

## **We Found the Common Ground: Little Rock Central High School National Historic Site**

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When nine African American students in Little Rock, Arkansas headed to high school in 1957, they left behind more than half a century of segregated education and entered a new era of equality. They paid a personal price for their belief in the U.S. Constitution, but their courageous demand for equal rights moved the nation further along its path of democracy for all.

On September 4, 1957 Arkansas Governor Orval Faubus ordered units of the state's National Guard to surround Little Rock Central High School and prevent nine African American students, later known as the Little Rock Nine, from entering the school. The new medium of television news turned the spotlight on Little Rock as the nation and world watched the drama unfold from their living rooms. Two weeks later, federal judge Ronald Davies ordered Faubus to stop interfering with the court's order to desegregate. Faubus removed the guard and rioting ensued. President Dwight D. Eisenhower called out the U.S. Army's 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division to escort and protect the Little Rock Nine.

On September 24, 2007 the National Park Service dedicated a new \$6.1 million visitor center at Little Rock Central High School National Historic Site in conjunction with events commemorating the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the school's desegregation. Because the school remains an operating educational institution, the visitor center is the place where visitors learn about the events that occurred there fifty years ago and their role in the context of the larger civil rights movements in the United States. The opening was the culmination of a 10 year planning effort that began with a nonprofit organization, civic and business involvement, and a university public history program that was willing to take on the challenge of telling the story that remains painful to many of the community's residents even today.

Beginning in 1996, community leaders partnered with the University of Arkansas at Little Rock (UALR) to plan for a new visitor center across the street from Central High School. The university offered faculty expertise through Dr. Johanna Miller Lewis with UALR's graduate program in public history. Dr. Lewis possessed not only academic history experience, but also experience in interpretation and developing exhibits through her work at Colonial Williamsburg. She led the effort to plan the exhibits about the crisis, while a nonprofit organization renovated a former Mobil gas station to serve as the visitor center.

The center opened in September 1997 for the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the desegregation crisis.

During the development of the visitor center, it became clear that the 1,100 square foot facility would not be large enough to tell the full story the crisis in its proper context. Those involved knew that a larger exhibit that incorporated multiple points of view was needed. In 1998, President Clinton signed legislation establishing Little Rock Central High School National Historic Site as a unit of the National Park Service. Plans began early in 1999 for a larger, permanent visitor facility that would be able to tell the story of Central High's desegregation in the larger context of the nation's development and the development of the fight for civil rights for all.

Fortunately, the National Park Service was able to draw upon the expertise of those in the community and at UALR who had been involved in the initial planning efforts, and who had been operating the visitor center since its opening. A diverse group of individuals including public historians, academic historians, interpreters, people involved in the crisis (such as members of the Little Rock Nine,) and others in the community identified the main stories that needed to be included in the new center's exhibits. Participants clearly expressed the need to place the events of Central High in the larger context of our nation's history and also to highlight the key theme that individuals can make a difference.

For the public historians and interpreters involved in developing the new exhibits, this inclusive planning process identified several key issues: the role of memory in influencing one's perception of the events, the challenges inherent in interpreting controversial events, and the need to back up the exhibit text with solid historical research. Many historians have written accounts of the crisis since 1957, but the challenge was to sort through both the facts and the myths to tell a story that would be relevant to all audiences—local, national, and even international.

The park's chief of interpretation, Laura A. Miller, worked with Dr. Lewis and UALR to develop an oral history project that involved interviewing more than 40 individuals directly involved in the crisis. These interviews formed the basis of a key part of the new exhibits—allowing participants to tell the story in their own words. In addition, they continued to work with exhibit designers, partners, and academic historians to ensure that the events of the crisis were told in the context of the larger civil rights movements in the United States, allowing visitors the opportunity to hear multiple perspectives of the crisis and understand how the events were the result of a long history of political and social action.

The new center includes three thousand square feet of exhibits dedicated to telling the complex history leading to the 1957 desegregation crisis. Visitors from around the world now have a place to learn about this pivotal event in the nation's history. The site's interpreters link the events of the late 1950s

to today's continuing battles over school desegregation, racism, equality, and even such current topics as immigration reform. All are issues that continue to evoke powerful responses from citizens and all have at their root a reaction to change.