

The Education of Ruby Nell

by Ruby Bridges Hall, New Orleans, LA

Forty years that brought incredible change in our country, forged in the crucible of the civil rights movement and the battle to end segregation. Forty years that changed me as well.

I was born in Mississippi in 1954, the oldest child of Abon and Lucille Bridges. That year the United States handed down its landmark decision ordering the integration of public schools. Not that I knew anything about school at the time. What I knew and loved was growing up on the farm my paternal grandparents sharecropped.

It was a very hard life, though. My parents heard there were better opportunities in the city. We moved to New Orleans, where my father found work as a service station attendant, and my mother took night jobs to help support our growing family.

As I got a bit older, my job was to keep an eye on my younger brothers and sister, which wasn't too difficult. Except for church and the long walk to the all-black school where I went to kindergarten, our world didn't extend beyond our block. But that was all about to change.

Under federal court order, New Orleans public schools were finally forced to desegregate. In the spring of 1960 I took a test, along with other black kindergarteners in the city, to see who would go to an integrated school come September. That summer my parents learned I'd passed the test and had been selected to start first grade at William Frantz Public School.

My mother was all for it. My father wasn't. "We're just asking for trouble," he said. He thought things weren't going to change, and blacks and whites would never be treated as equals. Mama thought I would have an opportunity to get a better education if I went to the new school - and a chance for a good job later in life. My parents argued about it and prayed about it. Eventually my mother convinced my father that despite the risks, they had to take this step forward, not just for their own children, but for all black children.

A federal judge decreed that Monday, November 14, 1960 would be the day black children in New Orleans would go to school with white children. There were six of us chosen to integrate the city's public school system. Two decided to stay in their old schools. The other three were assigned to McDonough. I would be going to William Frantz alone.

The morning of November 14 federal marshals drove my mother and me the five blocks to William Frantz. In the car one of the men explained that when we arrived at the school two marshals would walk in front of us and two behind, so we'd be protected on both sides.

That reminded me of what Mama had taught us about God, that he is always there to protect us. "Ruby Nell," she said as we pulled up to my new school, "don't be afraid. There might be some people upset outside, but I'll be with you."

Sure enough, people shouted and shook their fist when we got out of the car, but to me it wasn't any noisier than Mardi Gras, I held my mother's hand and followed the marshals through the crowd, up the steps into the school.

We spent that whole day sitting in the principal's office. Through the window, I saw white parents pointing at us and yelling, then rushing their children out of the school. In the uproar I never got to my classroom.

The marshals drove my mother and me to school again the next day. I tried not to pay attention to the mob. Someone had a black doll in a coffin, and that scared me more than the nasty things people screamed at us.

A young white woman met us inside the building. She smiled at me. "Good morning, Ruby Nell," she said, just like Mama except with what I later learned was a Boston accent. "Welcome, I'm your new teacher, Mrs. Henry." She seemed nice, but I wasn't sure how to feel about her. I'd never been taught by a white teacher before.

Mrs. Henry took my mother and me to her second-floor classroom. All the desks were empty and she asked me to choose a seat. I picked one up front, and Mrs. Henry started teaching me the letters of the alphabet.

The next morning my mother told me she couldn't go to school with me. She had to work and look after my brothers and sister. "The marshals will take good care of you, Ruby Nell," Mama assured me. "Remember, if you get afraid, say your prayers. You can pray to God anytime, anywhere. He will always hear you."

That was how I started praying on the way to school. The things people yelled at me didn't seem to touch me. Prayer was my protection. After walking up the steps past the angry crowd, though, I was glad to see Mrs. Henry. She gave me a hug, and she sat right by my side instead of at the big teacher's desk in the front of the room. Day after day, it was just Mrs. Henry and me, working on my lessons.

Militant segregationists, as the news called them, took to the streets in protest, and riots erupted all over the city. My parents shielded me as best they could, but I knew problems had come to our family because I was going to the white school. My father was fired from his job. The white owners of a grocery store told us not to shop there anymore. Even my grandparents in Mississippi suffered. The owner of the land they'd sharecropped for 25 years said everyone knew it was their granddaughter causing trouble in New Orleans, and asked them to move.

At the same time, there were a few white families who braved the protests and kept their children in school. But they weren't in my class, so I didn't see them. People from around the country who'd heard about me on the news sent letters and donations. A neighbor gave my dad a job painting houses. Other folks baby-sat for us, watched our house to keep away troublemakers, even walked behind the marshal's car on my way to school. My family couldn't have made it without our friends' and neighbors' help.

And me, I couldn't have gotten through that year without Mrs. Henry. Sitting next to her in our classroom, just the two of us, I was able to forget the world outside. She made school fun. We did everything together. I couldn't go out in the schoolyard for recess, so right in that room we played games and for exercise we did jumping jacks to music.

I remember her explaining integration to me and why some people were against it. "It's not easy for people to change once they have gotten used to living a certain way," Mrs. Henry said. "Some of them don't know any better and they're afraid. But not everyone is like that."

Even though I was only six, I knew what she meant. The people I passed every morning as I walked up the school's steps were full of hate. They were white, but so was my teacher, who couldn't have been more different from them. She was one of the most loving people I had ever known. The greatest lesson I learned that year in Mrs. Henry's class was the lesson Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., tried to teach us all. Never judge people by the color of their skin. God makes each of us unique in ways that go much deeper. From her window, Mrs. Henry always watched me walk into school. One morning when I got to our classroom, she said she'd been surprised to see me talk to the mob. "I saw your lips moving," she said, "but I couldn't make out what you were saying to those people."

I wasn't talking to them," I told her. "I was praying for them." Usually I prayed in the car on the way to school, but that day I'd forgotten until I was in the crowd. Please be with me, I'd asked God, and be with those people too. Forgive them because they don't know what they're doing.

"Ruby Nell, you are truly someone special," Mrs. Henry whispered, giving me an even bigger hug than usual. She had this look on her face like my mother would get when I'd done something to make her proud.

Another person who helped me was Dr. Robert Coles, a child psychiatrist who happened to see me being escorted through the crowd outside my school. Dr. Coles volunteered to work with me through this ordeal. Soon he was coming to our house every week to talk with me about how I was doing in school.

Really, I was doing fine. I was always with people who wanted the best for me: my family, friends, and in school, my teacher. The more time I spent with Mrs. Henry, the more I grew to love her. I wanted to be like her. Soon, without realizing it, I had picked up her Boston accent.

Neither of us missed a single day of school that year. The crowd outside dwindled to just a few protestors, and before I knew it, it was June. For me, first grade ended much more quietly than it began. I said good-bye to Mrs. Henry, fully expecting her to be my teacher again in the fall. But when I went back to school in September, everything was different. There were no marshals, no protestors. There were other kids - even some other black students - in my second-grade class. And Mrs. Henry was gone. I was devastated. Years later I found out she hadn't been invited to return to William Frantz, and she and her husband had moved back to Boston. It was almost as if that first year of school integration had never happened. No one talked about it. Everyone seemed to have put that difficult time behind them.

After a while, I did the same. I finished grade school at William Frantz and graduated from an integrated high school, went to business school and studied travel and tourism. For 15 years I worked as a travel agent. Eventually I married and threw myself into raising four sons in the city I grew up in.

I didn't give much thought to the events of my childhood until my youngest brother died in 1993. For a time, I looked after his daughters. They happened to be students at William Frantz, and when I took them there every morning, I was literally walking into my past, into the same school that I'd help integrate years earlier.

I began volunteering three days a week at William Frantz, working as a liaison between parents and the school. Still, I had the feeling God had brought me back in touch with my past for something beyond that. I struggled with it for a while. Finally I got on my knees and prayed, Lord, whatever it is I'm supposed to be doing, you'll have to show me.

Not long after that, a reporter called the school. The psychiatrist Robert Coles had written a children's book, *The Story of Ruby Bridges*; now everyone wanted to know what had happened to the little girl in the Norman Rockwell painting (See Picture Gallery) that had appeared in *Look* magazine. No one expected to find me back at William Frantz. Dr. Coles had often written about me, but this was the first book intended for children. To me it was God's way of keeping my story alive until I was able to tell it myself.

One of the best parts of the story is that I was finally reunited with my favorite teacher, Barbara Henry. She reached me through the publisher of Dr. Coles's book, and in 1995 we saw each other in person for the first time in more than three decades. The second she laid eyes on me, she cried, "Ruby Nell!" No one had called me that since I was a little girl. Then we were hugging each other, just like we used to every morning in first grade.

I didn't realize how much I had picked up from Mrs. Henry (I still have a hard time calling her anything else) - not only her Boston accent, but her mannerism too, such as how she tilts her head and gestures her hands when she talks. She showed me a tiny, dog-eared photo of me with my front teeth missing that she'd kept all these years. "I used to look at that picture and wonder how you were," she said. "I told my kids about you so often you were like part of my family."

We have stayed a part of each other's lives ever since. It turns out that because of what I went through on the front lines of the battle for school integration, people recognize my name and are eager to hear what I have to say about racism and education today. I speak to groups around the country, and when I visit schools, Mrs. Henry often comes with me. We tell kids our story and talk about the lessons of the past and how we can still learn from them today - especially that every child is a unique human being fashioned by God.

I tell them that another important thing I learned in first grade is that schools can be a place to bring people together - kids of all races and backgrounds. That's the work I focus on now, connecting our children through their schools. It's my way of continuing what God set in motion 40 years ago when he led me up the steps of William Frantz Public School and into a new world with my teacher, Mrs. Henry - a world that under his protection has reached for beyond just the two of us in that classroom.

~ Ruby Bridges

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