

In Their Own Words

Eyes on the Prize: Little Rock and Mississippi

Melba Pattillo Beals: “The mob was getting past the wooden saw horses, because the policemen would no longer fight their own in order to protect us. And so someone made the suggestion that if they allowed the mob to hang one kid they could then get the rest out. And a gentleman whom I believed to be the assistant Chief of Police said, ‘How you gonna choose? You gonna let them draw straws?’”

Ernest Green, on the black students’ first trip to Central High with federal troops: “Well, we got into the jeep, into the stationwagon, rather. And the convoy that went from Mrs. Bates’ house to the school had a jeep in front, a jeep behind. They both had machine gun mounts. And then the whole school was ringed with paratroopers and helicopters hovering around. We marched up the steps in this circle of soldiers with bayonets drawn. I figured that we had really gone into school that day. And walking up the steps that day was probably one of the biggest feelings I’ve ever had. I figured I’d finally cracked it.”

Melba Pattillo Beals: “You’d be walking out to the volleyball court, and someone would break a bottle and trip you on the bottle. I have scars on my right knee from that.”

White reporter to white high school student: “Do you think you’ll get used to going to school with colored children?”

White student: “Yes, sir. I think so. I mean if I’m gonna have to do it I might as well get used to it.”

White student: “If a Spanish or a Chinese person come here it wouldn’t be hard to get along with

them. It’s just that the Negroes are what you might say, more different to us than a Spanish person might be.”

Melba Pattillo Beals: “By the time school had ended I had sort of settled into myself. And I could have gone on for the next five years—it didn’t matter anymore. I was past feeling. I was into just that kind of numb pain where you say, ‘Hey, I can make it. Do whatever you’d like, and it just doesn’t matter anymore.’ But I came home and by myself I walked to the back yard and I burned my books, and I burned everything that I could burn. And I just stood there crying looking into the fire. And wondering whether I would go back, but not wanting to go back.”

Constance Baker Motley: “It was a genuine revolution on the part of black people.”

White student, Ole Miss: “If the school is closed, we want the (football) games played anyway.”

Ross Barnett, Governor of Mississippi, at Mississippi-Kentucky football game: “I love Mississippi. I love her people, our customs. I love and respect our heritage.”

Burke Marshall, Assistant U.S. Attorney General: “In a way, Oxford had become the symbol of massive resistance in the final gasp of the Civil War.”

White reporter to James Meredith after the riots and deaths at the University of Mississippi: “Sir, there’s been a great deal of turmoil and conflict. Two people have been killed. Do you have any feelings of guilt? Have you given it any second thoughts?” ■