

Minnijean Brown Trickey Looks Back

Excerpts from an interview conducted by Veronica Majerol of *The New York Times Upfront* on May 16, 2012

Upfront: What was your life like before you became part of the Little Rock Nine? Can you tell me a little bit about your community, your school, and your friends?

Minnijean Brown Trickey: I've never been asked that question before. Little Rock was a kind of quiet, sleepy Southern town and very segregated, which was the way it was and so it didn't seem to matter particularly. In terms of what segregation looked like was [we] couldn't try on clothes at stores, eat at drugstores.

The great American dream as it was shown in *Seventeen* magazine—we couldn't do any of those sort of American fantasy things. So as a teenager, I had no images of black girls at all, except for *Ebony* magazine. I mean, I knew about segregation, but, in some ways, I had a very safe, comfortable community. If I chose to go [to an ice cream shop], I would have to go to the back and wait until the other teenagers in there stopped giggling and making fun. So there were things I just didn't do because they weren't available. I had a rich friendship life. I really liked my school. Well, I mean, when you're in a situation like that, you're not really always thinking about it or feeling oppressed because that's how things are.

Upfront: So, your school was a good place to go to school?

MBT: Well, it was fun, and the teachers were great, and I had friends. Yeah, it was a good place. I mean, I went to the colored branch of the library every Saturday, which was close to my house. I couldn't go to the white library, so there weren't a lot of books but there were enough for me.

Upfront: How, exactly, did you come to be part of the Little Rock Nine? What was the process?

MBT: Everybody says they remember the *Brown v. Board* decision. Maybe I do and maybe I don't, I can't remember, but there must have been some talk about desegregation. But in the spring of 1957, on the intercom and in my

homeroom, it was said, "If you live in the Central district and you're interested in going to sign up [to desegregate Central High] . . ." and I did. So that was the beginning of it.

Upfront: And did you know how important it was at the time?

MBT: I think if you live in a segregated society, and I think if you live in the United States as a black person, you know really quickly that there are things that need to be changed. And how that is going to happen, you don't know, but you want to be a part of trying to make change. You know, I had a safe community, but it's no fun not being able to try on clothes, it's not fun to sit on the wooden bench at the shoe store while the white people sit on a soft bench

in the front, and it's no fun seeing a really nice door on a restroom that says 'White Ladies' and then down in the basement there's a restroom that says 'Colored Women.' So, although I lived in a safe community and felt a great deal of safety, I also felt denied and I thought on the day that I put my name on that list, sort of loosely I thought, "This may be something that can shift some of that, so why not? I'm beautiful, I'm smart, I'm talented, I've got a smile to

die for. How hard can this be?"

Upfront: Did you have any reservations about doing it?

MBT: No. Not that day. The reservations came later when they said, "Oh well, if you go, you can't participate in any activity. You can't be in the choir, you can't be in athletics, you can't be in any clubs, you can only go to school." So there I'm thinking, I'd like to be in the choir too. That was the main thing.

Upfront: Do you remember what you were feeling on that morning of September 4, 1957?

MBT: The night before—Labor Day—[Arkansas Governor] Orval Faubus announced that he was bringing units of the



Minnijean Brown, 16, arrives outside Central High School, on September 25, 1957. Members of the U.S. Army stand guard to protect her.

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Arkansas National Guard to keep the peace. And in our house we were saying, “What is he talking about?” And my mother drove as close as she could to the school and she came back and she said, “There are just soldiers everywhere and they wouldn’t let me—they have it all blocked off for a couple of blocks around the school.”

Upfront: That was the morning of?

MBT: That was the night before. My best friend, Melba Patillo, who lived half a block away from me—our preparations were, “What are we going to wear? We’re really excited. This is gonna be interesting.” Though we had a hint of what was to come because when the school board selected the students, they published our names and addresses in the newspaper. So the calls—hate calls—kind of started immediately. So that was a little unsettling, and people would drive by and screech the brakes and have very loud mufflers. So there was some sense of, “Hmm, this is gonna be interesting.” So on the first day it was just really excitement of going to a new school.

Upfront: Were you prepared for what actually happened?

MBT: How would you prepare? I’m asking, What do you say? “Oh, you’re gonna run into this wall of hatred?” You’re a kid, so there is no preparation. Nobody knew what was gonna happen, to my knowledge. It was among the first [instances of integration], so it hadn’t happened before as a model. What do you say? “Oh, here in the United States, you’re pledging allegiance, you’re singing anthems, hiding under the desk, it’s liberty and justice for all”—and you’re brainwashed to believe that as well, and then you go to school one day and you see none of this was true. Not any of it. This is breaking my heart. We were scared, we were shaking because people were screaming obscenities and carrying stupid signs. It was a big shock because hatred is always a shock, I think. There was no preparation for that. I mean, I thought, “How could anyone hate *me*, per-

sonally?” No, there was no preparation. There can’t be. There’s no preparation for hate.

Upfront: And after those first three weeks, can you describe what it was like for you to be a student at Little Rock Central High School?

MBT: Well, we were out for three weeks. The first day we left, we had to go home, we had to go to federal court because there were injunctions filed . . . to delay integration. And then [there were] the negotiations between President Eisenhower and Orval Faubus for him to remove the National Guard. So it took [Faubus] three weeks to do that. And there was the Little Rock police, and the mob had grown quite bigger, and we got in [the school building], and it sounded like some kind of sports event. The roar of the crowd. And then we were told we had to leave, and we did. We went into the basement and got into these police cars and they told us to put our heads down and somebody told the drivers, “Once you start, don’t stop.” You know, we had already on the first day experienced the kind of fear, like the whole-body-shake kind of thing. And then we kind of got in [the school], and then we had to come out. So it was frustrating.

Then, of course, the mob beat up the reporters, which was [shown] on television.

I want to just say what made it fun. What made it fun was after the first day, we got letters from all over the world, and I still have an envelope that says “Minnijean USA.”

Upfront: What did the letters say?

MBT: The letters all said we admire you. They were from outside the country, they were all complimentary, from outside the state, they were admiring. I mean that was the most certain thing about it, “Oh my god, this is cool. People are paying attention to this.” Some hate [mail], usually unsigned from Arkansas. But most letters were from different parts of the world, saying people admired us and thought it was wonderful.



Minnijean Brown Trickey returned to Central High School in 2007 to mark the 50-year anniversary of the school’s integration.

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Upfront: I want to ask you about the chili incident. I'm sure you've been asked about it a lot, but can you tell me what happened?

MBT: Do you want to hear about the three times it was thrown on me by white students? Or do you want to hear my story about me, the one that was reported?

Upfront: They're probably part of the same story?

MBT: There are three separate incidents of soup thrown at me. But they're not known, and they're not talked about.

In the cafeteria, I think it was December, going through kind of sideways, through a narrow space, and having boys on the other side of the table pushing the chairs of the boys on the side of the table where I am, and they are slamming into me. And the girls are all giggling, and giggling, and doing their girl things. And then what they say is that I dumped a bowl of chili on a dude's head. I say, "No, it was much more exciting than that, because I dropped the tray virtually—the bowl, cutlery—the whole thing."

Upfront: Did this get you suspended from school?

MBT: It got me suspended, yeah. When I came down, [the girls' principal] asked me, did I do it on purpose? And I said, "accidentally on purpose." Part of that answer is, it really was if the teacher didn't see it, it didn't happen. So nothing that ever happened to us [nine black students] was ever important. So we stopped reporting. So you'd say, "Oh, I just got kicked down the steps," and somebody would say, "Well, did your teacher see it?" and you know, oh well. . . .

I had some resistance. I did ask in my history class why there's only one paragraph on slavery in a thousand-page book. Everybody went "Uh! You uppity!" The teacher turned beet red. So there were ways to [resist]—and asking to be in the Christmas concert was a form of resistance and saying that the chili was [spilled] "accidentally on purpose" was a form of resistance.

'What made it fun was after the first day, we got letters from all over the world.'

Upfront: In what ways did being one of the Little Rock Nine shape your life—either positively or negatively?

MBT: It made me really compassionate and made me kind, thoughtful, but also strident in speaking the truth. And saying things as I see them. Someone showed me our first press conference about 10 years ago. And the question was, "Why did you want to go to Central?" And I said, "When we're working hard and giving our lives in the war, it's all right, but when it comes time for equalization, we're turned down?" And when somebody showed me that, I said, "Oh my god, I'm that girl. I have been her all the time. This is who I am."

It gave us visibility and it also gave us some voice. But these are things that I am constantly analyzing as an elderly woman. I don't know what it meant then. I'm analyzing it from this point. I think probably we inspired other kids, but it gave us visibility, and we did interviews, and it gave us voice.

Upfront: Do you have any regrets about becoming one of the Little Rock Nine? Would you do it all again if you could?

MBT: Yeah, and the cool part would be that I would know more, maybe. What I think about the United States is that we still don't know what racism is [and] we're never going to

find out because we don't talk about it.

Upfront: Have you kept in touch with the other Little Rock Nine over the years?

MBT: Oh yeah, absolutely.

Upfront: Good friends?

MBT: Yeah, and we have raised money and we give scholarships every two years to nine students. Jefferson Thomas died two years ago. He was our wit, our cutting-edge social critic. We value each other much more. We went in different directions for a long time, and then as the country admitted that it happened in Little Rock and we could

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speak, we did, and we became really good mature friends.

Upfront: Have you had a chance to talk with any of the white students you went to school with at Little Rock?

MBT: No.

Upfront: Is that something that you've ever had the urge to do?

MBT: I don't need to talk to them; they need to talk to me. I had an apology for one chili incident on *[The Oprah Winfrey Show]* from David Sontag. Before David died, he became friends with my daughter, which is kind of interesting because my daughter has been a park ranger at the Little Rock Central High School National Historic Site for 10 years. But then he would bring his family to see the visitor center, talk to her. David is the person who was really serious about his part in the situation and kind of understood it. So that is good.

Upfront: Have you forgiven David?

MBT: Well, people ask me, "Would you accept his apology?" And I say, well, you know, it was almost 40 years later, and I hadn't been apologized to, and it was unbelievable that that happened. It was wonderful. And we wait for apologies. So when I'm talking to kids about bullying, which I do, I can use that and say, "I waited almost 40 years for that apology," and that it's really important to apologize because you liberate people and you say, "Hey, this actually happened. Something happened." Because for a real long time, Little Rock was saying, "It didn't really happen, it wasn't violent." There was a lot of denial.

Upfront: What advice do you have for students today who care strongly about a cause and want to make a difference?

MBT: We've been told that we need leadership and that that's how we make change. Well, that's not true at all. Whoever turned out to be the Little Rock Nine, that was our decision, individually. One day, I put my name on the list. No grown-ups said, "Do it." And that, I think, is hard for our society to convey to young people: that we have self-determination. We've sort of been made to believe that we have to have someone walking in front of us, telling us what to do. I teach at three community colleges . . . and I think the most shocking thing that college students are learning is that Dr. King was not saying, "Follow me." Dr. King was saying, "Yeah, I'll come. Yeah, I'll follow you." They can make change, and it doesn't have to be big change. We're sort of persuaded that the Little Rock Nine were brave. We weren't. We were more stupid than brave—or really naive.

'We all started off with great innocence. We were ordinary teenagers, and we were interested in changing something.'

Upfront: So it's up to young people in the end?

MBT: Yes, and that it's gonna be hard. Like, in the civil rights movement, it was really brutal, but you had people who were ready to put their bodies on the line. I'd like for young people not to think of the people who were in the civil rights movement and [other] movements as special or somehow have something they don't have. Because we all started off with great innocence. We were ordinary teenagers, and we were interested in changing something. And [we believed] that we can and that we must. •