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Melba pattillo beals death date

Interview with Melba Pattillo BealsView Item Production Team: An Interview Date: November 30, 1985Camera Rolls: 370-374Sound Rolls: 1330-1331 Preferred Quote: Interview with Melba Pattillo Beals, conducted by Blackside, Inc. on November 30, 1985, for Eyes on the Award: America's Civil Rights Years (1954-1965). University of Washington Libraries, Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection.These transcripts contain material that did not appear in the final program. Only the text that appeared in bold italics was used in the final version of Eyes on the Award. FILM PRODUCTION TEAM: Camera Roll 370. SOUND ROLL 1330. INTERVIEW: I WOULD LIKE TO TAKE YOU TO DESCRIBE TO ME LITTLE ROCK, YOU ARE BACK, YOU ARE ABOUT TO GO TO HIGH SCHOOL, YOU PROBABLY HAVE NOT THOUGHT ABOUT WHAT CAN HAPPEN IN YOUR LIFE, I WOULD LIKE TO HAVE AN IDEA OF THE LITTLE ROCK THAT YOU EXPERIENCED WHEN YOUNG BEFORE GOING TO SCHOOL. Melba Pattillo Beals: Little Rock was separated, my world was mostly black. Part of my family is white, my first cousins, etc. and those people I went to town with occasionally did things, but most of my world was black. I went to a black school called, uh, First Knight, and then, uh, I just went to school every day. My mother was a teacher, I lived with my grandmother. My parents were divorced. So, Me, my life consisted of school and church, uh, you should make good grades, you should polish your saddle shoes, uh, there were no parks, my big wish had been to ride a carousel and swim in a pool. And I can do that. There was a park there called Fair Park and we'd go there, uh, sometimes. But I couldn't use the pool. And I kept wondering why, you know, I couldn't do that. And going on rides on Sunday with my mother and we were always going to spend at Central College, because it was a castle, it looked like a castle and I always what was inside it. So it was my life, it was very simple, uh, a lot of family reading, a lot of familiar stuff, a lot of Bible reading with my grandmother, a lot of bible verses memorizing -- very simple, uh, very Southern. INTERVIEWER: [GAP] YOUNG PEOPLE WHO DON'T KNOW LIFE THERE, OR HOW IT WAS WHEN YOU WERE YOUNG, AND MANY PEOPLE [GAP] TALK TO ME MAYBE A LISTRACTION SO THAT SOMEONE WHO MAY NOT HAVE A GOOD NOTION OF THIS KIND OF [GAP] TRYING TO GET AN ILLUSTRATION OF WHAT IT MEANT TO BE A YOUNG BLACK GIRL IN LITTLE ROCK. Melba Pattillo Beals: It meant that if you went to Woolworths, and you wanted, you know, if you were a young black man 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 in on the counter, you just watched and then secondly, they built a grill so you could eat on one side. I the essence of this is that if you had to go to the bathroom, there was the white women's bathroom and the black women's bathroom. And I remember one day getting very curious as a child and wanted to know why if I have to go to the bathroom I have to go down these stairs and far away. So one day, I wanted to go to the bathroom and I decided I wanted to know what was going on, a white ladies' room that I couldn't see, you know, so I went there and, here are all these cops knocking on the door, you know, and everything was going on, my mom was screaming Don't kill her! It was a great scene, you know. And there was nothing but toilets in there. The essence of life if you were young in Little Rock was that life was separate and you were always scared. I've always been afraid. If you were in a black community, it meant you didn't have protection. In general there were no black cops, no black buses, no black mailmen, you were on a separate reservation. And if you depended on the police department for security, as if my father were a very big man and I remember when I was too little someone was being lynched, an Asian, and they would come to pick up the men, black people out of the community to avoid lynching or to help him get out of town in the middle of the night. So my life as a kid was shadows, the Bible, joy with my family, boundaries, always felt bounds. see, you always feel like, uh, scared like I couldn't be protected. My uncles and my father couldn't protect me if there was a confrontation with white people. I remember an incident where I think black kids got stuck in a car, and because the police took their parents away, something tiny like a ticket or something. So life was limited, you know, within the permitted limits. There was someone about you, someone in control. You were in a bottle and someone else had the cork. INTERVIEWER: COULD YOU PLEASE TELL ME, HUM, WHY DID YOU WANT TO GO TO CENTRAL HIGH? WHY, YOU ARE [A] YOUNG BLACK, UNDERSTANDING ALL THINGS HAPPENING IN LITTLE ROCK AND YOUR POSITION, WHY YOU WANTED... Melba Pattillo Beals: Okay, let's take the heroism away now and understand that Little Rock was a quiet reserve. And there was no thought on my part, no thought on our part that when we went to Central 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. Ever since I was two, my mom said, You're going to college. Education is your key to survival, and I understood that. And it was kind of a curiosity. It was not an overwhelming desire to go to this school and integrate this school and change history. Oh it wasn't like that. Eyes on the Award: Years of Civil Rights of America 1954-1965; Episode 102-9 There was just, being, fun to go to this school that I ride every day, I want to know what's in there. I don't necessarily want to be with these people, I assumed that being with these people wouldn't be any different than being with the people I was already with. I had no idea, none, until the adventure started that it would be like this. And me getting into Central College was almost an accident. I simply raised my hand one day when they said, Who of you lives in the Central College area? So that was two years earlier, in 1955, and they said, you know who has good grades, and I've had excellent grades. It was a freak accident. WITH THAT ACCIDENT OF FATE IN MIND, WHEN YOU FOUND OUT THAT IT WAS ACCEPTED, HOW DID YOU FINALLY REALIZE THAT YOU WOULD BE ONE OF THOSE WHO WAS... [unintelligible] Melba Pattillo Beals: I was sitting in Cincinnati, Ohio with my mom on a couch and Walter Cronkite came on television and said in late August that Central High School was going to be integrated into Little Rock, Arkansas, that they were already starting to have trouble with the White Citizens Council [gap] of the Ku Klux Klan, and that um , these were the children who were going and he mispronounced my name. My maiden name is Pattillo, and he said, these are the children who were going and my mother said, What did you say? And that was it, my mom started making phone calls back. I wasn't involved in this. So, you know, we went back to Little Rock and I started being involved in the preparation that the NAACP was doing to go to Central College. But before that I had no real awareness that I would. 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? AT THAT TIME, BEFORE YOU ENTERED, BEFORE EXPERIENCING RESISTANCE INSIDE OR OUTSIDE SCHOOL, AT THAT MOMENT, WHEN YOU FOUND OUT YOU WERE GOING, WHAT WAS YOUR FEELING? Melba Pattillo Beals: Just you, [gap] apprehension, some. You know, we'd meet and discuss, you know, what could happen, meet with some members of the school board, we had a few community meetings with quakers, with several people, to try to establish a premise for communication. And then, everyone, you know, I like new things, I like exciting things, I really have a tendency towards excitement, I like, you know. If it's new, let's go search, you know? So I wasn't feeling anything. I was feeling like, Okay, this is going to be an adventure, I'm going to meet new people and do new things. I'm going to see something I haven't seen before, do something I haven't done before. So it's cool, you know. I was prepared and kind of I could feel you know, my internal internal for something that would be new. Without the institute that I faced a holocaust, without the indesertion that I faced a holocaust - none. FILM CREW MEMBER: TAKE 3. INTERVIEWER: [unintelligible] Melba Pattillo Beals: Arrangements, prior arrangements had been made for each of the children to come to Central College as individuals, with their families or anything else. Some carpooled. Eyes on the Award: Years of Civil Rights of America 1954-1965; Episode 102-9Let's meet at a specific point. No one anticipated it, although there were radio announcements of crowds gathered, sporadic fights, or what not, no one expected there would be a crowd in front of the school. Uh, the school, you might imagine, is this castle, so, so the front of it is a long block and within that block perimeter, it was full of layers and layers of red-faced people. And I came up behind this group of people on the opposite side, you know, across the street from Central School to see Elizabeth Eckford walking across the street with the crowd mocking her. And at first, you know, I was standing in tippy-toes, trying to see what everyone in front of me was looking at. You know, what was going on, if there had been some [gap] accident, why were all these people there? Why, you know. All these questions in my mind. Angry people, angry, it was like, you know, when you go to a football game or rodeo, just angry, angry crowds of people. And we're after these people, my mom and Me. My mother was after me, and they were mocking Elizabeth who was across the street and then one of them turns around and says, Now we have a black man. And it was at this moment that my mother said: Take the car, Eyes on the Award: Civil Rights Years of America 1954-1965; Episode 102-9 don't wait for me, don't stop, Melba, just go ahead. And I couldn't drive. She said, Take the car, and then we were driving this Chevrolet and um, the guys had their t-shirts out and they had ropes, and they, they were sweating and, I saw all these faces looking at me and I remember thinking, because at first you know, when these people turn around, you mean, Hi, how are you? You don't understand that what they're turning around is to kill you. Eyes on the Award: Years of Civil Rights of America 1954-1965; Episode 102-9 And then, I walked away in amazement, you know, like with both hands up and my mom yelled at me, she said, I tell you, go to the car now! Listen to me, let me if you have to, get to the car! She was yelling at me to get into this car, we both got in the car, she blocked the car to reverse and we pulled down this crowd. And this was my first day at Central College.Eyes on the Award: America's Civil Rights Years Episode 102-9 CAMERA CREW MEMBER: TAKE 4: CAMERA ROLL 371. INTERVIEWER: WHAT I'D LIKE TO JUST PICK UP WITH, TALK TALK WATCHING THESE PEOPLE TURN AROUND, STILL HOW OLD ARE YOU? ARE YOU 17 AT THE TIME? 15 YEARS AND PEOPLE TURN TO EACH OTHER AND LOOK AT YOU. At 15, WHAT DO YOU SEE IN THEIR FACES? Melba Pattillo Beals: Anger, more anger than I've ever seen. You know, when I look at people and they turn around, I see anger, more anger than I've ever seen in my life. And I felt a lot of pain because I hadn't done anything to them. And it was an anger I didn't understand. But it was a lethal rage 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 you like me? What's wrong with me? Why don't I eat myself, why do they want to kill me, what I did that someone might want to kill me? And so, I backed off on defense, but it was like I was in a, in a gap] and I wasn't really, you know this can't be my reality, this is a bad dream, uh, you know, why are they doing this? Of course, I was always afraid of the whites in Little Rock and I knew I knew my parameters, I knew the line not to go over and I hadn't stepped, in my estimation, on that line. So, what was going to happen to me, I was just, just, amazing arms reaching out, eyes looking like, uh, red-looking rage. You know, get her! Kill her, enforce her, we've got a black man! We got two niggers! And it was me they were talking about, that it was my mother's who was talking. But my mother, my mother, you see, it was. And so, I, I obeyed her, you know, without thinking. That's how we saved our lives, that's how we got to the car. SO NOW, NOW YOU'VE ENTERED THE SCHOOL YOU CAN DESCRIBE TO ME BEING IN THAT SCHOOL, Um, AND GIVE ME SOME ILLUSTRATIONS IN TERMS OF INCIDENTS, BUT AT THE SAME TIME KEEP, ALSO HELP ME UNDERSTAND HOW THIS IS AFFECTING YOU, HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT ALL THIS? Melba Pattillo Beals: A little time passed, a little before us, you know we went back to school. Uh, some days I remember and I was now scared, really, from the top of my head to the tip of my fingers, scared, with a kind of fear that I can't even explain to you: a kind of scared, horrible, uh, desolate. There is no one here but me, and my grandmother said, There is God there. So my grandmother taught me how to say the psalms of the 23rd. FILM CREW MEMBER: SHOT 5. Melba Pattillo Beals: Okay, for the first time, on the first day, I was able to get into Central College, what I felt inside was a screaming and delirious fear - terrible fear, terrible fear, a fear I can't explain to you. There are no words for how I felt inside. I knew I was in a space I'd never been in, and I didn't know pain, I didn't know any pain like that because I didn't know what I'd done wrong. You see, when 15 years, and someone's going to hit you or hurt you, you want to know what you did wrong. Although I knew the difference between black and white, I didn't know the penalties that were paid for being black at the time. So I was a kid. And I remember walking through the glass, grass to the car to go to school thinking, I'm going to get water in my saddle shoes. My grandmother always made me polish my shoes. And I remember looking at the floor and thinking, Oh, if I could go back, you know. But we went to school that day and I went in a car with Elizabeth Eckford, with, uh, Terry, with a lot of other kids, and one, we got on the side of the Eyes building at the Award: America's Civil Rights Years from 1954 to 1965; Episode 102-9 again, the it sums like in a football game. Thousands of people in front and we were getting on the side and I could catch a glimpse of this group and in the car, on the car radio I could hear there was a crowd. And I knew what a crowd meant and I knew that the sounds that came from the crowd were very angry. Then we entered the side of the building, very, very fastEyes in the Award: America's Civil Rights Years 1954-1965; Episode 102-9 even when we walked in there were people running after us, there were people stumbling across other people. And once you, once I got into school, central school, it was very dark, it was like uh, a deep, dark castle. And my vision had to adapt to the fact that there were then people around me. Children, young people, some were in class because they brought us later, during the middle class and we were greeted by school officials and quickly dispersed our separate ways. And there has never been, never in my life any terror or any fear that I've been aware of. OK, START TELLING ME THE KIND OF HARASSMENT, THE KIND OF ATTACK YOU WERE INVOLVED WITH AND, AND AGAIN, GIVE ME THAT FEELING OF BEING 15 YEARS OLD... [unintelligible] Melba Pattillo

Beals: The first day we went to school, the kind of thing I suffered was the [white] parents came into school, and the parents were kicking, the parents were beating, the parents were throwing things. Uh, you'd be tripped over, people just come in and hit you in the face. And you could not retry, we were instructed by this time that any attempt to retry to answer, call a name in response would mean the end of the case. So now we were experienced warriors, we were beginning the journey to become the warrior who would make the journey through the Central School. And so, I had to change my head to a new space. My grandmother used to say to me, Turn the other cheek, and understand what it meant to be the Christ. And that's what I'd have in mind. And you know, everything that was possible to happen, happened. Um, this now, is the area, this is the first day we're going to without the troops. So the biggest feeling I had was a lack of protection. There was no one to turn to. There was no help, there was no one on my side, I was on my side. And the only way to get through this was to count on myself. TELL ME THE STORY ABOUT SAYING THE LORD'S PRAYER AND HOW YOU HAD... Melba Pattillo Beals: Well, they separated us. We were told that the school clerk told us that this is harder than I thought it would be. The school official told us: You want integration, we will give you integration. We're going to separate them, and so, in fact, in a school of 2500 or more, they sent us 9 different ways. My room was, I believe, number 313. So that meant I had to climb three flights of stairs on my own. And the only way to climb the stairs was to say the Lord's Prayer repeatedly. And that's how I got there. I couldn't look to my left or right, if I was hit I didn't have to answer. Sometimes, on the first day, I was escorted by a teacher, and then I, you know, I would say the Lord's Prayer and I would come to my class and sit down. So you're in a closed classroom and you think to yourself, things are going to be better, but it's not because the teachers, no one was prepared to control this crowd so now you're in a class with maybe 20 other people and you have a different kind of harassment, you have a controlled harassment, you get a , name-calling, you get uh, the beginning of what we were going to endure later. On this first day, we're still talking about this first day, it was just the first layer of this iceberg that we would be able to penetrate later. FILM CREW MEMBER: TAKE 6. INTERVIEWER: WHAT IS THIS? WHAT IS THE DANGER AND HOW DO YOU GET OUT OF IT? Melba Pattillo Beals: I had only been at school a few hours and by that time it was evident that the crowd was just about school administration. Cops were throwing their badges and the crowd was passing the wooden saw horses because the police would no longer fight to protect us. And then we were all called to the principal's office and there was a great fear that we wouldn't leave this building. We were trapped. And I thought, Okay, so I'm going to die here, school. And I remember you know, thinking about what I was told that uh, understanding the reality of where you are and praying. And at one point, someone in this crowd, this crowd of adults was panicking. This is the other thing I could see is that even the adults, the school staff were panicking as no protection. And someone made a suggestion, a couple of kids, the black kids who were with me were crying and uh, someone made a suggestion that if they allowed the crowd to hang a child while they were hanging the boy, um, they could then get the the out. And a gentleman, who I believed to be the Chief of Police said: Which one? As you will choose, will you let them take out canudos? He said, I'm going to get you out of there. And we were taken to the basement of this place, and we were put in two cars, fords of gray-blue color. And the man instructed them, he said, Once you start driving, don't stop. Eyes on the Award: Years of Civil Rights of America 1954-1965; Episode 102-9 And he told us to put our heads down. So the guy accelerated the engine there was a whole, you know, there was a [gap] that elapsed, they took the gas together and took these cars. This guy accelerated the engine and he came out of the bowels of this building and when he went up, I could see his hands going through this car, I could hear the screams, I could see guns, uh, and he was told not to stop. If you hit someone, keep rolling, because the kids are dead. And he did just that, and he didn't hit anyone, but he certainly was strong and aggressive in the way he got out of this garage because people tried to stop him and uh, he left me at home. And I remember saying, Thanks for the ride, and I should have said, Thanks for my life. Eyes on the Award: Years of Civil Rights of America 1954-1965; Episode 102-12 One, and I went in the front door that day and um, my grandmother and my mom were starting to say then that you're not coming back. But that's when Eisenhower sent a man from the Central Intelligence Agency here in the middle of the night, at this point, the local ministries were watching the INTERVIEWER: Tell me about it. Melba Pattillo Beals: The next time I went to Central College, I was accompanied by the 101 Airborne Division.Olhos no Prêmio: Years of Civil Rights of America 1954-1965; Episode 102-12 Let's Start Again? The next time I went to Central College, I was escorted by Airborne Division 101, members of that troop, and they were in uniform. I went in a jeep; there was a jeep behind me with a gun and one in front. Actually, we were in a station wagon, there were two jeeps accompanying us, and there were helicopters flying overhead. And I went in not through the side doors, but up the front stairs, and there was a sense of pride and hope that yes, here is the United States, yes, there's a reason why I salute the flag, and it's going to be okay, you know. These guys are going with us the first time, it's going to be okay. The troops, however, did not mean the end of the siege, it meant the declaration of war. Eyes on the Award: Years of Civil Rights of America 1954-1965; Episode 102-12 The troops, the presence of the troops certainly wouldn't have survived, and wherever they are, my God, you know, I hope you're all happy because I wouldn't be alive today without them. But uh, that doesn't mean, they couldn't come into the classroom with us, for example, for the majority of time, unless we were having a very big crisis. And children would do things like, in the study room in particular, pass by and throw a piece of illuminated paper into their books. We change books three or four times a week. You go into your closet and there would be paint on everything you own. Eyes on the Award: Years of Civil Rights of America 1954-1965; Episode 102-14 I was walking down a hallway one day with my personal guard name was Johnny Black at the time, and someone, I think anyway someone threw up acid in my eye. They walked with a water gun, they did it many times, and you'd expect water, that would be cool, this time I got acid in my eyes and everything flew and I had long hair and he took my braid and hit my head under the water tap. And when I got to the doctor, they said, He saved the quality of his vision, if not his vision. You'd be walking, you'd be on the first floor and three floors up someone would throw a lit stick of dynamite down the stairs. The troops were wonderful, you know, there was a certain fear that they would date the girls in high school and they, I don't care what they were doing, they were wonderful, they were disciplined, they were helpful, they cared, they didn't baby us, but they were there. I remember once asking a guy what we would do if they [gap] this dynamite into us like they usually did, and he said, I'm going to get you 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 started to feel like there's a little buffer zone between me and this hell on the other side of this wall. They couldn't be with us everywhere, they couldn't be with us, for example, in the ladies' room, they couldn't be with us at the gym, we'd be bathing in the gym and someone turning their shower into hot. You'd be going to the volleyball court and someone would break a bottle and trip you over the bottle. I have scars on my right knee for that. Eyes on the Award: Years of Civil Rights of America 1954-1965; Episode 102-16 Uh, anything you might think one human could do with another they did. And that's what was scary for me, because there were things that never entered my mind to do to another human being. And after a while as a child, I began to say to myself, Am I less than human? Why did you do this to me? What's wrong with me? And so you go through stages even as a child. First you're in pain, then you're angry, and then you try to fight back and then you just don't care. You can't care. You expect to die. You expect there to be an end. And then you just calm down and realize that survival is day by day and you begin to understand your spirit, you begin to understand the, the depth of the human spirit and you begin to understand your own ability to cope no matter what happens and that's the lesson I learned. FILM CREW MEMBER: TAKE 8. INTERVIEWER: JUST UH, WHEN TALKING ABOUT BOTH SIDES AND WHAT BUFFER IN THE MIDDLE, YOU HAVE PEOPLE WHO ARE ANGRY AND WANT TO HURT YOU THERE, WHITE GUYS, YOU HAVE THESE GUYS IN THE AIR COMING IN, THEY ARE ALSO WHITE, HOW DO YOU TRUST THEM THAT THEY WILL BE THERE FOR YOU? Melba Pattillo Beals: When you were 15, you know it was a war. And you had, you had the troops and you had all these kids and all these parents, all these white kids in this school. And at first, when you were 15, you didn't understand what's wrong with you. I was brilliant, I could talk faster and better than they could, and I was sure my IQ was much higher than 100% of them. And I was informed, I was with you, and I knew it. My mother was a teacher, I knew who I was. And I wondered, what's the matter with you, you know, what's going on here? So first you know, it's like you're a stranger in a strange land. And first you begin to doubt yourself, then you wonder, how you got into this movie, what God is doing to you. And there's a lot on your mind, a lot of pain. The kids who were there, a few days, would say that a girl's name was Sammie Dean Parker, I never forgot their names, the other guy who tortured me the most was named David Sontag. Sammie Dean would say: Come sit with me today, let's salute the flag together. That's at home. We're going to do this, and together, they're going to be one day. The next day, you'd come in and she'd throw paint on you, or she'd throw a rock in the room at you, or she'd call you black as you walked in the door. You, you know inside I had to learn to trust someone, I had to learn to get a point of sanity, my point of sanity was my religion, it was God. As far as the troops are concerned, I was always afraid they wouldn't, and afraid of how they would. I was afraid, but after a while they proved themselves in the sense that they would stand up and proved that my own bodyguard proved to me that when the chips were down, it would help. On the other hand, there was always that little thought in my mind that there are nine of us, 2500 of them, maybe a thousand troops in the backyard, actually there. What would happen if all these people decided they didn't like me? So that thought always hid in my mind. But you have to, I've had to after a while establish some point of sanity, you have to trust someone, somewhere somehow, because you're going crazy anyway, you know. And the way I did, the way I dealt with it was to kind of joke about it and, but you're going crazy, it's crazy, you know. Why are you here? What are you doing here? At 15, you don't have the emotional to understand that you are well. And that's what have to understand most of all is, I'm ok, you know, this guy doesn't like me, but I'm O.K. FILM PRODUCTION TEAM: END SIDE ONE FILM PRODUCTION TEAM: TWO SIDE INTERVIEWER: STILL 15 YEARS OLD, WHAT KIND OF LIFE, SOCIAL LIFE ESPECIALLY, DID YOU HAVE AT THAT TIME? Melba Pattillo Beals: My eleventh year of my school was not good. I had no social life, my life consisted of going to school with the troops at first, um, lasting that day, going back to 1 or 2 houses and being deconstotado. Dealing with the troops as well as the press, the press was the first time, I was totally exposed to the press, journalists, press conferences. One study, tried to get some similarity from my homework, a eat with my family, trying to figure out how to keep the house safe. Dealing with the phone calls that would come from the people of the Ku Klux Klan or the White Citizens' Council of the League of Mothers, they formed all kinds of anti-black clubs. Dealing with harassment phone calls, being warned sometimes at night of what would happen the next day. It was like the war, it was as it must be for you to know that Vietnamese soldiers explain to me what it meant to be in a war camp and it was like a war. DOESN'T IT SEEM LIKE THE KIND OF YEAR THAT A 15-YEAR-OLD WOULD LIKE TO TALK TO ME ABOUT IT, DID YOU FEEL IT WAS UNFAIR THAT THIS SHOULDN'T BE? Melba Pattillo Beals: Well, you know, when people take their high school yearbooks and look back at their high schools, I get sick in the stomach like hell to look at mine. I remember once, look why, we're not being accepted into white school, we can't go anywhere, or do anything or be anyone at the same time, we're no longer accepted into black school because now we have problems for the black people in town. They're losing their jobs, my mom lost her job, they're asking us to retire and we're also in the national media, so it separates us, we become separate people because of what we support. We've been apart, and somewhat symbiotic because only 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 the spirit, that makes us understand who we are and our limits and you can't destroy it, you can't change that, and you can't separate it. So we really didn't have camaraderie, we had very little camaraderie with our black schoolmates. I remember one time going to a dance and getting out there and saying, Okay, guys, we're going to go for it. This is our big social occasion. It was around Christmas, and we got to this dance and maybe 20 minutes later, we were all together, together, and I remember Ernie Green saying, All right, we have to get together, let's spread out not talk to each other. But we were in a space where we had gone beyond where everyone was in their heads, and what we could do. So, my social life, you know, Ernie is a party guy, Jeff is a party guy, Terry, and my social life was pretty quiet, other people made the kinds of connections they could. You watched television, it's obviously become a lot more introspective... FILM CREW MEMBER: TAKE 9. INTERVIEWER: YOUR LIFE IS BEING CONSUMED BY THIS DISAGGREGATION EFFORT HERE. YOU'VE GONE HOME AND FELT LIKE, WHY ME, WHY, WHAT RIGHT DOES ANYONE HAVE TO TAKE THAT AWAY FROM ME, TO PUT ME IN THIS SITUATION? WAS THERE BITTERNESS? Melba Pattillo Beals: Look, when I was 15, I could, I didn't have time to think, why me? Not much. There was not much bitterness; there was only fear -- stark, delirium, convincing fear. Afraid you swallowed me 24 hours a day. There was no time to think why I, there was always preparation, always listened to things on the radio, there was always reading things always being told how to behave by adults. For a year of my life I was, part of that time, I had to be fed intravenously because I was sick. There was a part of the time you left, but there was no thought. I mean, I had gone beyond a point that I couldn't get left behind, I couldn't go back to a normal life. I couldn't retreat to relax. I remember we have a TV and I kind of looked at the TV a bit, but I was finished in a space that you have to be I believe to be a warrior. And I can only describe you now as an adult, and that space is that life is no longer normal, that your clothes ready, you polish your shoes, your life goes on autopilot. And the discipline that my mom and my grandmother gave me up to that point was what supported me, I did everything, but I did everything from afar looking at myself doing it, because, you know, I can't believe I'm here, I can't believe this is happening, and what's going to happen after that and how it's all going to end and when they're going to stop and there. Just Ai. EVERY MORNING YOU LOOK IN THE MIRROR, THIS 15-YEAR-OLD GIRL AND LOOK AT THE DAY YOU HAVE TO FACE. DO YOU LOOK AT THAT SCHOOL EVERY DAY? Melba Pattillo Beals: And it scared me to death. Going to school every day scared me to death. Until this moment, if you played Peggy Sue of Buddy Holly, I'd throw up and have to go to bed because it scared me to death. That scared me. There's a point beyond which you're not afraid. You're numl, but still, you're a different person than a person who's living an ordinary life because my everyday considerations weren't just, you know, I read, Newsweek and Newsweek, and I was on Newsweek and Newsweek, but not only am I following the current, I'm i to be hanged or I'll get it over the head. Am I going to get hit in the back of the head with something or am I going to blow up a dynamite banana? You know, what's left of me? My concerns began to be these concerns of some strange combination of adult-child warrior, you know, someone else, someone no one can define. You know, I've been worried about silly things like keeping my saddle shoes straight, like I said, you know, um what I'm going to wear today, things that a 15-year-old girl cares about, you know, how's my makeup, but also, which part of the salon to walk that's the safest, what will be the mood of the kids at school today. And who's going to beat me with what, it's going to be hot soup today, it's going to be hot chili, it's going to be so greasy that it ruins the dress my grandmother made for me, I mean, how's this day going to be? Eyes on the Award: Years of Civil Rights of America 1954-1965; Episode 102-19 Am I going to catch that book that's on fire in front of me before I catch my bra on fire? It's a different thing, you start thinking, can I do this in the next hour? Can I do that in the next half hour? And when I used to hear those helicopters flying over, just before 3:00, it's time to go home, the helicopters are here to walk me home. I did it the other day. Can I go from this table to the hallway to my closet and leave? And then you know, you go out and you get to the car and you, you know, some of the best times we used to have would be walking on the way home and then we played and we'd kind of play with each other and you'd let, your stomach kind of go back to your place, Eyes on the Award: America's Civil Rights Years 1954-1965; Episode 102-20 where it usually rests. And those would be good times because we talked to each other about our day and you know, I always made horrible, horrible jokes about the whole thing, so that was cool. But again, we probably, usually for the head of the NAACP house]], would normally be and we would have to face a Press-ConferenceEyes on the Award: America's Civil Rights Years from 1954 to 1965; Episode 102-21 for there to be the adult, see what you say at the press conference, um, we could say one thing, by the way, one thing could be said at the press conference in a day, which would trigger hell the next day, a wrong comment, a wrong word, could mean that the next day in the shower, I would be bathed in scalding water. So I was on guard, you know, I wasn't, that it was the end of my childhood, that was it - over and over. FILM CREW MEMBER: TAKE 10. INTERVIEWER: START TELLING ME ABOUT... [unintelligible] Melba Pattillo Beals: You know, there were 6 girls and there were 3 boys in the Little Rock 9. We all know each other, in the year I went to school, I went. Was. Terry Roberts. Then we know each other very well. Minnie Jean Brown was, for all intents and purposes, a good friend. We met, we lived a block away and we were friends, we went to school together, we talked, we visited, we ate meals together. Our parents knew each other. She was a big, tall, six-foot woman around, uh, and thoughtful, thoughtful and creative uh, a very kind woman, kind girl growing up and fun. Minnie Jean was under a lot of pressure because we were great, because we were both great, normally we would be chosen for more attention. Minnie Jean at the time was also fair-skinned with reddish hair and a strong, you know, very strong and grumpy spirit and um, I could see day after day a little bit of it being chewed. Uh, she had, you know, maybe it was because it was the nature of her home support system, or just because she was tired, she was implicated in I think, a little more than other people did. We were all caught, but I could see every day a little of it automatically saying to herself: No, I can't rebut. No, I can't do that. And yet, going further on the edge, just as we all were. And then came the day she was in that coffee shop and she just couldn't handle it anymore and then she just gave up. And she knew, she had, I could see her little click on the head, she consciously said to herself: No, Minnie Jean, if you do you know you won't be here, but then this was a time of year when we all didn't want to be there. Eyes on the Award: Years of Civil Rights of America 1954-1965; Episode 102-23 I wish I was dead. I wanted to stay away from it, but I walked away from him. She found a way out, she found a way out. And I was so jealous, I went to her house afterwards and she took all these new clothes and she was packing her bags and she was leaving, and I wanted to go with her. But I knew I couldn't. But Minnie Jean Brown was a pure human being, she's a pure human being, and she did, she gave her everything, she gave her personal best. If she'd stayed beyond that point, she'd have gone crazy. INTERVIEWER: WHAT HAPPENED THAT DAY, DESCRIBE TO ME THAT SCENE IN THE CAFETERIA. Melba Pattillo Beals: She's walking with this chili, Minnie Jean. There was a huge coffee shop, and this coffee shop was always time to catch us, you know, if you're going to have food spread on you, you're going to be tripped over. I mean, it was hardly worth having lunch, because the cafeteria was a fair game, because it was a big place and you had to walk between these lines of people, you were always going to get heckled, called black, until then you didn't even hear, you know, who cares, just let me sit and eat my food, you know. And she was carrying this chili and this guy went after tripped over her, and worked on her. And she let go, I mean, she couldn't and I know how she felt, she couldn't go any further. That's it, it better her to stop than to go further and snap. FILM CREW MEMBER: SHOT 11. INTERVIEWER: WHAT DID YOU DO AT THE SCHOOL OF THE DAY ENDED AND, UH, WHAT WAS YOUR FEELING AT THAT MOMENT? Melba Pattillo Beals: When school ended, I kind of settled into myself and I could have gone for the next five years, it didn't matter anymore. I was feeling, I was having that pain pain pain in the dormant where you say, I can do it, do whatever you want, and it just doesn't matter anymore. But I came home and, and alone I went to the yard and burned my books and burned everything I could burn and stood there crying looking at the fire and wondering if I would come back, but I didn't want to come back. Eyes on the Award: Years of Civil Rights of America 1954-1965; Episode 102-31 And realizing by then the magnitude of what I had done because you know I had heard all these adults say that you made these incursions for generations not yet born and um, you know I realized that it was important to do this and realize also by this time the danger is as if everything hit me, I knew what I had done , but if the school had gone another day, I wouldn't have made it. At that moment, I wanted, I needed this pause, and yet, I knew I had learned a lesson that would serve me the rest of my life because I knew then that no one, no human being could certainly break me, because I had, I had learned the limits of Melba, I knew how far she could go then and I knew her strength depended on God and not from what someone else did with her off and that it was the best lesson I've ever learned. INTERVIEWER: WHAT DOES THIS ACT OF BURNING THE BOOKS, WHAT IT SAID, WHAT DOES THAT MEAN? Melba Pattillo Beals: That I could burn all my pain, you know, that when I burned the books, I was burning the pain, you know, the terrible, the terrible anguish, the terrible fear, um, that I felt this feeling that is still for me indescribable. The feeling of not being enough or not being you know, what's wrong, the pain, the horrible pain that you can't overcome that you can only get through. The fear, the extraordinary fear I felt, that I learned to live with that fear must be what it is to be a prisoner of war camp. You have to learn to live with fear and I learned to live with fear. So the burn was saying hey, you know, I'm going to do it. It doesn't really matter, I'm going to get it, I can go beyond everything you do to me and what you tell me doesn't make me. FILM CREW MEMBER: SHOT 12. FALSE MARK. SECOND MARK. TELL ME, WHAT DO YOU THINK YOU PAID THE HIGHEST PRICE AND I REALLY DON'T WANT TO GET INTO A LIST OF PEOPLE AND WHAT THEY'RE DOING NOW, LET'S TALK ABOUT HOW EACH CAN THAT'S DIFFERENT. Melba Pattillo Beals: Beals: Rock 9 are a unique group of people and as I get old I realize how unique we were. [Gap] had a heart condition when she started and we all used to protect her, she had a very serious heart problem, and she went through it with a heart problem. The kind of heart problem where she had to sit in her haunches on time and she would change color, turn blue and uh, she paid a big price. She ended up in surgery. Elizabeth Eckford may have paid the main price. Elizabeth Eckford hasn't had one since Little Rock, she had one we'd call a normal life. She paid an expensive price, gave her life. Um, the normality of it, I'm sure wherever she is she's fine, but um, she hasn't been able to function. I think we've all learned something. I'd be a different person if I hadn't gone to Central College. And when I talk to everyone now, I think we'd all be different, certainly, look between us, success, strength, ability to deal with life, uh, the ability to function in the real world has been increased, enhanced by that. When it was early, we learned who we were. We learned, hey, you have to stretch. I think Carlotta Walls, for example, I just saw her a short time ago, still has a tremendous case of asthma. We still wept together, I spoke to Terry Roberts, Dr. Terry Roberts, each of us has a thin thread passing through us, an appearance of the pain we suffer. I'm sure it 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 in line in a San Francisco suburb waiting for a movie and look around me and all the people in that movie are waiting in line with me are white or white teenagers and for an instant, just an instant I'm scared and I tell myself it's okay. So we all pay the prices, but we all win. Because I always believe you're always where you're supposed to be. So, hey, Little Rock was a baby lesson, which was a lesson, a lesson I can't forget, uh, but a lesson that suits me. Eyes on the Award: Years of Civil Rights of America 1954-1965; INTERVIEWER OF EPISODE 102-31: YOU TALKED ABOUT STRENGTH, THE STRENGTH YOU GAINED FROM IT, BE SPECIFIC WHEN YOU TALK TO ME ABOUT THESE PERSONAL STRENGTHS. Melba Pattillo Beals: I learned from Little Rock to care more about people, because I never, ever want to hurt someone 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's an entity, the color of hate is neither black nor white, uh, some of the people who were the kindest to me in my life were white. The reason I live today is because of these people whose skin was white. It has to do with this horrible, it's one thing, it's an ugly, ugly thing and have to go through this no matter where you see it, whether it's the Holocaust in Germany, or it's in Little Rock, or it's in Vietnam, it's something that triggers people to mistreat other people and not remember that we're all children of God and we're all human. And when this thing comes up, each of us is responsible for doing what we have to do to stop it. So Little Rock taught me to respect human life and know that I can't give it away, so don't take it and don't abuse it. Because I'm never going to space that no one's been with me, I'm not going to do that to another human being. So you taught me to love. Love.

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