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# Collective Memory, Commemoration and Ways of Remembering Little Rock: 50 Years After the Integration Crisis at Central High School

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**COLLECTIVE MEMORY, COMMEMORATION & WAYS OF  
REMEMBERING LITTLE ROCK:  
50 YEARS AFTER THE INTEGRATION CRISIS AT  
CENTRAL HIGH SCHOOL**

by

**CAROLINE W. DALY**

**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF  
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“Memory is a great liar” – Adolph Reed Jr.

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## Chapter One: Introduction

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“Central High Thrown in National Spotlight As It Faces Integration” read the headline from Little Rock’s Central High School’s newspaper, *The Tiger*.<sup>1</sup> National newspaper and television reporters made Little Rock a front-page story in the fall of 1957. Little Rock’s Central High School was desegregated when nine brave African American students walked through the large looming doors of the high school. Central High experienced what would become a highly recognized series of events that many call “The Little Rock Crisis of 1957.” As Melba Pattillo Beals, one of the Nine, recounts, “On our first day at Central High, Governor Faubus dispatched gun-toting Arkansas National Guard soldiers to prevent us from entering.”<sup>2</sup> From actions like this and the ongoing mob violence that occurred for weeks, it was evident that “segregationists [had] mounted a brutal campaign against us, both inside and out of school.”<sup>3</sup> Beals, along with the other eight students, Ernest Green, Elizabeth Eckford, Jefferson Thomas, Terrence Roberts, Carlotta Walls LaNier, Minnijean Brown, Gloria Rey Karlmark, and Thelma Mothershed, experienced harsh racism each day at school, which proved to be both emotionally and physically harmful. This racism in the classrooms at Central High School mirrored exactly what was happening throughout the country at the time.

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<sup>1</sup> Georgia Dortch, “Central High Thrown In National Spotlight As It Faces Integration,” *The Tiger*, 19 Sept. 1957, [http://www.centralhigh57.org/the\\_tiger.htm#Sept.%2019](http://www.centralhigh57.org/the_tiger.htm#Sept.%2019) (accessed November 25, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> Melba Beals, *Warriors Don't Cry: A Searing Memoir of the Battle to Integrate Little Rock's Central High* (New York: Pocket Books, 1994), 1.

<sup>3</sup> Beals, *Warriors Don't Cry*, 2.

In 2007, the Nine gathered for the 50th anniversary commemoration events in Little Rock. The 50th anniversary would be much more elaborate than the previous commemorations of the 40th and 30th. The Central High Integration 50th Anniversary Commission's "Official Events" spanned various mediums and locations including: the dedication of the Little Rock Central High School National Historic Site Visitor Center, book readings by several famous Arkansas historians including Elizabeth Jacoway, as well as "Unity in the Community," a walk around Little Rock that ended with a time capsule dedication ceremony at Bullock Temple CME Church. However, the two most significant aspects of the entire anniversary were the Commemoration Ceremony outside on the steps of Central, where Arkansas native Bill Clinton, and the Nine all made remarks, and the opening and dedication of the Little Rock Central National Historic Site's Visitor Center. These various 50th Anniversary events, many of which received national media attention, contributed to what the memory of Little Rock means today.

This thesis uses the 50th Anniversary of Little Rock as a case study to explore the issues of memory and remembrance. The complexities and the problematic nature of collective memory and commemoration are seen throughout our country's history and therefore a critical aspect that needs to be addressed and studied. By looking at the various forms of commemoration that took place in honor of the 50th anniversary, and what sort of information they give their participants and viewers, this thesis will demonstrate the importance of commemoration, but also its pitfalls and what needs to be looked at critically when forming our own memories. It will point to the various forms of commemoration that should be looked at with a critical

eye, as well as ones that are most successful in forming a realistic collective memory.

### **History & Memory**

Looking at all kinds of sources is vital to our greater understanding of our history – documents, speeches, video footage, and photographs are some of the many keys that open the doors to our country’s past. While we have our own personal memories of past events or people that we have experienced or seen, it is these tangible, visual and auditory types of evidence that begin to create a bigger collective memory. It is first important to differentiate between what the past stands for and what history means. The past is everything that has happened previous to the present moment, while history is what we have chosen to remember, and how we think of the past in our present context. In this way, collective memory, which in the most basic sense means the memories shared by society, a community or a group, shapes our history; French historian Pierre Nora contends, “memory dictates, while history writes.”<sup>4</sup> The specific artifacts that we see in museums and the certain people we hold in the highest regard in magazines and books are what form our collective memory, and are in turn what make up the history of our country. When history and memory are detached from one another, memory proves to be the more significant way of remembering because it can relate on an individual level to people, whereas history cannot always have this effect.

Historian David Blight addresses this: “History asserts the authority of academic

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<sup>4</sup> David W. Blight, *Beyond the Battlefield: Race, Memory & the American Civil War* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002), 2.



training and recognized canons of evidence; memory carries the often more powerful authority of community membership and experience.”<sup>5</sup> This power that collective memory holds is the root of the problem because of the huge impact it has on the ways in which we form history and remember the past; the power that it has leaves little room for so many other memories that are not part of the “master” collective memory, resulting in them inherently being forgotten. This pattern of forgetting is problematic because it raises the question of the accuracy of our past. Blight furthers this notion of the powerful as detrimental: “Collective memories are instruments of power in all modern societies. They are wielded for political ends, to shape social policy, and for control of the historical narratives in which people understand themselves.”<sup>6</sup> What happens is that American society becomes very selective about what it chooses to remember, whether it is because of a political agenda, created out of embarrassment of past events, or even as a way to fully forget past wrongs. Barry Schwartz would agree with Blight’s worry about collective memory being so malleable and easily forgotten. “Collective memory” Schwartz suggests, “is a metaphor that formulates society’s retention and loss of information about its past in the familiar terms of individual remembering and forgetting.”<sup>7</sup>

There is definitely a process to how collective memory is formed from individual memory. Historian Alan Confino, who writes about cultural history and collective memory, discusses how memory can be looked at and studied in two

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<sup>5</sup> Blight, *Beyond the Battlefield*, 2.

<sup>6</sup> Blight, *Beyond the Battlefield*, 279.

<sup>7</sup> Robin Wagner-Pacifici, “Memories in the Making: The Shapes of Things That Went,” in *The Collective Memory Reader*, ed. Jeffrey K. Olick, Vered Vinitzky-Seroussi and Daniel Levy (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 395.

ways. He describes the first as memory in the most basic sense, from the point of view of an individual. Examples of this could include stories of survivors of tragic events, or stories of individuals who were involved in some kind of protest. The second way of seeing memory is the transformation when memory becomes collective memory. This way that collective memory is formed has “come to denote the representation of the past and the making of it into a shared cultural knowledge by successive generations in ‘vehicles of memory’ such as books, films, museums, commemorations and others.”<sup>8</sup> This means that through different “vehicles of memory,” shared collective memories are made in a way in which those who aren’t originally part of the event can relate through the collective memory that is being issued, and therefore come to adopt the memory themselves. While this begins as insignificant, the more and more subscribers there are to the greater collective memory, the more quickly this can grow into a bigger issue. It gets back to the troubling nature of memory because if people continue to buy into a collective memory without thinking critically about what it is and isn’t addressing, it expedites the forgetting process of the past. As David Blight writes,

While I agree that the world is riven with too much memory and that its obsessions can paralyze whole peoples and stifle democratizing and universalizing principles, it is precisely because of this dilemma that we must study historical memory. We must know its uses and perils, its values and dark tendencies.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Alon Confino, "Collective Memory and Cultural History: Problems of Method," *The American Historical Review* 102, no. 5 (1997), 1386.

<sup>9</sup> Blight, *Beyond the Battlefield*, 4.

I am arguing that society must recognize the intricacies of memory and collective memory formation in order to have a greater understanding of our past and how that impacts our present.

### **Commemorations**

Major commemorations like that at Little Rock are an extremely influential medium for forming and shaping collective memory. Lori Ducharme and Gary Fine write about “successful figures [who] are heroized, [and] failures and rogues [who] are demonized and denied their personhood” also write that, “celebration of the remembered past enhances collective commitment to those ideals. Communities benefit from the endurance of heroic events in the collective representations found within individual memory.”<sup>10</sup> This touches on the idea that especially for past tragic events, people like to remember heroes and to celebrate the positives, while not always giving attention to past wrongs. Because of this reason, remembering any sort of difficult event of the past is always challenging; knowing what to highlight and how much emphasis to place on the “heroes” can be a very difficult balance to find. Events like Little Rock fall victim to the complications that come with incidents in which there are both positive and negative outcomes. Ducharme and Fine explain the complexities further:

On these occasions [that have both positive and negative characteristics], society faces a challenge. For any commemoration

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<sup>10</sup> Lori Ducharme, and Gary A. Fine, "The Construction of Nonpersonhood and Demonization: Commemorating the 'Traitorous' Reputation of Benedict Arnold," in *The Collective Memory Reader*, ed. Jeffrey K. Olick, Vered Vinitzky-Seroussi and Daniel Levy (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 296.

must adequately address both the object's virtue and its depravity. When heroism and glory cannot be ignored, they may be discounted, such that these characteristics seem accidental or irrelevant. Or these same characteristics may be used to magnify the evil also found in the event, as when heroism and treason are juxtaposed to show the extent of an individual's fall from grace.<sup>11</sup>

It is evident that any commemoration ceremony of an event like Little Rock gets very complicated because of the various messages that may or may not be getting addressed. In the case of Little Rock, commemorators have to decide whether to dwell on the "progress" of integration and "acceptance" of racial difference, or acknowledge the truly brutal happenings that occurred within the walls of the school. Many commemorations attempt to find a way to balance the two, but finding this balance is extremely difficult and it too can be ultimately misunderstood. The current state of Central High School is also something that comes into play, because even though the school is "desegregated" with a student body of approximately 60% African American and 40% Euro American, many argue that the classrooms are far from integrated.<sup>12</sup> This current context of the school obviously complicates any kind of "celebrating" that the commemoration could call for, especially with regard to true integration.

In any kind of commemoration there are very specific, carefully planned messages being told. The most significant of these messages are usually communicated through symbols; as John Bodnar writes, "[Commemorative events] contain powerful symbolic expressions—metaphors, signs and rituals—that give

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<sup>11</sup> Ducharme and Fine, "Construction of Nonpersonhood and Demonization," 297.

<sup>12</sup> *Little Rock Central: 50 Years Later*, dir. by Brent Renaud (2007; HBO Documentary Films, dvd).

meaning to competing interpretations of past and present reality.”<sup>13</sup> These symbols and metaphors can come in many different forms, from the choice of speaker or presenter, to the use of artwork. Having these symbols is not solely a ritual of commemorations, but in many cases, the symbols stand for much more. As Reverend Virgil Caldwell, a spokesman for a coalition of African American leaders, said, “We need a symbol. Dr. Martin Luther King symbolized progress for blacks, and we want a symbol for our young blacks...Symbols are necessary to build hope, to build desire.”<sup>14</sup> With regards to the commemoration of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Little Rock, it is apparent that the Little Rock Nine themselves serve as this kind of symbol of hope and optimism. Terrence Roberts, one of the Nine, said before the 50<sup>th</sup> ceremony, “[We’ll be] like little puppets, pulled around and highlighted and showcased.”<sup>15</sup> Being one of the heroes himself, Roberts gives insight to the danger of dwelling on the stars of the show.

Commemorations and memorials also imply a sense that the past is only in the past and that it does not infiltrate into the present. As discussed earlier, the current state of Little Rock Central High demonstrates that the past is very much permeating into the present. As Owen Dwyer and Derek Alderman point out, “The presence of memorials sends the message that this is History, properly commemorated and ready to edify all who walk within view.”<sup>16</sup> By believing that

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<sup>13</sup> John Bodnar, "Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century," in *The Collective Memory Reader*, ed. Jeffrey K. Olick, Vered Vinitzky-Seroussi and Daniel Levy (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 267.

<sup>14</sup> Owen J. Dwyer, and Derek H. Alderman. *Civil Rights Memorials and the Geography of Memory* (Chicago: Center for American Places at Columbia College Chicago, 2008), 7.

<sup>15</sup> Leslie N. Peacock, "Profiles of the Nine." *Arkansas Times*, 20 Sept. 2007, <http://www.arktimes.com/gyrobase/profiles-of-the-nine> (accessed September 6, 2011).

<sup>16</sup> Dwyer and Alderman, *Civil Rights Memorials*, 13.

issues of Little Rock are strictly confined to the past, and thinking that by going to the events of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary will make people knowledgeable on the subject is problematic because it oversimplifies everything. It also is practically impossible to be able to identify something as “properly commemorated” because there is always a flaw or different approach that “could have been better” that exists; events can be successful, but never perfect. For Little Rock specifically, this raises many questions of concern because the commemoration of the event needs to address the current conditions and not only think of the Little Rock Nine and stories of integration as history in order for it to be a truly successful tribute.

### **Memory Trends of the Civil Rights Movement**

These larger themes of collective memory and commemoration can also be looked at through the lens of the Civil Rights Movement at large. Larry Griffin and Kenneth Bollen have contributed to this field of collective memory and its connection to the Civil Rights Movement. Griffin and Bollen look critically at how collective memories, especially those pertaining to race relations, affect people’s racial attitudes in America today. They write,

Recollections, memorials, and commemorations of what went before are “meaning-making” cultural resources and, as such, are thought to solidify personal, group, and national identities; sanction complaints and encourage intergroup hostilities; levy obligations and debts on the living; and exacerbate, or offer relief from, past traumas.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Larry J. Griffin, and Kenneth A. Bollen, “What Do These Memories Do? Civil Rights Remembrance and Racial Attitudes,” *American Sociological Review* 74, no. 4 (2009), 594.

The phrase “offer relief from past traumas” is something that is critical to look at especially for commemorations of any Civil Rights Movement milestone. The research that has been done on the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the desegregation of Central High School is a true testament to this issue of romanticism of past events, and falsely “offering relief from past traumas.” While these authors raise valid points with regard to romanticism, they believe memories can be beneficial in the long run. In their article, they write about the power that these historical memories hold today. They argue that with more awareness of the movement, more understanding will occur: “Civil rights recall may increase people’s awareness of and sensitivity to continuing racial disparities, thereby facilitating ‘sympathetic understanding.’”<sup>18</sup> However, the only awareness that our country seems to be capable of producing is not the past, but rather a revised version that leaves out many gritty details, a version that with time becomes the collective memory. I have to disagree with Griffin and Bollen here because, as I am arguing, there is danger in relying solely on collective memory to understand the past.

Historian Jennifer Fuller raises issues about the 40th anniversary of Little Rock. Fuller focuses on the media of the 1990s and how it depicted the Civil Rights movement;

Television scholar Herman Gray has argued that representations of the civil rights movement convey “contemporary political and cultural

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<sup>18</sup> Griffin and Bollen, “What Do These Memories Do?,” 601.

hopes and longings,” in particular that America has transcended racism.<sup>19</sup>

Fuller goes on to argue that this was definitely the case for coverage on Little Rock, and I would go on to argue that this is true for the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary to some extent. At the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary ceremony at the school, the visual cues of racial integration were ever present; “At the commemorating ceremony, two girls—one black, one white—sang the national anthem together, and [President] Clinton held open the door of Central High School for the Little Rock Nine.”<sup>20</sup> These symbols of a perfectly integrated school and community at large are examples of the dangers of commemorations that romanticize the past like this because not only do they discredit the horrendous actions of the past, they also depict a current school with no issues and no inequalities, which is far from the truth. Through my interviews about the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary, I have uncovered similar uses of black and white students posing in ways to portray these same messages of true integration. As I have found and as scholars have noted, the messages these anniversary commemorations, both the 40<sup>th</sup> and 50<sup>th</sup>, portray, do not tell the real story that is happening today.

Arkansas historian Elizabeth Jacoway elaborates more on the issues that Fuller addresses, as she writes about the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Little Rock as well. She argues that Civil Rights Movement commemorations like those of Little Rock usually have an agenda about them. By being in the present it is so easy to manipulate the

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<sup>19</sup> Jennifer Fuller, “Debating the Present through the Past,” in *The Civil Rights Movement in American Memory*, ed. Renee Christine Romano and Leigh Raiford (Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 2006), 167.

<sup>20</sup> Fuller, “Debating the Present through the Past,” 176.



past in order to have certain events or people shine in a specific light. For instance, at the 40th anniversary of the Little Rock Nine, “almost everyone ha[d] an agenda that [was] shaped more by present needs than by past realities.”<sup>21</sup> Jacoway is arguing here that during the 40th anniversary, as it is for many ceremonies like this, ironically the issues of the present tend to come before the issues of the past. As many scholars, including Jacoway, have noted, the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary was definitely one categorized as one of reconciliation and understanding. As Elizabeth Jacoway writes,

Many saw [the 40th anniversary] as an opportunity to demonstrate to the world, and to each other, that the people of Little Rock openly acknowledged the errors of the past; this was to be cleansing, an opening of a festering wound that has plagued the city for forty years, in order to administer a healing dose of self-examination, confession, and repentance.<sup>22</sup>

This theme of the anniversary was quite evident through various mediums. Will Counts’ photograph of Elizabeth Eckford and Hazel Massery forty years after his iconic photograph of the two of them in 1957 is the most explicit example of this; As Jacoway writes,

As girls, [Elizabeth Eckford and Hazel Massery] gave the nation and the world a classic image of white persecution and black suffering; as women, they have begun the process of reconciling their

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<sup>21</sup> Elizabeth Jacoway, “Understanding the Past: The Challenge of Little Rock,” in *Understanding the Little Rock Crisis: An Exercise in Remembrance and Reconciliation*, ed. Elizabeth Jacoway and C. Fred Williams (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1999), 4.

<sup>22</sup> Jacoway, “Understanding the Past,” 1.

differences, understanding each other, and moving into a better future.<sup>23</sup>

Here Jacoway demonstrates the problem of using commemoration tools like

photographs as a way to mend the past. Even though Eckford and Massery may have moved forward together does not mean the rest of the country has as well. What I have found is that the trends that Jacoway and other historians have addressed continue to be true for Little Rock's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary: themes of forgetting and reconciliation are present.

The way America reminisces about the Civil Rights Movement is both meaningful and detrimental, as

it both commemorates yet excludes events of the past. As Jacquelyn Dowd Hall writes,




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<sup>23</sup> Jacoway, "Understanding the Past," 22.

Remembrance is always a form of forgetting, and the dominant narrative of the civil rights movement—distilled from history and memory, twisted by ideology and political contestation, and embedded in heritage tours, museums, public rituals, textbooks, and various artifacts of mass culture—distorts and suppresses as much as it reveals.<sup>24</sup>

She reiterates the danger of memory and how it is not as accurate as it should be. There are countless examples of this to be the case, especially with regards to the Civil Rights Movement. Hall gives the example of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and how he is remembered today. She says that “endlessly reproduced and selectively quoted, [Martin Luther King’s] speeches retain their majesty yet lose their political bite... Erased all together is the King who opposed the Vietnam War and linked racism at home to militarism and imperialism abroad.”<sup>25</sup> Here she is pointing to the ways in which our country thinks of the past, specifically here Martin Luther King Jr., and how it makes our history so selective. The same is true for the 1957 crisis in Little Rock and the ways we remember it today. The Nine are seen as heroic figures that should be remembered because of their bravery, but what they stood for and believed in seems to have less of an impact. However they are spun, these stories are what make up how people think and remember the past and are therefore important. Hall argues that “clearly, the stories we tell about the civil rights movement matter; they shape how we see our own world.”<sup>26</sup> This is why I am arguing for more awareness of how powerful these stories and collective memories

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<sup>24</sup> Jacquelyn D. Hall, “The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past,” in *The Journal of American History* 91, no. 4 (2005), 1233.

<sup>25</sup> Hall, “Long Civil Rights Movement,” 1234.

<sup>26</sup> Hall, “Long Civil Rights Movement,” 1239.

are, and how we need to change their framework in order to see our past clearly. In the case of the Little Rock Nine, as people today look back at the events of 1957, they can say that today schools and people are so much farther along than they were back in the 1950s, but is that true? Are the wrongs of the past really exterminated out of our society? These are the questions that collective memory studies scholars are posing. Hall for example, challenges this notion that race relations have been mended since the movement; "Despite the movement's undeniable triumphs, those evils persist and in some ways have been compounded. The resegregation of the public schools; the hypersegregation of inner cities."<sup>27</sup> These questions of racism complicate the validity of commemorations like those at Little Rock Central High School and provoke the question if these are really events worth celebrating at all.

Another aspect to the problem of forgetting that Hall raises is how it can directly hinder progress in the present. The Civil Rights Movement is often times remembered "as a shining example of the success of American democracy."<sup>28</sup> While there were clearly many instances of progress that the movement had, the success has not necessarily been sustained even though memorials and commemorations of all kinds will often appear otherwise. For many, having a romanticized view of the past is a way of protecting oneself from the brutal realities of the past and present; however this only creates more of a problem because it hinders future progress. As Raiford and Romano point out, "how we remember the [Civil Rights] movement, in

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<sup>27</sup> Hall, "Long Civil Rights Movement," 1261.

<sup>28</sup> Renee Christine Romano and Leigh Raiford, "Introduction," in *The Civil Rights Movement in American Memory*, ed. Renee Christine Romano and Leigh Raiford (Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 2006), xvii.

other words, can discourage us from...future activism.”<sup>29</sup> Especially with regards to the Civil Rights Movement, many today turn a blind eye to any current racism that exists solely because the past has been remembered in an antiracist framework that gives them the space to ignore current injustices; “unlike the majority of representations of American history in public space, civil rights memorials present an explicitly antiracist rendering of the past.”<sup>30</sup> This constant reiteration of the extermination of racism throughout these mediums can be very harmful to our society; “Those who believe the movement was successful in incorporating America’s black minority into the mainstream may see little role for the state in ameliorating current racial inequalities, for example.”<sup>31</sup> This idea is extremely important in the context of Little Rock because Central High today would benefit greatly if society would come to terms that racism still exists in Little Rock. While it may not be as overt as the 1950s and 1960s, its subtleties are just as troubling and shouldn’t go unaddressed. Because there is still a very distinct racial divide within Central High School today, makes these questions of memory very real and significant to analyze.

## **Methodology**

After researching in depth the intricacies of history, collective memory and commemorations and their specific connections with the Civil Rights Movement, I

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<sup>29</sup> Romano and Raiford, “Introduction,” xix.

<sup>30</sup> Owen J. Dwyer, “Interpreting the Civil Rights Movement: Contradiction, Confirmation, and the Cultural Landscape,” in *The Civil Rights Movement in American Memory*, ed. Renee Christine Romano and Leigh Raiford (Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 2006), 6.

<sup>31</sup> Romano and Raiford, “Introduction,” xvi.

was especially intrigued about the story of Little Rock Central High and the history and memories that have been created there. All of these previous authors challenged me to question whether or not Little Rock's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary too experienced the perilous nature of collective memory. My method of approaching this project was to try and analyze the commemoration through a variety of angles and mediums of commemoration.

My sources include published materials, speeches, interviews, video, as well as my own personal observations. The 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary was commemorated in various ways, so it is very important to look at all kinds of evidence to get the fullest picture of the event; the event was not solely remembering the past through a traditional standard like text, but it also commemorated the past through various speeches, images, art installations and exhibits.

For the published materials, I read books, scholarly journal articles, and newspaper articles, as well as looked at photographs. The photographs I looked at all came from photographer Will Counts' work, as he had a huge influence on the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary with his photographs of Elizabeth Eckford, one of the Nine, and Hazel Bryan, an angry white woman. I have used these means, specifically articles and books, to gain a greater perspective on more general themes of commemoration, anniversaries and collective memory. I looked at authors that both gave commentary on issues that pertained directly to the Civil Rights Movement or Little Rock, as well as sources that solely address collective memory and ways of thinking about commemoration. The newspaper articles and photographs have deepened my understanding of the actual anniversary, as they

gave voice and visual representation to the real people and sentiments of the commemoration. The articles and photographs that were written and taken during the actual commemoration events, capture the true emotions and sentiments of the moment, which make them that much more valuable to analyze. The newspapers were especially critical because they were so directly linked to and engaged with the issues at hand.

I have closely looked at the speeches that various people made for the Commemoration Ceremony on the steps of Central High School. I analyzed the transcribed speeches as a way to look at the specific language being used, especially at the buzzwords that got repeated, for example “reconciliation” and “progress.” I wanted to be able to get a true sense of the sentiments that were being put forth, so I thought it would be important to also look at the video footage of the Commemoration Ceremony itself, because by looking and listening to how the crowd responded (and the atmosphere in general) to the speeches speaks volumes as to how certain aspects of the commemoration translate into the greater collective memory. The atmosphere and crowd morale are just as important as the specific words for showing how the anniversary was either effective or not for the audience; that is, did the words being said resonate with the people that were listening, or were people hoping other issues were being addressed? The large group of people that gathered at Central on September 25, 2007 are key participants in the commemoration because they are the ones that internalized all of the information in order to begin creating a collective memory; what they think is critical to how the collective memory is formed and ultimately remembered. I examined this through

the amount of cheering and silence that emerges from the large crowd that gathered outside the school during the different speeches and presenters; these reactions show us the initial responses that these listeners had; these initial reactions are extremely significant to understanding what people actually felt about the issues of the past as well as the present. I paid particular attention to the speech by Bill Clinton as well as the brief remarks made by each of the Nine.

Looking at the crowd's response to the information that was presented by the Nine and Clinton is important for the reasons I mentioned above, but it is also important to hear individual feelings about and reactions to the Commemoration Ceremony. Interviews are powerful because they give details to overarching sentiments. I interviewed one student who went to Little Rock Central High School in 2007, the year of the anniversary. I talked with her about her perceptions of the anniversary, how the students felt about the event, and about her experience with being a member of the "Principal's Cabinet." Having the perspective of a student at the event is very important because so much of the memory we have of the event is through the Little Rock Nine themselves and other figureheads like Bill Clinton. It is also important to get the perspective of a student because they are the people whose memories are being formed and molded, as they were not at the school in 1957. I also interviewed Nancy Rousseau, the Principal of Central, as a way to see the event firsthand through the eyes of a key participant as she was a co-chair in planning the main 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Commemoration Ceremony. In addition to these interviews, I talked with a couple who both attended Central in 1957. I found their words particularly interesting because they are my only source that experienced



both the actual events during the crisis of 1957 as well as the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Commemoration Ceremony. Listening to their memories of their high school days and the Nine in conjunction with their impressions of the ceremony were quite fascinating.

In addition to the video footage of the speeches, I also analyzed the HBO documentary film that was made in 2007 titled, *Little Rock Central: 50 Years Later*, as it not only addresses the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary, but also the current state of the school today in the classroom and the problems that still occur. The video interviews several people that I found useful to my research, and provided me with an honest take of both the good and the bad aspects of Central today. It also provided a nice visual that was interesting to compare and contrast with the things I saw on my own trip to Central.

I traveled to Little Rock so I could have a first hand look at the school, as well as the Visitor Center's permanent exhibit, and the Little Rock Nine monument, "Testament" at the Arkansas State Capital. The Visitor Center had been rebuilt and revamped for the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary, so it was interesting to look at these visual forms of commemoration and see what sort of stories they told. By physically going there myself it was a time to interpret and be able to interact with these spaces and works of art for myself. It was also valuable to go on a school tour, see the students and meet with Principal Nancy Rousseau, and Vice Principal Donna Muldrew. This visit contributed much to my understanding of the collective memories that have been made and are still forming at the actual site of Little Rock.

In the following chapters I look specifically at various aspects of the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Commemoration and how they have contributed to the collective memory of Little Rock that has been formed thus far. In Chapter 2, I look specifically at the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Commemoration Ceremony. By deconstructing various speeches and the overall atmosphere of the event, as well as looking at the importance and danger of symbolism, I show how these various components contribute to collective memory. In Chapter 3, I look at the Little Rock Central High School National Historic Site Visitor Center, as it is formally called. The Visitor Center's museum about the Little Rock Nine is a critical venue for the Nine's legacy as well as a key site in which visitors come and inherently form memories that contribute to a greater collective memory. In Chapter 4, I discuss three other, more informal, forms of commemoration. Specifically, I look critically at the Little Rock Nine monument at the state capital titled "Testament," the *Little Rock Central: 50 Years Later* HBO documentary, as well as Central High School's "Memory Project" that is a student produced body of oral histories that relate to the memory of the Nine, as well as greater issues of race. The HBO documentary in particular is crucial to understand the context of Central as it was filmed during the year of the anniversary in 2007. By understanding where Central stood as of 2007, it helps further explain how and why the commemoration events played out as they did because the student body and school as a whole were both key contributors to the events. Chapter 4 in essence provides examples of ways of commemorating Little Rock in an effective way that breaks away from the detrimental trends that often times comes along with commemorating difficult events.

With all of these modes of representing and documenting the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Little Rock, I want this thesis to challenge our notions of collective memory and understand its problematic nature. Within the context of this problematic nature with regard to Little Rock I also want it to challenge our notions of past and present race relations in the United States. As I have outlined, collective memory has a rocky past in our country and needs to be evaluated extensively in order for us to comprehend our history and its context in the present. By looking at Little Rock's Central High School, all of these issues are at play and together they raise various questions about our country and how it remembers, as well as how society needs to understand that every member of our American society contributes to our collective memories. My hope is that this case study of Little Rock highlights these issues and challenges readers to think about the various layers that it addresses with regard to collective memory and ways of commemorating the past.

## Chapter Two: The 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Commemoration Ceremony at Little Rock Central High School



On September 25, 2007, on the Little Rock Central High front lawn, history was made again. The 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Commemoration Ceremony began at 10am and included various speakers including the Little Rock Nine themselves, and former President Bill Clinton. The anticipation of the event had been growing as the tickets to the ceremony sold out in just ten days.<sup>32</sup> A truly historic event, the crowd remained enthusiastic despite the overcast and dreary weather.<sup>33</sup> Deborah Mathis, the master of ceremonies of the Commemoration Ceremony, began the day with, “There is a whole new crowd here today showing up at Central High”<sup>34</sup> that instantly set the mood that things were different and had changed since 1957.

The preparation for the event had been in the works for three years. This planning and prep work was not just done by the co-chairs of the event, Principal

<sup>32</sup> “Ten Days In, Tickets to Central High Commemoration Already Sold Out,” *ArkansasOnline*, 26 July 2007, <http://www.arkansasonline.com/news/2007/jul/26/ten-days-tickets-central-high-commemoration-alread/> (accessed March 1, 2012).

<sup>33</sup> Livingston, Kari. “Little Rock Turns Out to Honor Nine Who Integrated Central High School: 50th Anniversary Commemoration Featured Local, State and Nation Dignitaries,” *Yahoo! Voices*, 27 Sept. 2012, <http://voices.yahoo.com/little-rock-turns-out-honor-nine-integrated-568875.html?cat=37> (accessed February 22, 2012).

<sup>34</sup> “50th Anniversary Commemoration Ceremony,” 2007 (City of Little Rock, 2012 dvd).

Nancy Rousseau and local banker Virgil Miller, but also the school, the students and other members from the community all came together to spruce Central up for the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary. As Central Principal Nancy Rousseau said, “The school was very involved. Students studied, gave tours and did interviews for months. They were participants, along with teachers, on public forums and panels.”<sup>35</sup> The organization “City Year” also stepped in to help with the grounds. Young people helped with things like weeding and painting.<sup>36</sup> The “City Year” people were extremely vital to the actual ceremony as hundreds of them stood along the perimeter of the event to give directions and answered questions. While these volunteers were clearly not why 5,000 people came to Central that day, they were very memorable; Lou Ellen Treadway, who attended the ceremony, recalled that “The City Year children, they just did a wonderful job, asking people to feel at home and directing traffic, and picking up trash, and I thought they did a swell job.”<sup>37</sup> They played into the sentiments of the day as well; “Black and white [City Year] 19 to 20 somethings...to have them there that was a nice statement.”<sup>38</sup> This racially mixed group milling about the campus and into the neighboring streets definitely set the tone visually for attendees of the event.

For two hours, the Nine and others spoke to the lively crowd about their experiences and frustrations. Their dissatisfaction with all the work that still needs to be done with regards to true integration at Central and all over the country

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<sup>35</sup> Nancy Rousseau, email to the author, 27 Dec. 2011.

<sup>36</sup> “City Year Volunteers Needed,” *FOX16.com*, 15 Sept. 2007, <http://www.fox16.com/news/story/City-Year-Volunteers-Needed/8Fkm5rZyek-RNhwpTo4bvg.csp> (accessed March 22, 2012).

<sup>37</sup> Lou Ellen Treadway, conversation with author, 5 Jan. 2012.

<sup>38</sup> Treadway, Lou Ellen, conversation with author.

contrasted drastically with the diverse student body that sat on the stage. The tensions between those planning the event and the words of the speakers is a key element to looking critically at how the event played out. The ever-present symbolism of unity, acceptance and integration were critical for the event's planners as the ceremony was broadcast on every local and some national stations. When looking deeper into the event, the issues become much more complex and complicate the real sentiments, and ultimately how viewers end up seeing the commemoration. Many speakers spoke out about the current racial divide at Central and in the United States as a whole, while the planners were trying to visually show a fully integrated Central, by displaying a diverse student body on the ceremony stage.

### **Speeches**

Many different people spoke at the ceremony, and while they varied in length and seriousness, they all contributed to the formation of collective memory. For most people, including Central's Principal Nancy Rousseau, the remarks made by the Nine were the most powerful. "The most memorable aspect of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary was hearing the Little Rock Nine give their individual speeches during the ceremony" Principal Nancy Rousseau recalled, "To have the nine students, who actually experienced and altered the history of Civil Rights to give their personal thoughts 'out loud' in front of the world, was a very sobering time."<sup>39</sup> Even the

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<sup>39</sup> Rousseau, email to the author.

Nine's former schoolmates from 1957 listened to their words with great admiration. For instance, Lou Ellen Treadway, who was a senior at Central High in 1957 said, "I really thought [the Little Rock Nine] were extraordinary [at the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary]. Their presentations, their manners, their speaking ability, the ambiance of it all, I thought was dramatically excellent."<sup>40</sup> The Nine were without a doubt the crowd favorite, even though many spoke in a serious tone and with pretty forceful words. For example, Terrence Roberts said, "In spite of the progress that's been talked about today, it is not nearly enough for me."<sup>41</sup> In response to his own words, Roberts "challenged each audience member to be 'an active agent of change.'"<sup>42</sup> Roberts got across the message that certainly work needed to be done, and that change needed to start at an individual level, not just from movements or public figures like the Nine. Roberts said to the crowd, "look in the mirror and ask the hard questions, 'What am I doing to support the status quo? What am I willing to do to change that?'"<sup>43</sup> This powerful tone proved that this commemoration was not one of celebration, and many of the other Nine echoed this sentiment. For example Melba Pattillo Beals said, "[Time] does bring about a change. And we must each of us be our own equality, claim our own equality before we can see the equality in others"<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Treadway, Lou Ellen, conversation with author.

<sup>41</sup> "Little Rock Nine Mark 50th Anniversary of Integration," *Lodi News-Sentinel*, Google News, 26 Sept. 2007, <http://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=2245&dat=20070926&id=AP1RAAAAIBA&sjid=hjQNAAAAIBA&pg=7025,3089001> (accessed March 22, 2012).

<sup>42</sup> "Little Rock Nine speak, Clinton praises their actions," *Fox16.com*. 25 Sept. 2007, <http://www.fox16.com/news/story/Little-Rock-Nine-speak-Clinton-praises-their/0AliseP-PUCHIocQYhM3Cg.csp> (accessed March 22, 2012).

<sup>43</sup> "Little Rock Nine speak, Clinton praises their actions," *Fox16.com*.

<sup>44</sup> Melba Pattillo Beals. "Melba Pattillo Beals' Remarks at 50th Anniversary," 50th Anniversary Commemoration Ceremony," Little Rock Central High, 25 Sept. 2007.

Her words spoke to Roberts' sentiments that we need to individually look to ourselves in order to be "agents of change" and improve our society as a whole.

Minnijean Brown Trickey also spoke for a call to action. She said, "It's my hope that this 50<sup>th</sup> Commemorative Ceremony will energize and invigorate the social movement that is absolutely called for in 2007."<sup>45</sup> This statement was followed by immense clapping from the audience, showing that in fact there truly is much more work to be done in our future.

One of speeches that stood out to many, however, was Jefferson Thomas's despite its unorthodox nature. As a local news story said after the event, "Jefferson Thomas brought levity to the memory of a horrid event."<sup>46</sup> His remarks included his story of

when he stood up at a high school rally and cheered for the Central High Tigers. Thomas said he thought the white students were carrying the school flag and yelling the school cheer. He said [Carlotta Walla LaNier] glared at him and later set him straight: it was the Confederate flag and the students were singing "Dixie."<sup>47</sup>

While the story clearly brought the audience back to an uncomfortable time, it also brought the audience a lighthearted moment during the seriousness of the ceremony. One of the students in the audience, Julia Zebronsky, agreed that "[Jefferson Thomas' remarks] stuck out for me because a lot of his talk was sort of joking around."<sup>48</sup> While she admitted that it was at first a bit off-putting, it turned

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<sup>45</sup> "50th Anniversary Commemoration Ceremony"

<sup>46</sup> "Little Rock Nine speak, Clinton praises their actions," *Fox16.com*.

<sup>47</sup> "Little Rock Nine speak, Clinton praises their actions," *Fox16.com*.

<sup>48</sup> Julia Zebronsky, conversation with author. 9 Oct. 2011.



out actually to be an important aspect of the overall ceremony. Zebronsky further elaborated that “it just was a nice sort of moment of levity, that we can sort of begrudge the horribleness of the events, but at a certain point we can all laugh together then maybe that is a more unifying experience.”<sup>49</sup> As a result of reactions like this, the lighthearted moment that Thomas created can be seen as serving as a unifying mechanism whether he had anticipated it or not.

The Nine were definitely seen as heroes at this 50<sup>th</sup> Commemoration Ceremony. Governor Mike Beebee said, “We are here to honor the heroes and the history of Central High.”<sup>50</sup> Student speaker Cyrus Bahrassa echoed that with “[The Nine are] heroes of the greatest caliber.”<sup>51</sup> The video footage from one of the local television stations in Little Rock cut during one of the Nine’s remarks to a young boy who was holding a large poster of the Nine that had all of their signatures on it – this anniversary without a doubt displayed the Nine as legends, as greats and as heroes.

Aside from the Nine, people remembered former president Bill Clinton’s speech the most. Principal Nancy Rousseau will never forget his remarks at the ceremony because of what a powerful and composed speaker he was: “He spoke for 15-20 minutes without a single ‘uh’ or break in thought. When it was all over, he left a small 3x5” note card on the podium with one sentence. He is, in my opinion, one of the top orators of my lifetime.”<sup>52</sup>

The president’s speech focused on the theme of gratitude. Beginning his talk with, “First of all, this day should be about gratitude for all of us. You should think

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<sup>49</sup> Zebronsky, conversation with author.

<sup>50</sup> “50th Anniversary Commemoration Ceremony.”

<sup>51</sup> “50th Anniversary Commemoration Ceremony.”

<sup>52</sup> Rousseau, email to author.

about, every one of you in your life, what it is you have to be grateful to the Little Rock Nine for.”<sup>53</sup> He continued to use the buzzword “gratitude” along with others like “progress,” only adding to the misleading collective memories being made that day and still to this day. He said to the crowd that “I am grateful that they have lived 50 years, and that we can see them and remember their progress.”<sup>54</sup> In addition to the problematic nature of words like “progress,” Clinton went as far as to use the word “celebrate” when he said, “We celebrate the triumph of a struggle today, but we dare not forget what they did with the gift they were given”<sup>55</sup> This phrasing goes against what Roberts discussed in his remarks that this is not the time or place for celebration, which is a shame but unfortunately the truth. While Clinton’s message is thoughtful and fully valid to want to recognize the Nine for their struggles and efforts in an extremely less than desirable situation, the chosen language sets the speech back in terms of not leaving any room for any prior collective memories to be challenged. While on the surface these words are fairly ubiquitous, they are extremely loaded, as they create the sense that great strides have been made with regard to race relations, to the point that there must not be any tensions or divisions in our country today, which we all know to not be true.

### **Symbolism**

As the ceremony was outside, the grand façade of Central was a beautiful backdrop to the speakers and the Nine. In addition to the Nine, Bill Clinton, and

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<sup>53</sup> Bill Clinton. "President Clinton's Speech at Little Rock 50th Commemoration," Little Rock Central High School, 27 Sept. 2007.

<sup>54</sup> Clinton, "Speech at Little Rock 50th."

<sup>55</sup> Clinton, "Speech at Little Rock 50th."

others, there were a handful of Central students that were sitting up on the stage as well. These students were members of Principal Rousseau's "Principal's Cabinet." Juila Zebronsky, who was a senior at Central at the time, was one of them. She remarked, "We just got a special spot at the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary ceremony. The group exists every year, but this year the Principal was especially conscious about having a good mix of races represented."<sup>56</sup> From the start, when these students were selected, Principal's Cabinet had been crafted in a way that would be presentable for this very event. Zebronsky remembers a lot of tension when it came down to who had been chosen for Principal's Cabinet that year in particular;

I remember there being some amount of controversy about [who was ultimately chosen for Principal's Cabinet] because some white students who thought they were like more highly qualified to be on the council didn't get in and some black student or a Latina student or something would get in...the traditional issues with affirmative action manifested themselves on a smaller scale there.<sup>57</sup>

Zebronsky reiterates through this vignette that there is clearly a racial divide within the student body still present at Central today.

At Little Rock Central past anniversary commemorations, there has definitely been a focus on having integration be visible, and this ceremony was no different. The Principal's Cabinet, for example, played a key role visually up on stage. As Zebronsky said,

I remember before the ceremony the principal telling us all to, I don't remember the phrase she used, but I guess to sit by somebody

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<sup>56</sup> Zebronsky, conversation with author.

<sup>57</sup> Zebronsky, conversation with author.

that wasn't our friend or someone who we don't normally talk to on Principal's Cabinet because we were in a very visible location [at the ceremony] and the event was going to be televised so she wanted our group, which was representing our school on a smaller level to I guess look more integrated.<sup>58</sup>

While this move by Principal Rousseau makes sense because ideally this is what Central would look like fifty years after the horrendous events, I think it sends the wrong message. As Zebronsky pointed out, the Principal's Cabinet was not only very visible to the audience at the event, but their image was being broadcast to thousands of other viewers via the televised reports. This image of the Principal's Cabinet was for many of the audience members and certainly for those watching on television, the only sense of what Central looks like now. This is where the danger lies in symbolism like this, because this is not what Central really looks like. While the proportion of African Americans and whites who attend Central all together is a similar ratio to that of the Cabinet, the way these Central students choose to arrange themselves on a daily basis, segregated, is unfortunately not how Principal Rousseau would have liked the Cabinet members to be arranged.

At each anniversary at Central the chief leaders of the ceremony, usually Bill Clinton included, hold open the big main doors at Central for the Nine to walk through as a symbolic gesture because those very doors has been closed on them for so many years. For the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary the Principal's Cabinet also walked through those doors as a beacon of hope for viewers, as again they projected a sense of

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<sup>58</sup> Zebronsky, conversation with author.

integration; As Julia Zebronsky recalled, “We all walked out in a line, a racially diverse line...that was sort of a symbol of unity.”<sup>59</sup>

There was definitely an underlying tension between this unity being projected by the Cabinet and speakers like Clinton, and the words of the Nine. As Zebronsky said,

The impression that I got was that [the Nine] were dissatisfied, which is completely understandable. So [the ceremony] definitely was not all “everything is roses here” but it was interesting to come out and hear people talk in that way after we had just been told basically like sit by a black person if you are white or sit by a white person if you are black.<sup>60</sup>

This is why anniversaries of tragic events can be so hard to commemorate because tensions like these will never cease to exist. The problem is that for many, when they see the Principal’s Cabinet and when they hear people like Clinton talking about “progress,” even when that is only a part of his ideas about the event, listeners are going to gravitate more to these positive sentiments when forming a collective memory. Viewers and audience members are not going to want to be confronted with difficult race issues or work that still needs to be done. With this comes the pitfall of collective memory; “the celebration of *positive* memories reaffirms the collective conscious.”<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Zebronsky, conversation with author.

<sup>60</sup> Zebronsky, conversation with author.

<sup>61</sup> Ducharme and Fine, “Construction of Nonpersonhood and Demonization,” 297.

## Fragmented Commemorations

Sociologist Vered Vinitzky-Seroussi's idea of "fragmented" commemorations is useful to understand in the context of the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Commemoration Ceremony at Little Rock. Fragmented commemorations, she suggests, "include multiple commemorations in various spaces and times where diverse discourses of the past are coined and aimed at disparate audiences."<sup>62</sup> I think that the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Commemoration at Little Rock could be seen in a similar way. I would argue that even though the ceremony itself did not have people broken up into small groups discussing specific topics of interest to them, audience members were certainly divided up mentally as to why they attended; Whether they felt guilty about the past and they wanted to see the symbols of unity, or because they were a little unsettled by the state of Central today and were so thrilled to hear what people like Terrence Roberts had to say. In this way, while the ceremony was not physically split up, it was psychologically situated that way, making it a version of what Vinitzky-Seroussi calls a "fragmented" commemoration. The context at Central in 2007 plays an important role in this as well. As Vinitzky-Seroussi writes, "a fragmented type will be engendered in a conflictual political culture, when a strong link exists between the past and the present debates, and in the presence of powerful agents of memory."<sup>63</sup> I think that this is extremely true in the case of Little Rock because of the unique dichotomies between Central's history and its present situation. This fragmented commemoration is manifested in those instances of

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<sup>62</sup> Vered Vinitzky-Seroussi, "Commemorating a Difficult Past: Yitzhak Rabin's Memorials," in *Collective Memory Reader*, ed. Jeffrey K. Olick, Vered Vinitzky-Seroussi and Daniel Levy (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 375.

<sup>63</sup> Vinitzky-Seroussi, "Commemorating a Difficult Past," 376.

tension that Zebronsky experienced, for instance when what is visually being presented does not necessarily match up with the words being spoken.

There is much to learn from this fragmented Commemoration Ceremony, about Little Rock, about Central High, and about our society at large. For instance, commemoration ceremonies like these have multiple facets working with and against each other and when these facets go against each other, the tensions that result are critical to understanding deeper meanings within the event.

Commemorations like this have a huge impact on the way we form collective memories and in turn how we shape or reshape our past.

That being said, this form of commemoration is tricky because while it presents a lot of information, the difficult information that needs to be addressed by our society may not be incorporated into the collective memory because it is too complicated to face or it is too hard to think about. When leaving a ceremony like this, people are going to stick to the messages that are easy and not demanding of their time and lifestyle. Audiences need to be pushed and challenged for the commemoration to have any progressive impact.

### Chapter Three: Little Rock Central High School National Historic Site Visitor Center

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Opened in 2007, just in time for the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary, the Little Rock Central High National Historic Site Visitor Center has become a primary venue for commemorating the integration crisis of 1957. Located just across the street from Central, the National Historic Site is extremely accessible to visitors. The Visitor Center provides great insight

to the experiences of the Little Rock Nine, as well as the greater context of what they were apart of: the Civil Rights Movement. Through the use of multimedia and a variety of ways of delivering the information, the exhibit



is very dynamic and continues to grab your attention throughout the viewing experience. That being said, there are several places in the museum that offer relief to the viewer, which, when it comes to forming a collective memory, can be quite troubling and inhibit any real growth or change in our society of the past and our society of the present.



## **Exhibit Layout**

As soon as one even enters the main building near the information desk, shouting can be heard. Echoing off of every wall is “two-four-six-eight we don’t want to integrate!” – the angry, harsh chants and screams of the white mob on September 4, 1957. Those haunting words, cheers and shouts fill the entire Visitor Center, starting out rather faintly when one walks in, and getting significantly louder upon entering the exhibit. The atmosphere that is created by this ongoing audio of tormentors mimics how Elizabeth Eckford, the only one of the Nine to walk alone into the rabble-rousers on the day of the first attempt, would have felt.

The organization of the exhibit is laid out and arranged in a dynamic manner; it was very apparent that every space had been accounted for in the planning and execution of the exhibit. It flows like a circle; there are displays along the walls and surround several middle displays. The perimeter of the exhibit serves as a timeline that does not directly relate to the Little Rock Crisis, but it serves as a historical context within which to place the Little Rock Nine. As one enters the exhibit, they are directed to begin in a specific place on the outside walls. The first panels that one sees provide information about things like the Jim Crow laws that mandated racial segregation, and the Plessy v. Ferguson case that established the “separate but equal” doctrine. To continue the circle, the next wall is a solid window that looks out at Central High. Being able to see the school from the exhibit I think is extremely powerful, as it reinforces that this school is still real and that these stories are not that far removed from us today. The next wall in the exhibit is titled “Individuals Who Make a Difference” and includes information about people like Dolores Huerta

and Fred Korematsu who fought for civil rights through their own struggles with racial prejudices, just like the Little Rock Nine.

These outside pieces provide the framework for the middle part, the heart of the museum. In between, each of the four main pillars contains more information about the crisis. For example, one of the panels is titled “Why Step Forward?” and that includes audio clips from each of the Nine explaining their individual choices that led them to come to Central in 1957. What is interesting about this part is that the audio is done with the use of old black telephones. This was especially powerful because as one sits there with the phone up to their ear, it is like the Nine are actually on the other side of the line talking to you; it creates a more personal atmosphere that is quite powerful. Telephones were also an extremely important item in the homes of the Nine during the crisis, as the easiest way for Daisy Bates to get in contact with all Nine was calling them at home. Telephones, however, were another way that the Nine and their families were harassed, as angry whites would call and shout death threats at them; Terrence Roberts remembers, “the telephone was a real monster in our house.”<sup>64</sup> For these reasons alone, it seems important to have telephones like these present in the exhibit. The other panel is titled “Faces of Crisis” and that has a touch screen with a lot of pictures, both black and white and color, as well as text. By clicking on the various faces and images, one can read the biographies of each of the following: the Nine, their parents, government officials, community groups, lawyers and judges, the school itself, the security that was

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<sup>64</sup> Roberts, Terrance, 2007. Audio Clip, Little Rock Central High School National Historic Site Visitor Center.

involved, community leaders, and the media. All of the major players are covered and offer a comprehensive overview of why these people and places were so significant. Many people look at the images of 1957 and because they are all in black and white, assume that what they are looking at is ancient history. By having this balance of black and white, and color images, the message comes across that these people and places are not stuck in the past, many are alive to this day and what they fought for is still ever present at Central. These panels serve as an important foundation, in combination with surrounding walls, for an understanding of Little Rock. Once one has walked through the pillars, there is another wall that is unconnected from

the main wall that too serves as a timeline; it is titled "Crisis at Central High." Situated in the center of the museum with all of these panels and photographs



around it, this is the heart of the exhibit. Starting on the left there is a television that plays video footage of Arkansas Governor Faubus, President Eisenhower, and other clips from the television coverage on the day at Central when Elizabeth Eckford attempted to enter the school. The next section is titled "Three Weeks in the

World’s Eye” and includes more images of the Nine and the National Guard as well as another telephone with a blurb about harassment calls. A third section is titled “Inside the School” and that displays Ernest Green receiving his diploma as well as artifacts like the “One Down, Eight to Go” cards that students at Central passed around after Minnijean Brown got expelled that year. By having these positive and negative objects juxtaposing each other, the exhibit demonstrates just how difficult it was for the Nine to go to school and what an accomplishment it was for Ernest Green to walk across the stage and receive his diploma at the end of the year. The final panel on this central wall is titled “Lost Year” which is referring to the 1958-1959 school year, when all four of the public high schools in Little Rock, Central included, were closed as a way to avoid any further integration from occurring. There is a photograph of Central’s empty hallways and one of the sign that was posted outside the school that read “This School Closed by Order of the Federal Government.” The “Lost Year” has often been a moment in the Little Rock Crisis that is forgotten, as the Little Rock Nine’s tumultuous school year took precedence over our collective memories of the event.

The middle section of the exhibit as a whole acts in a way as Central High School itself. On the front of the actual school there are four statues that are situated



above the main doors that have the following words beneath them: Ambition, Personality, Opportunity, Preparation. Thus, the middle of the Visitor Center has four pillars that include the images and the words that are seen on the front façade of the school. This reinforces how, along with the audio as well, what the experience would have been like to be walking closer and closer to Central on that first fateful day and really the entire year, which is a very powerful sensation created by the museum itself.

On the other side of the wall are three kiosks that have seats for people to sit and interact with a touch screen as they listen to the “Memories of the Crisis” as they are called. Again, like in the pillars, all of the audio is done with black telephones.

Each kiosk had the following 16 videos: “The Announcement – September 2, 1957,” “1<sup>st</sup> Attempt to Enter Central High School – September 4, 1957,” “Waiting for School to Re-open – September 5-22,

1957,” “2<sup>nd</sup> Attempt to Enter Central High School – September

23, 1957,” “The 101<sup>st</sup> Arrives!! – September 24, 1957,” “3<sup>rd</sup>

Attempt to Enter Central High School – September 26, 1957,”

“Inside Central High School,”

“The Chili Story,” “Harassment

of Parents,” “Bomb Drills,” “Student Interactions,” “Teacher Interactions,” “Stories

from Central High,” “Graduation Day – May 27, 1958,” “The Lost year 1958-1959,”



“WEC/STOP – Two Stories.” The kiosks face towards the wall that is mostly made up of windows, that give the viewers a clear view of Central. What makes that view so powerful is that while you are seated at the little kiosks and are holding the phone up to your ear listening to the “memories,” it can almost feel like you are part of these historical events because while you are listening you are looking out the window at the actual scene of the crime, where our country saw so explicitly the racial injustice and hatred.

While I found the experience of watching the video excerpts at the kiosks quite interesting because of the use of the black telephones and being able to see Central through the window, I found the content of the clips to be very significant.

There were many video clips of “reconciliation.” For instance, in “The Chili Story” clip, the viewer sees Minnijean Brown and the white man whom she had dumped the chili on sitting side-by-side talking about the incident together; they are very candid and friendly towards one another.



During the 1957 school year, Minnijean Brown was expelled because of this chili incident, so it is fascinating that these two appear to be friendly when the event between the two of them was quite tragic really for Minnijean. I discussed the danger of this type of remembrance in my introduction with the example of Elizabeth Eckford and Hazel Bryan and I think it is true here as well; that while

maybe these two individuals have come to terms with the past, does not mean that all racial conflict is obsolete.

Upon leaving the middle section on the way out of the museum, there is another wall that has quotations about race relations in a contemporary context. One includes a quote from one of the Nine, Thelma Mothershed Wair; “I think race relations are better. I hope I had something to do with that.”

To a critical viewer, these words of Thelma Mothershed Wair seem loaded. While there is much truth to what she said, I think that it may offer false hope about the present and could be especially detrimental for people to have this be one of the last things they see upon their departure from the museum. By not having anything that counteracts this statement or challenge it in anyway, it doesn't give the viewer something to ponder when they leave, it instead suggests that this quote says it all, that there is in fact nothing else to ponder.

This wall is followed by a table with a Visitor Log Book where visitors can sign and write about their experience or reactions to what they have seen. This allows visitors to become apart of the exhibit themselves, which gets at the heart of what the Visitor Center is all about – bringing the past into the present in order to look at the serious issues presented. Visitor Center park ranger Spirit Trickey, daughter of one of the Nine (Minnijean Brown Trickey) says, “there are incredible testimonies [in the guestbook] to how people relate the crisis story to their own lives.”<sup>65</sup> These entries include people from all over the world. For example a woman named Linda from Sweden wrote on December 26, 2011,

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<sup>65</sup> Spirit Trickey, email to author 12 Jan. 2012.

It's hard to believe that something like this could happen in a country like this – but at some point I'm glad it did. Everything has a beginning and this was the beginning of a new era that would change the world. Thank you for your bravery, Little Rock Nine. You did more for our civilization than you probably realized then.<sup>66</sup>

All of the comments I read were positive. Countless entries say, "We love you Little Rock Nine!" As one leaves the museum, they leave feeling good; they leave on a good note. This begs the question, do visitors simply absorb the information and then think that because we live in a different time that things are automatically better?

The last section of the museum is complex in many ways besides Thelma Mothershed Wair's quote and the Visitor Log. What was interesting for me in these last few minutes I was in the museum, as I was flipping through the visitor's entries in the book, I noticed that the chanting of the mob that had really been so evident in the beginning of my exhibit experience had fully become white noise; I knew it was there but I wasn't listening to the intensity and ruthlessness of "two-four-six-eight we don't want to integrate!" I didn't feel that haunting atmosphere that I had originally felt, I had become numb to the tragic, painful past. This in itself speaks volumes to the sentiments of this final section of the museum because it has a much more optimistic vibe to it already, so to have those harsh tones muted practically in my own mind is very interesting and says something about how many visitors most likely leave the museum without even realizing it. It is this subconscious nature in

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<sup>66</sup> Linda, 2011. Visitor Log Book Entry, Little Rock Central High School National Historic Site Visitor Center.



combination with how the exhibit is presented where danger in the sense of collective memory becomes evident.

Elizabeth Eckford and Hazel Bryan have their place in the Visitor Center as well, in the Visitor Center's gift shop. Strategically placed, the gift shop is right next to where visitors walk on their way out of the exhibit. The Center continues to sell posters of the infamous 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary picture of Elizabeth and Hazel that is visibly titled "Reconciliation." To me, this is extremely problematic because even though this photograph can definitely speak a thousand words, most of those words are inaccurate. The inaccuracy is twofold. At the time that the picture was taken, Eckford and Bryan were "friends," however since 1997 the two have gone their separate ways and do not communicate anymore because of the stress it caused both of them. In that sense the photograph is inaccurate because they no longer can stand next to each other and smile. It is inaccurate in another sense because the two have come to represent their races on a grander scale, and unfortunately enough the reality is that there is still a divide between African American and Euro Americans in American society today.

### **Importance of the Exhibit**

Spirit Trickey, daughter of Minnijean Brown Trickey, is one of the head park rangers at the Little Rock Central High School National Historic Site. As one of the main planners of the Visitor Center herself, Spirit has watched the Visitor Center grow and has seen many visitors come in and out of the museum over the years. She says that "the interesting thing about the exhibits is that each visitor takes away a

different meaning, experience. The exhibits provoke visitors to think about the fact that the Little Rock Nine were just children when they went to Central.”<sup>67</sup> Because the exhibit has so many different facets, there are so many concepts, events and people to grapple with. Spirit says “many people come out of the exhibits very emotional because they can’t believe that it happened. They are shocked to find out about all of the abuse and terror that the [Little Rock Nine] and their families faced every day.”<sup>68</sup> This awareness is key and extremely important to preserving the legacy of the Little Rock Nine.

Another aspect that Trickey discusses as being important to the exhibit is the wide range of voices to which the visitors can listen. Spirit says,

[Visitors] are also able to hear from a variety of different voices through oral history interviews. For example, there are interviews with the [Little Rock Nine], Arkansas National Guardsmen, members of the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne, parents, teachers, police officers, etc. that were intimately involved in the crisis. That way visitors are able to get a whole picture of what it was like for different people.<sup>69</sup>

This range is essential because it gives life to many of the stories that would otherwise be unknown. For instance, in the video kiosk, with the clip called “Stories from Central High,” the viewer can listen to some of the white students’ testimonies. One of the students named Jerry Butler is featured and he explains an encounter when his friend spat in Terrence Roberts’ face and then the friend and Butler ran away. In his interview clip he says, “I’ve always regretted I didn’t...I didn’t do

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<sup>67</sup> Trickey, email to author.

<sup>68</sup> Trickey, email to author.

<sup>69</sup> Trickey, email to author.

something about that. But I was 16, and I was afraid.”<sup>70</sup> Many of the kiosk’s videos that included the interviews with white students that attended Central in 1957 focus on apologizes for not standing up for or helping the Little Rock Nine. The video clip of Jerry Butler is a prime example of this. While on one hand it is great that those students are apologizing because they should, however I think that by only showing white students apologizing isn’t helpful; it provides a limited look at white society, because much of this white student population isn’t apologetic because they are in utter denial about the whole thing. Ted Treadway, who was a senior at Central in 1957 recalled, “I never saw anything that went on. I understand, one time, someone knocked the books out of one of them hands. But I don’t remember any of that.”<sup>71</sup> It is stories like Ted’s in conjunction with stories like Jerry’s that need to be seen side by side in order to understand the complex nature of collective memory as well as the complex nature of how to “properly” commemorate something like the crisis of 1957.

Trickey sees the Visitor Center contributing to the collective memory of the crisis of 1957 by allowing visitors to fully understand that the Nine were just kids and that they are an example of people who made a difference in the world through simple, yet extremely powerful, actions;

The visitor center is also a place where we honor the Little Rock Nine. It’s wonderful to see kids in awe of ordinary teenagers who helped change the world. That to me is the ultimate message, that

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<sup>70</sup> Butler, Jerry, 2007. Audio Clip, Little Rock Central High School National Historic Site Visitor Center.

<sup>71</sup> Ted Treadway, conversation with author. 5 Jan. 2012.

we all have the ability to be a positive force in this world in whatever way we choose to be.<sup>72</sup>

In this regard, I think that the Visitor Center is extremely well done because it does honor the incredible bravery of the Nine and their families. It also places them in the context of the bigger civil rights movement and how extraordinary it is that they were just children who were fighting for something so much bigger than themselves. I agree with Spirit that the awareness the Visitor Center provides is key, however I think that it can be pushed a bit further with what it can say and how it challenges viewers to think critically about past and present issues of race relations.

The major question is, what collective memories are being formed as a result of the Visitor Center? In what ways is the past being put forward for this generation to understand and think about? Park Ranger Spirit Trickey presents instances of viewers leaving the exhibit with more awareness which is good, yet I would argue that there are several aspects that could be misleading for viewers when it comes to race relations in the present as well as the past.

All of the aspects of the Visitor Center, the clips, the quotations, the stories, the visualizations of reconciliation, and the power of audio (or subconsciously muted audio), project messages that I would not consider to be beneficial when it comes to the formation of our collective memory of Little Rock. Each of these components of the museum have their own significance and importance for a variety of ways, but in terms of how visitor's collective memories are shaped, unless

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<sup>72</sup> Trickey, email to author.

the viewer is really looking critically at the material, I think that the exhibit is lacking what it needs to challenge viewers to think about the issues of the past and how they transfer to the present. This National Historic Site is probably the most influential space in which the legacy of the Nine and Central is preserved, however, I argue that while it does recognize the Nine and their experiences in a dynamic way, it leaves questions of current race relations at Central, and really anywhere, up in the air. There is no guidance as to what visitors should do next, and there is no awareness about the actual legacy that is currently being made at Central today.

## Chapter Four: Commemorating Little Rock on a Smaller Scale

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The legacies of the 50th anniversary of the Little Rock Nine, as well as the events of 1957, are still ever present today. Three mediums that we see this legacy manifesting today is through the Little Rock Nine Monument titled “Testament” which was unveiled in 2005, the HBO Documentary *Little Rock Central: 50 Years Later* that was made in 2007 around the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary, and the Little Rock Central High Memory Project that began in 2007 for the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary and continues still today. Each of these legacy markers are vital to the ways in which our collective memories are formed and continue to form about the Nine and the specific events of 1957 even though they aren’t big events or spaces like the Commemoration Ceremony and the Visitor Center. I argue that these distinct ways of approaching the issues of 1957 and their mark on Central in 2007 and today are a much more effective means for contributing to our collective memory. Unlike the Commemoration Ceremony and the Visitor’s Center, these three forms of commemoration, while they weren’t broadcasted on television or have thousands of people walk through them every year, bring more to the table ultimately when it comes to challenging collective memory.

### **“Testament,” Little Rock Nine Monument**

In 2005, John Deering sculpted a monument, titled “Testament,” in honor of the Little Rock Nine that is located on the grounds of the Arkansas State Capital in Little Rock. This work of art becomes an important part of the Nine’s legacy, as “the

students stand forever firm before the office of the governor – the very seat of power that fueled the conflict and forged their remarkable futures.”<sup>73</sup> This quote from a State Capital brochure touches on the importance of the location of the monument; the local government played a key role in the suffering that the Nine faced, so to have them fixed there is quite a powerful message.



The statues themselves are quite unique in the fact that they aren't realistic. While it is apparent which member of the Nine is which, there is something very surreal about the figures; the texture of the bronze is very unique but successful in what it does. The artist, Deering, wanted the observers "to become virtual witnesses, imagining themselves amid the blur of protestors, reporters and troops who surrounded the Little Rock Nine."<sup>74</sup> I think that Deering's vision is very successful; while I was at "Testament," I weaved through the statues, which was much more moving than I had anticipated. The way they are configured and their humanlike size make them very real. Looking into each of the statues eyes gave me the shivers and not in a scary way, but in a powerful way because I was seeing them in a new light; not just pictures or words on a page, faces on a screen, or a voice on an audio track – they

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<sup>73</sup> Arkansas Humanities Council & the National Endowment for the Humanities. *Testament: A Monument Honoring the Little Rock Nine*. Little Rock: Little Rock State Capital, 2006.

<sup>74</sup> Arkansas Humanities Council & the National Endowment for the Humanities.

were real kids, real people. Ken Richardson, a member of the Board of Directors for the city of Little Rock and alumni of Central echoes my same sentiment that

When you look at those films, or you see it on T.V. you are kind of far removed because you are looking at something visually, its through a T.V. screen, through a lens, but once you get up close its almost like you can touch them and feel them, then you can look and see that these were just kids. 16, 17-year-old kids, that wanted nothing else but to equal access to education and equal opportunity, something that all Americans are supposed to have.<sup>75</sup>

I think that this is why these statues and the monument as a whole are so powerful.

Around the statues are quotes from each of the Nine, which I found effective because



it gave a voice to each of these bronze students. Even though they are permanent in their stance, their words are fluid and continuing to influence everyone who comes to “Testament.”

I see “Testament” as a positive marker of the Nine’s legacy. It celebrates them because they are permanent fixtures and because of their location at the Capital; they are displayed in a way that

demonstrates that they were strong and believed in their right to equal opportunity and education. It is able to get this message across without the additional

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<sup>75</sup> *Little Rock Central: 50 Years Later.*



romanticized subtext that issues of race and racial conflict that these Nine people experience is gone, which is critical to my main argument about collective memory and its tendencies to want to say things like that. The monument is evocative through its use of the Nine's own words because through those insights, the Nine can and will continue to speak to future generations. For a work of art that is without audio, it truly speaks volumes.

***Little Rock Central: 50 Years Later, HBO Documentary***

In 2007, the same year as the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Little Rock Nine, the HBO Documentary *Little Rock Central: 50 Years Later* was made. The film avoids the faults demonstrated by the Commemoration Ceremony and the National Historic Site Exhibit, as it addresses issues at Central and covers a wide variety of opinions and perspectives. What was most valuable about the documentary was that it captured the essence of Central, the positives of the numerous academic awards, as well as the negatives like ever-growing achievement gap that runs along racial lines.

Central today is stereotypically thought of as a historical school for obvious reasons, as well as one that is extremely prestigious with many National Merit Scholars roaming its halls. It is important and valid for the movie to highlight the school's successes, as it is a very famous institution. A lot of commentary is provided throughout the film about all the various state-awards and honors that the school has received. Principal Nancy Rousseau is very proud of her school for these high recognitions, which the viewer gets a strong sense of especially during a scene where Rousseau is addressing students and parents at a school assembly;

We are very proud of our legacy here at Central, as many of you may know Newsweek has us at 20<sup>th</sup> in the United States. This ...is based on the number of advanced placement exams that our students take at our school and I want you to know that out of all the schools in Arkansas, we do have the most advanced placement scholars. We keep getting more and more awards, more and more colleges and universities honoring our students, so we are very proud.<sup>76</sup>

Again, Central should be applauded for its academic excellence and people like Rousseau should be proud, but Central also should be examined from other angles, for instance those students who are advanced placement scholars and how they fit into the Central community. As will become clear in the next couple paragraphs, these issues of advanced placement exams classes are the root of a major quandary that Central faces.

Another positive that the film highlights is one student in particular, a senior named Brandon Love. A successful student, and someone who is well-liked by his peers and teachers, Love is also Central's Student Body President, and, as he points out, that is significant in the context of Central in 1957 as well as 2007; "Tonight I get sworn in as student body president here at Central. Being a black student it means something because of what happened 50 years ago...it's a big deal."<sup>77</sup> These accomplishments of Central High School are things that should be celebrated and recognized; however, the school is not faultless just because it pumps-out national merit and advanced placement scholars, and has an African American student body

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<sup>76</sup> *Little Rock Central: 50 Years Later.*

<sup>77</sup> *Little Rock Central: 50 Years Later*

president, there are many components and layers that are at play that show Central in a much different light than what is presented in Newsweek.

The unique makeup of the school and how the school has configured itself is a very important basis to understand the rest of the issues that Central faces today. As Central High Teacher and Golf Coach, Shannah Ellender explains,

[White families] send their kids to Central because Central is so well known, and Central gets so many academic opportunities and money thrown, so [white] kids come for the academics and the reputation of the school and what that can do for them. The lower-income kids are [at Central] because they are in the district and that is where the bus takes them.<sup>78</sup>

Right away there is a divide within the student body population because of this difference of socio-economic backgrounds. This also becomes the root of the various other problems that Central High faces today that the documentary illuminates.

Central is criticized for being “two schools in one”: a black school and a white school all under the same roof. The documentary speaks extensively to the idea that Advanced Placement (AP) classes have become an invisible dividing line between African American and White students. For instance, Chuck West, an AP history teacher at Central said that,

Central’s racial breakdown is probably 60% or approaching 60% African American, and it doesn’t even come anywhere near that in my classes. My three African American young women sit boom boom and boom right there next to one another, they feel like they

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<sup>78</sup> *Little Rock Central: 50 Years Later.*

kind of need to be together. They are by far the minorities in a school where they aren't the minorities.<sup>79</sup>

This example touches on the fact that the school is still segregated, and that the handful of African American students in these classes feel the need to stick together, much like what the Nine did when they were at Central; it really puts into question just how much has changed since 1957. Another Central teacher, Angela Jackson discusses the AP divide;

Where are we as a school? If you asked a white teacher that, I bet you nine out of ten times that their gonna say 'ah Central is just, we are just everything, everything is wonderful here, all of our kids are learning' and they have no reality. If you are living in an Advanced Placement world, you are out of reality when it comes to students in this school.<sup>80</sup>

Jackson here also picks up on a divide between teachers, which is fascinating because students tend to mimic what their teachers do; these issues need to be addressed by teachers in an effective way in order for "progress" to occur. AP teachers need to recognize their ignorance because their obliviousness in turn has an influence on the student's collective memory and how they will remember in the future what is happening at Central, which is not the legacy that the Nine wished to leave.

Brandon Love, Central's African American Student Body President, is an AP student himself and finds himself stuck in the binaries of black/white, general

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<sup>79</sup> *Little Rock Central: 50 Years Later.*

<sup>80</sup> *Little Rock Central: 50 Years Later.*

education/AP classes. He speaks to the reality that Jackson says most are not recognizing;

Central is still pretty segregated. It's just that we don't have to have the National Guard here to get into school. At Central I take AP classes and I am the only black person in my class. Its like two schools in one really.<sup>81</sup>

In a school like Central where the teachers and resources all exceed adequacy, it is difficult to look at the dilemma that the school faces. As Central teacher Cynthia Nunnley says, "The gap should be closing, but it doesn't appear that it is."<sup>82</sup>

The divide amongst the students is not solely in the classroom, but really everywhere. The Caucasian students in the film all talk about college and what kind of car they drive to school, while many African Americans are faced with a different reality; many talk about their constant fear for their safety at home, or teenage pregnancies. For instance, Maya, a 16 year old student at Central has two children of her own and she says that, "you see a lot of single parents, especially at Central. A lot of people got kids up there."<sup>83</sup> Even though all of these students are contained within the beautiful brick building that is Central, they are really living in two different worlds.

After understanding all of these facts and facets of Central, it puts the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary in a new perspective. It shows that it really is a difficult event to commemorate not only for the horrendous actions of 1957, but also the equally problematic issues that were occurring in 2007, and that still continue today. As

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<sup>81</sup> *Little Rock Central: 50 Years Later.*

<sup>82</sup> *Little Rock Central: 50 Years Later.*

<sup>83</sup> *Little Rock Central: 50 Years Later.*

Ken Richardson said, and what really became the tag line of the documentary, “We want to celebrate how far we’ve come, but we still have so much farther that we have to go.”<sup>84</sup>

Aside from the major reoccurring themes of the “good” and the “bad,” the film also addressed “Mix Up” days which was a strategy that was implemented by Principal Nancy Rousseau to help students begin to address the racial divide that exists at Central. The divide is especially visually present during lunch time, as all of the African American students each lunch in the cafeteria and all of the Caucasian students eat outside. When I traveled to Little Rock myself, I saw first hand the way the students configured themselves at lunch and unfortunately enough, the patterns are still the same. The Park Ranger from the Visitor’s Center who was giving the tour pointed out this trend as well; it is certainly no secret to anyone who walks into Central that there is a serious racial divide, and while it is not the violent sort of divide that was seen in 1957, it is still ever present. The film shows Rousseau announcing on the school intercom that the next few days will be called “Mix Up” days and that it is a time for the students to sit with someone new whom they don’t know at lunchtime. As she is announcing this, the camera cuts to various different classrooms to capture the response of the students. Needless to say no one looked pleased, annoyed at best; the film truly captured the uneasiness of the students, both black and white. The film then got shots of the students at lunch post-Mix Up day announcement where it showed students explaining why they were still sitting in their respective “spots.” One white girl said that the reason why she and her

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<sup>84</sup> *Little Rock Central: 50 Years Later.*

friends don't sit with their fellow African American peers is because "we just don't like sitting inside the cafeteria."<sup>85</sup> Another student, Julia Zebronsky also remembers the awkward nature of "Mix Up" days; "I remember really dreading those days, not because I didn't appreciate the thought behind it, because I do, it was just so uncomfortable, the whole situation."<sup>86</sup> Zebronsky elaborated on "Mix Up" days and why they weren't the most comfortable of situations for her;

"Mix Up Day" came down to being like if you usually eat outside, eat in the cafeteria, go talk to some black people and vice versa, and it was just, uncomfortable, not only because [it was] making explicit this underlying issue that maybe you think about but you don't think about it formally or you aren't forced to like think about it while you know everyone else is thinking about it and [so] there is this big elephant in the room. But it is also just awkward in the sense that you know you are talking to people who don't know and they are not your friends and that you maybe don't know how to relate to and so I found that often it sort of enhanced the feeling of a discrepancy or a difference or a divide.<sup>87</sup>

Zebronsky, confirms what was shown in the film, that this was not an easy exercise, and ultimately did not help the situation in the way that in an ideal world it would have because students were not actually forging new friendships or understandings. However, Zebronsky did mention that the awareness that it brought to each and

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<sup>85</sup> *Little Rock Central: 50 Years Later*.

<sup>86</sup> Zebronsky, conversation with author.

<sup>87</sup> Zebronsky, conversation with author.

every student was the silver-lining of it all; “[“Mix Up” day] was making the [racial divide] issue salient and so that was useful but uncomfortable.”<sup>88</sup>

All of these components of the documentary lead to the big questions of what is going to happen next? And how are these issues going to be addressed fully and solved fully? The documentary does not give an explicit solution, yet, as this chapter has shown, it definitely provides the entire picture of what is happening at Central. Towards the end there is a clip of Principal Nancy Rousseau who is speaking to an AP class at Central that has two African American students in the class; She says, “we can’t all fix it, its hard, it’s a very, very controversial, political situation. It really takes all of us, it takes the family, it takes the community, it takes the school, it takes the child, and that’s how we get there.”<sup>89</sup> This advice really gets to the heart of the matter that this is not just an individual problem, it is a societal problem that needs to be addressed by all members in order for any gains to be made. Member of the Little Rock Nine, Minnijean Brown ends the film with the following quote: “You look at Little Rock today we will line up on two sides of color, and if we keep saying and talking about and doing the same things that we’ve been doing forever, we’re going to stay the same and I’m really sorry for us.”<sup>90</sup> I think that this is an extremely important point to get across as well that by not actively engaging in discussions of race, and being a part of a greater dialogue about the racial divides that still exist, then it only contributes more to the problem. All members of a society, at Central, in

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<sup>88</sup> Zebronsky, conversation with author.

<sup>89</sup> *Little Rock Central: 50 Years Later*.

<sup>90</sup> *Little Rock Central: 50 Years Later*.



Little Rock, or virtually anywhere, need to take Terrence Roberts' advice and be "active agents of change."

This documentary had become a lasting part of the legacy of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Nine because it addresses the issues of 2007. It is a positive part of the legacy of the Nine because it doesn't ignore the wrongs, it doesn't palliate important issues, no matter how hard they are to hear.

### **Central High's "Memory Project"**

Students at Central High School today contribute to a "Memory Project" that too serves as a meaningful aspect to the Nine's legacy;

These projects honor Central High's legacy as a turning point in the struggle for civil rights both in our community and the nation and also acknowledge our obligations—and our opportunities—to wear the mantle of change in positive ways in the future.<sup>91</sup>

The "Memory Project" began as a mere assignment for 9<sup>th</sup> grade Civics classes and spurred into a surplus of incredible oral histories, a website, as well as a published book, *Beyond Central, Toward Acceptance: A Collection of Oral Histories From Students of Little Rock Central High*;

The Memory Project started as a one-time assignment for ninth graders in the Class of '07—to prepare for the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Central's historic desegregation. But the stories they heard and the lessons learned wouldn't let the project stop. Next came a website, now comes [*Beyond Central, Toward Acceptance* which is full] of

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<sup>91</sup> *Beyond Central, Toward Acceptance: A Collection of Oral Histories from Students of Little Rock Central High*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Little Rock, Ark.: Butler Center Books, 2010), 7.

stories the students think others should know. The Memory Project keeps on teaching students and teachers alike.<sup>92</sup>

Central Principal Nancy Rousseau is a great admirer of the project and believes it is a wonderful way to maintain a dialogue about race relations and the crisis of 1957 between not just students and teachers, but with others in the greater community. Rousseau explains that, “it was at that time and in anticipation of 2007 that our school launched a special ‘Memory Project.’”<sup>93</sup>

The project has really taken on a life of its own since 2007 and, as Rousseau explains, it covers a lot of ground;

This project is a permanent archive of Civil Rights histories collected by Little Rock Central High School students. The project preserves several hundred essays students have written about their interview experiences of older members of a universal community.<sup>94</sup>

Through this archive, students are able to contribute to the history and legacy themselves, making it much less intimidating and easier to access. This is extremely important because of what things like “Mix Up” day revealed: racial tensions, divides and conflicts are clearly not easy topics to breach and need to be approached in a setting that is safe so that all participants can fully be engaged. For this reason alone I think that this project works wonders because it has been able to open up a space like this in which historical issues of race as well as contemporary issues can become a public discussion in a nonthreatening way.

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<sup>92</sup> *Beyond Central, Toward Acceptance*, back cover.

<sup>93</sup> Rousseau, email to author.

<sup>94</sup> Rousseau, email to author.

The “Memory Project” website as well as *Beyond Central, Toward Acceptance* book both include lesson plans for teachers who want to start a similar dialogue in their respective areas. As Rousseau says, “[the lesson plans] were created to be shared across the educational community across the U.S.”<sup>95</sup> These lesson plans serve as a valuable tool for change not only to be sparked at Central and Little Rock but nationally as well. Rousseau also mentioned the “Memory Project” working on a second book that will be due out soon.

For all of these reasons, I think that Central’s “Memory Project” is an amazing tool and venture for students, teachers, and historians – even the general public. I think that oral histories as well as writing can be very powerful tools when looking at challenging subject matter and I think that this project is extremely successful in implementing both of these things.

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<sup>95</sup> Rousseau, email to author.

## Chapter 5: Conclusion

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Memory can be a tricky thing. Because we cannot recall all of the past, we rely on memory to form what becomes history. This puts into question the accuracy of our history because memories are not consistent and not always reliable. For large-scale historic events, the 1957 crisis at Little Rock included, commemorations serve as the most influential spaces for a collective memory to take shape. Commemorations are not only for well-informed people; virtually anyone can attend a ceremony, walk through an exhibit, visit a monument, or watch a documentary. This is exactly why commemorations need to be well thought out because of the power they hold in the formation of collective memory for the current population. Commemorations like the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Little Rock reach a large audience and need to be attuned to the implications of creating public history.

When these various ways of commemorating an event are selective in what they choose to highlight, celebrate and reconcile, they become detrimental because the message that is being sent becomes narrow and limited. In the instance of Little Rock, the Commemoration Ceremony speaks of progress and gratitude and the Visitor Center speaks to reconciliation. These aspects of the Little Rock legacy are valuable but cannot serve as the major basis of our collective memory because there are so many more complex issues of race and flaws in our education system that are at play. And granted these issues of racial tensions and Central's achievement gap are difficult to grapple with and not things that can instantly be solved. However, if

these things are left out completely, society will end up commemorating and celebrating a lie. In order for our society to progress as a whole, these issues that are brought to our attention through the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary at Little Rock must be dealt with.

This is not to say that all forms of commemoration are hopeless and misleading. As Chapter 4 brings to our attention, there are forms of commemoration that even though may be on a smaller scale, they are able to contribute to our collective memory in a valuable and successful way. I think that by looking critically at the “Testament” monument, the *Little Rock Central: 50 Years Later* documentary, and Central’s “Memory Project,” it becomes clear that these means are all effective because they are honest, celebratory in a proper context, and able to continually reach their audiences. When it comes to commemorating the Little Rock Nine’s journey through the maze that is Central High and the legacy of the pivotal moment in American history, these three forms of commemoration have done so in an effective way, which I think is important when looking at the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary. While they were not the main attractions of the 50<sup>th</sup>, they still contributed and continue to contribute to our collective memory. I would argue that they do so in a better way than that of the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Commemoration Ceremony or the National Historic Site’s Visitor Center. I think that because these three ways of commemorating the Nine and the legacy of Little Rock were not the capstones or the pinnacle points of the major 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary they are able to be more honest, more powerful and more accurate.

Little Rock will continue to be commemorated, as will many major events in our nations past, however I hope that we can learn from Little Rock's 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary that the ways in which we commemorate are important and they serve a purpose that extends beyond the speeches given and beyond the songs sang, because all of the elements of commemorations get interwoven into our collective memory. It is important that we do not forget our past, and that with the history we do remember, we remember and think about the whole picture, not just the positives because how will we ever learn otherwise? How will we move forward?

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