**Teaching Ruby Bridges: Fifty years after the Civil Rights Act, an educator on the front lines of desegregation is still sharing her lessons.**

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**Abstract**

Fifty years after the Civil Rights Act, an educator on the front lines of desegregation is still sharing her lessons. In November 1960, over furious objection from many whites, first-grader Ruby Bridges became the first African-American student at William Frantz Elementary School in New Orleans (an image immortalized in Norman Rockwell's The Problem We All Live With) and thus among the first to desegregate a Southern elementary school.

**Full Text**

In November 1960, over furious objection from many whites, first-grader Ruby Bridges became the first African-American student at William Frantz Elementary School in New Orleans (an image immortalized in Norman Rockwell's The Problem We All Live With) and thus among the first to desegregate a Southern elementary school. West Roxbury native Barbara Henry, now 82, was Ruby's teacher.

One of the most distinguishing features of my time as a student at Girls' Latin School in Boston was the respect and sense of worth given to every student, irrespective of class, community, or color. Without ever being explicitly taught, we learned to appreciate our important commonalities of character and ideals and goals. It was the springboard for all that evolved in my life.

I began teaching in Malden for a few years after college, and then I went to Quincy. During that time, I had been taking graduate courses at Boston College for a master's in history and government. I decided I would love to visit the places I was studying about, so I applied to be a teacher to Air Force children. I found myself at an Air Force base outside Paris. It was there that I met this dashing lieutenant.

He went back to Louisiana, which was his home. I married him and came to New Orleans. I wanted to return to teaching. I loved being with the kids. I had applied to the New Orleans school system. The superintendent called and asked me would I like to take first grade.

"Oh, yes," I said. "Is this to be one of the desegregated schools?"

"Yes it is," he said. "Would that make any difference?"

What a strange question to ask. Why would it make any difference? I had been part of a desegregated world for years and years.

"The police will have your name," he said. I didn't realize what that would signify -- that there was an expectation of trouble. The morning of Monday, November 14, 1960, my husband followed me to the area. We had to park a distance from the school because of the mobs. I had to make my way through that raging sea of protesters to the front barricade, where I met a policeman and gave him my name. My whole life, in a way, had prepared me for that moment.

My first moments with Ruby are as clear today as they were then. This beautiful little black girl, all dressed in pink. The only clue she was going to school and not to a party was she had her school bag and lunchbox. When kids are shy, they raise their heads a little bit. But enough for me to see her beautiful brown eyes and magnetic smile. I just fell in love with Ruby. How could your heart not be taken by a scene like that?

We walked upstairs to begin our long, solitary, and wonderful journey. Our only classmates were the federal marshals at the door. I was the gym teacher, the music teacher. We sang "Davy Crockett." We'd do jumping jacks and pretend jumping rope. And I was just so certain I would give Ruby everything I could to help her become a skilled reader. We created our own oasis of love and learning. We each had hearts free of prejudice. That was the bond that united us and has become indomitable all these many years later.

I thought I would definitely see her again at some point. I picked up the phone one day and there was this soft, satiny, mellifluous voice: "Hello, Mrs. Henry." I knew that voice could only belong to one person.

"Oh, Ruby," I said, "I had dreamed of meeting you one day!"

"Well, I had planned to go on the Oprah show and see if I could find you," she said. "Maybe we could go on the show together."

I thought, well, that's lovely but probably will never happen. But she is a dreamer. I love Langston Hughes's poem -- Hold fast to dreams / For if dreams die / Life is a broken-winged bird / That cannot fly. Sure enough, I got a call from the Oprah show. It wasn't long before I was walking up those stairs to meet Ruby. That was the beginning of reuniting with her. We spoke together to gatherings of educators and people from coast to coast.

Most wonderful, really, are the times I have been invited to schools throughout the region. It's important for kids to realize that the achievements of the past will only last if they are active participants in the struggle for justice and equality.

Many kids write letters to me expressing their appreciation for my kindness for Ruby. That's so powerful for teachers to realize -- how quickly children absorb the attitude of their teacher: the caring, sensitivity, and sense of worth and respect. The ripples are endless. To make a difference in a person's life and to shape their awareness and caring for other people -- what can be better than that?

(This interview was condensed and edited.)

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Credit: By Barbara Henry (As told to Scott Helman)

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