My life consisted of going to school with the troops at first, enduring that day, coming back to one or two houses—one of two houses and being de-briefed. Dealing with the troops as well as the media, the press it was the first time, I was fully exposed to the press, journalist, press conferences. Study, trying to get some semblance of my homework, eating with my family, trying to figure out how to keep the house secure. Dealing with the phone calls that would come in from the people of the Ku Klux Klan or people of the White Citizens Council, the Mother's League, they formed all sorts of anti-black clubs, dealing with those phone calls harassment. Being warned sometimes at night of what was going to happen the next day. So it was like war, it was, what it must be like to you know, I since had some of the Vietnamese soldiers explain to me what it meant to be in a camp of war and it's like war.

00:30:24:00

INTERVIEWER: IT DOESN'T SOUND LIKE THE KIND OF YEAR THAT A FIFTEEN YEAR OLD WOULD WANT TO HAVE, TALK TO ME ABOUT THAT, JUST ABOUT—DID YOU FEEL THAT IT WAS UNFAIR THAT THIS SHOULDN'T BE?

Pattillo Beals: Well, you know, when people take out their high school annuals and they look back at their high schools, I get sick in the stomach 'cause I don't look at mine. I remember once, see because, what you've got to understand is we're not being accepted in the white high school, we can't go anywhere, or do anything or be anybody, at the same time, we're not really accepted anymore in the black high school because we've now made trouble for the black people of the city. They're losing their jobs, my mother lost her job, they're asking us to withdraw and also we're on national media, so it separates us, we become separate people by

virtue of what we endure. We become separate, and in some ways symbiotic because only another one of us can understand what we're doing. And in a strange way, we're going through a rite of passage that makes us separate, that makes us an adult, that makes us understand spirit, that makes us understand who we are and our limits and you can't obliterate that, and you can't change that, and you can't separate it. So we really had no camaraderie, we had very little camaraderie with our, you know black schoolmates. I remember once going to a dance and getting there and saying, OK guys, we're going to go for it. This is our big social occasion. It was around Christmas time, and we got to this dance and about maybe 20 minutes into it, we, we were all clustered together, held together and I remember Ernie Green saying, all right, y'all you know we gotta get it together, now let's spread out, let's not talk to each other. But we were in a space where we had gone beyond where everybody else was in their heads, and what could we do? So, my social life, you know, Ernie's a party guy, Jeff's a party guy, Terry, my social life was fairly quiet, other people made the kinds of connections that they could. You watched television, you, you became much more—I became much more introspective.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: LET'S CHANGE ROLLS.

INTERVIEWER: WE'RE RIGHT ON TIME.

[cut]

00:32:28:00

[slate]

[change to camera roll 373]

[sync tone]

INTERVIEWER: YOU'RE FIFTEEN AND YOUR, YOUR LIFE IS BEING CONSUMED BY THIS, THIS DESEGREGATION EFFORT HERE. FIF—I MEAN, DID YOU EVER GO HOME AND JUST FEEL LIKE, WHY ME, WHY, YOU KNOW, WHAT RIGHT DOES ANYONE HAVE TO TAKE THIS FROM ME, TO PUT ME IN THIS SITUATION? WAS THERE BITTERNESS?

Pattillo Beals: See, as a fifteen year old, I could, I didn't have time to think, Why me? Not a lot. There was not a lot of bitterness; there was just fear—stark, raving, compelling fear. Fear that just engulfed me twenty-four hours a day. There wasn't time to think sort of why me, it was always in preparation, it was always hearing things on the radio, it was always reading things always being told how to behave by adults. I mean for a year of my life I was on—part of that time, I had to be fed intravenously because I was ill. And there was a part of the time where you snap out you know, but, but there was no thought. I mean I had gone beyond a point that I couldn't get backwards, I couldn't get backwards to a normal life. I couldn't step back to relax. I remember we got a TV and I sort of looked at TV a little bit, but I mean I was wound out into a space that you get—you have to be in I believe to be a warrior. And, and I

can only describe it now as an adult, and that space is that life is no longer normal, your clothes ready, you polish your shoes, your life goes on automatic pilot. And the discipline that my mother and grandmother had given me up to that point was what sustained me. I did it all but I did it all from a distance looking at myself doing it, 'cause I thought, I can't believe I'm here. I can't believe this is happening, and what's gonna happen after this and how's this all going to end and when are they gonna to stop and ouch. Just ouch.

00:34:15:00

INTERVIEWER: EVERY MORNING YOU LOOKED AT YOURSELF IN THE MIRROR, THIS FIFTEEN-YEAR-OLD GIRL AND YOU LOOK AT THE DAY YOU'VE GOT TO FACE. YOU LOOK AT HOW TO GO INTO THAT SCHOOL EVERY DAY.

Pattillo Beals: And it scared me to death. Going to that school every day scared me to death. To this moment, if you played Buddy Holly's "Peggy Sue", I'd throw up and I'd have to go to bed because it scared me to death. It frightened me. There's a point beyond which you're not frightened. You're numb, but still in all, you are a different person than a person who's living an ordinary life because my considerations everyday were not only, you know, have I read, Newsweek and Time, and, and I was in Newsweek and Time, but not only am I keeping up with current events, am I gonna be hanged or am I gonna get it over the head. Am I gonna be hit in the back of the head with something or am I gonna blow up with a stick of dynamite? You know, what's going to be left of me? My concerns began to be those concerns of some, I was some odd combination of adult-child warrior, you know, somebody else, somebody that nobody can define. *You know, I worried about silly things like keeping my saddle shoes straight*, as I said, you know, *what am I gonna wear today, the things that a fifteen-year-old girl does worry about*, you know, how's my make-up, *but also, which part of the hall to walk in that's the safest*, what's gonna be the mood of the kids in school today. And, *who's going to hit me with what? Is it going to be hot soup today? Is it going to be hot chili? Is it going to be so greasy that it ruins the dress my grandmother made for me? I mean, how's this day going to go?* Am I gonna get that book that's afire in front of me away from my chest before it catches my bras on fire? It's a different thing, you start to think about, can I just make it the next hour? Can I just make it the next half hour? And then when I used to hear those helicopters overhead, around just before 3 o'clock, it's time to go home, the helicopters are here to accompany me home. I've made it another day. Can I get from this desk to the hall to my locker and get out? *And then, you know, you get out and you get to the car and you*, you know, some of the greatest times we used to have would be riding on the way home *and then we'd joke, we'd kind of play with each other* and you kind of, you let, *your stomach would kind of go back into its seat*, where it usually rests. And those would be nice times 'cause we'd talk to each other about our day and, you know, we'd, you know, I'd, I'd always make horrible, horrifying jokes about the whole thing, so that was kind of nice. *But then again, we'd get* probably, usually *to the head of the NAACP Daisy Bates' house*, usually would be *and we'd have to face a press conference*, so it would be the grown-up, watch what you say in the press conference. We could say one thing, by the way, one thing could be said in the press conference in one day, which would trigger hell the next day. You know, one wrong comment, one wrong word, could mean that the next day in the

shower, I'd get bathed in scalding water. So, I mean, I was on guard, you know, I wasn't, that was the end of my childhood, that was it—over and out.

INTERVIEWER: OK LET'S CUT FOR A SECOND.

[cut]

00:37:18:00

[cut]

[sync tone]

INTERVIEWER: RESPONDED THE WAY SHE DID. SO THAT—THERE'S A REAL CONFLCIT. OK?

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: OK, IT'S ALL YOURS.

INTERVIEWER: OK. BEGIN TO TELL ME ABOUT MARY—MINNIJEAN.

Pattillo Beals: You know, there were six girls and there were three boys among the Little Rock Nine. We'd all known each other. The first year I went to school, I went with Terry Roberts. And so we'd all known each other very well. Minnijean Brown was, for all intents and purposes a very good friend. We had known each other, we lived a block apart and we, we were buddies, we walked to school together, we talked, we visited, we ate meals together. Our parents knew each other. She was a big, a big woman, tall, 5'8" about, and pensive, thoughtful and creative, very, very much a kind woman, a kind girl growing up and fun. Minnijean was under a great amount of stress because we were big, because the both of us were big, we would usually be singled out for more attention. Minnijean Brown was also at the time a little bit fair-skinned with reddish hair and, strong, you know, a, a really, really strong spirit and feisty and, I could see day by day a little bit of her being chewed away at. She had, you know, maybe it, it was because of the nature of her support system at home, or just because she was tired, she, she got picked on I think, maybe a little bit more than other people did. We all got picked on. But I could just see everyday a little bit of her automatically telling herself, no, I can't hit back. No, I can't do this. And yet, going further out in the edge just like all of us were. And then there came the day that, she was in that cafeteria and she just couldn't handle it anymore and so, she just gave up. And she knew, she had. ***I could just see her little head click. She consciously said to herself, "No, Minnijean, if you do this, you know you won't be here." But then this was the time of the year that we all didn't want to be there.*** I wanted to be dead. I wanted to be away from there, however I got away from it. She found a way out, she found a way out. And I was so jealous, I went to her house afterwards and she got all these new clothes and she was packing up and she was going away, and, I wanted to go with her. But I knew I couldn't. But Minnijean Brown was a neat human being, is a neat human being, and, she did, she gave her all, she gave her personal best. If she had stayed maybe beyond that point, she would've gone nuts.



00:40:06:00

INTERVIEWER: WHAT HAPPENED THAT DAY, DESCRIBE FOR ME THAT SCENE IN THE LUNCHROOM, THE CAFETERIA.

Pattillo Beals: She, is walking with this chili—

INTERVIEWER: I MEAN—

Pattillo Beals: —Millie Jean—Minnijean. There was this huge cafeteria, and this cafeteria was always the time to get us, you know, if you're going to get food splattered on you, you're gonna get tripped. I mean, it was almost not worth having lunch, because the cafeteria was fair game, because it was a big place and you had to walk among these lines of people, you were always gonna get heckled, called nigger, by then you didn't even hear it, you know, who cares, just let me sit down and eat my food, you know. And she was carrying this chili and this guy went for her, and tripped her, and worked on her. And she let go, that's it. I mean she couldn't go, and I know how she felt, she couldn't go any farther. That was it, better she should stop then than go farther and snap.

INTERVIEWER: OK. LET'S CUT PLEASE.

[cut]

00:41:06:00

[sync tone]

INTERVIEWER: WHAT YOU DID THE DAY SCHOOL ENDED AND, WHAT YOU WERE FEELING AT THAT TIME?

Pattillo Beals: *By the time school had ended, I had sort of settled into myself, and I could've gone for the next five years. It didn't matter anymore. I was past feeling, I was, I was into just that, kind of, numb pain where you say, hey, I can make it; do whatever you like; and it just doesn't matter anymore. But, I came home and, by myself I walked to the backyard and I burned my books. And I burned everything that I could burn. And I just stood there crying, looking into, to the fire, and, wondering whether I would go back, but not wanting to go back.* And realizing by then the magnitude of what I had done because you know then I had heard all these adults say you've made these inroads for generations yet unborn and, you know, I realized that it was important to do that and realizing also by this time the danger I first—you know, it's just like everything hit me, I knew what I had done, but if school had gone on one more day, I wouldn't have made it. At that point, I wanted, I needed that break, and yet, I knew that I had learned a lesson that would serve me all the rest of my life 'cause I knew then that nobody, not another human being certainly could break me, because I had, I had learned the limits of Melba. I knew how far she could go then and I knew that, that her strength depended on God and not on what somebody else did to her outside and that was the best lesson I ever learned.

00:42:44:00

INTERVIEWER: WHAT DID THAT ACT OF BURNING THE BOOKS, WHAT DID THAT SAY, WHAT DID THAT MEAN?

Pattillo Beals: That, that I could burn away all my pain, you know, that, that—when I burned the books, I was burning the pain, you know, the terrible, the terrible anguish the terrible fear, that I felt this, this feeling that is still to me indescribable. The feeling of not being enough, of not being you know, what's wrong, the pain, the horrible pain that you can't get beyond that you can only go through. The fear, the extraordinary fear that I felt, that I learned to live with this fear it must be what it's like to be you know, in a prisoner of war camp. You gotta learn to live with the fear and I learned to live with the fear. So, the burning was saying hey, you know, I'm gonna make it. It really doesn't matter, I will make it, I can get beyond

[cut]

00:43:33:00

[wild audio]

Pattillo Beals: all of what you do to me and what you say to me doesn't make me.

INTERVIEWER: OK LET'S CUT PLEASE FOR A MINUTE.

Pattillo Beals: [singing] I'm saving it all for you. That Jack Connor [sic] in the corner. Don't go nowhere, what do I care? [talking] See. I'm taking singing lessons.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: ALL RIGHT.

INTERVIEWER: SOUNDS LIKE OUR SINGING NEEDS A BASY [sic] DANCE.

[cut]

00:43:53:00

[slate]

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[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: FALSE MARK.

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: SECOND MARK.

00:44:11:00

INTERVIEWER: TELL ME, TELL ME, WHO DO YOU THINK PAID THE HIGHEST PRICE? WHOM MIGHT HAVE PAID THE LEAST PRICE? AND, AND EVEN MIGHT HAVE BENEFITTED FROM THAT EXPERIENCE. AND I DON'T REALLY WANT TO GET INTO A, A LISTING OF PEOPLE AND WHAT THEY'RE DOING NOW, BUT BEGIN TO JUST TALK ABOUT HOW EACH EXPERIENCE, HOW EACH MIGHT EXPERIENCE IT A LITTLE DIFFERENT.

Pattillo Beals: The Little Rock Nine are a unique group of people and as I get older I realize how unique we really were. Thelma Mothershed had a heart condition when she started and all of us used to protect her. She had a very serious heart condition, and she went through this with a heart condition. The kind of heart condition where she had to sit down on her haunches at time and she would change color, turn blue and, she paid a big price. She eventually had an operation. Elizabeth Eckford perhaps has paid the major price. Elizabeth Eckford has not since Little Rock, had a normal—what we would call a normal life. She paid a dear price, she gave her life. The normalcy of it, I'm sure wherever she is she's fine, but, she's not been able to function. I think we all learned something. I would be a different person had I not gone to Central High School and when I talk now to everybody, I think we all would be different. Certainly, look at among us, the success, the strength, the ability to cope with life, the ability to function in the real world was increased, enhanced by that. 'Cause at an early age we learned who we were. You know, we learned, hey, you gotta stretch. I think Carlotta Walls, for example, I just saw her a little while ago, still has a tremendous case of asthma. We still cry together. I've talked to Terry Roberts, Dr. Terry Roberts, each of us has a thin thread running through us, a semblance of the pain we endured. I am sure that it has affected me in the sense of my fear of people. Some of the choices I make, some of the things I do. I could be standing in line in a suburb of San Francisco waiting for a movie and look around me and all of the people in that movie—are waiting in line with me are white teenagers or white and for just in instant, just an instant, I'm frightened and I tell myself it's fine. So, we all pay prices, but we all gained. 'Cause I believe you're always where you're supposed to be to learn the lesson you need to learn. So, hey, Little Rock was a lesson baby, that was a lesson, a lesson that I can't forget, but a lesson that serves me.

00:46:40:00

INTERVIEWER: OK, YOU TALK ABOUT STRENGTHS AND THE STRENGTH THAT YOU GAINED FROM THAT EXPERIENCE. BE SPECIFIC WHEN YOU TALK TO ME ABOUT THOSE PERSONAL STRENGTHS THAT YOU—

Pattillo Beals: I learned from Little Rock to care more about people, 'cause I don't ever, ever, ever want to hurt anybody the way I was hurt. I learned the strengths and weaknesses in people. I learned my own strengths and weaknesses. I learned that the color of racism is neither black nor white, it is an entity, the color of hatred is neither black nor white. Some of

the people who were the kindest to me in my life have been white. The reason I live today is because of these people whose skin was white. It has to do with this horrible entity, it's a thing, it's an ugly, ugly thing and you've got to get passed it no matter where you see it, whether it's in the Holocaust in Germany, or it's in Little Rock, or it's in Vietnam, it's a thing that triggers people to mistreat other people and not to remember that we are all God's children and we are all human. And when that thing arises, each of us is responsible to do what we have to do to stop it. So Little Rock taught me to respect human life and to know that I cannot give it so don't take it and don't abuse it. Because I will not go ever into the space that anybody went with me. I will not do that to another human being. So it taught me to love.

00:48:13:00

INTERVIEWER: LET'S CUT. THANK YOU.

00:48:24:00

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