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Twenty years later, the Little Rock Nine talk about their experiences during the desegregation of Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas.

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Transcript

Central High School: 20 Years Later

TOM BROKAW, anchor:

There was a dramatic and historic confrontation twenty years ago this week in Little Rock, Arkansas, for the first time black students attended the city’s all white high school. This became the first major constitutional challenge to scold the segregation that in a major way in the South. When the struggle was over two years later, many saw it as the beginning of the end of white supremacy in the public schools of this country. Here’s a report of the anniversary form Bob Jimenez.

BOB JIMENEZ, reporting:

Little Rock, Arkansas late September 1957, the federal courts have order school desegregation here. Nine young black students will enter all white central high. Whites rebel, mob violence breaks out, President Eisenhower orders in federal troops to enforce the law. Troops of the 101st airborne division escort the nine blacks to their first day of classes on September 23rd. The six girls and three boys are jeered by some white students, peace is restored but Governor Orval E. Faubus goes on television and declares a state of military occupation.

Governor ORVAL E. FAUBUS: We are now an occupied territory…

JIMENEZ: Faubus decries the action, earlier he had attempted to use his executive powers and the courts to stop desegregation in Little Rock. Faubus in fact managed to close the school the following year, when they reopened in the Fall of 1959 the governor continued to agitate the situation.

FAUBUS: I have learned that there are those of you as citizens who plan to protest tomorrow, the integration of the schools, you have that right, how long that right is enjoyed by Americans remains to be seen.

JIMENEZ: This time city police face the mobs alone, more arrests are made but it will be the last major confrontation in Little Rock, black students are soon able to walk from classes unmolested. All of the black students volunteered to be the first to enter Central High, they were afraid but encouraged to stick it out. Melba Beals is now a television reporter in San Francisco remembers.
MELBA BEALS, of "Little Rock Nine": At any point during the course of events, my parents, my mother could have elected not to let me go. There was some discussion of my not going, but eventually it was decided that I would go. The thought being that the generation inborn, it would solve a problem that we had all lived with for a very long time.

JIMENEZ: Ernest Green was the first to graduate, today he is now the Assistant Secretary of Labor for employment in training in Washington.

ERNEST GREEN, of "Little Rock Nine": That was 1957, it was three years after the Supreme Court Decision, we were clearly aware of the impact of desegregation and desegregated facilities. And I felt that we were going to make a change in Little Rock that would be irreversible.

JIMENEZ: Governor Faubus’s unflexing support for white supremacy earned him an unprecedented six terms as governor of the state. But today he is remembered not as a man of his people but rather one who capitalized on their fears for political gain. Today Faubus works as a bank teller in Huntsville, Arkansas, a job he calls useful and honorable. His recollection of Little Rock, bitter resentment to federal interference…

FAUBUS: And everyone said get involved, you know all the liberals, and I agree with them on that, people should be involved. But how am I gonna be involved in your school affairs when you are overruled by distant authorities all the time. That never should have been in our business in the first place.

JIMENEZ: School officials agree, federal involvement did make the difference, today central high school is academically strong and boasts of a model integration program. Blacks and whites are so evenly mixed and apparently content that some students say the racial disharmony in the past is a stranger to them. Elizabeth Eckford is so easily convinced the change is complete, twenty years ago she walked up to the doors of Central High and was ridiculed. That is not easy to forget…

ELIZABETH ECKFORD, of "Little Rock Nine": I have never been inside those doors since the end of that school year, that one year that I was here. I need to go back inside to finish it all.

JIMENEZ: Next week Eckford will enter Central High school again, she’s been invited to take part in the school’s twenty-year memorial to desegregation. Eckford says she’ll know then if it was all worth it. Bob Jimenez, NBC News, Little Rock, Arkansas.