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For the 40th anniversary of the Little Rock Nine, NBC's Matt Lauer interviews Ernest Green who talks about his first days at Central High School, and the impact it had on history.

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Transcript

Central High School: 40 Years Later

MATT LAUER, anchor:
As we’ve noted, today marks the 40th anniversary of the integration of Little Rock Central High School. It was a drama that gripped the nation as nine Black teenagers braved a White mob and under federal military escort, walked into an all-white school, and into history.

Ernest Green was one of the nine. This morning he’s in Little Rock to commemorate the occasion. Mr. Green, good morning to you.

ERNEST GREEN of the Little Rock Nine: Good morning, how are you?

LAUER: Fine thank you. Forty years is a long time, but can you take me back to that time in 1957? As you walked into the school, what were you thinking?

GREEN: Well that day was the day that we had 1,000 paratroopers from the 101st Airborne Division and we spent three weeks, outside being unable to get into the school…We had a mob that occurred the day before that. All of it led up to a point that I felt if I didn’t finally get into the school, I’d never graduate that year. It was a feeling of exhilaration that we had finally broken the backs of the resistance and that we were going to attend Little Rock Central that morning. And when you had the army behind you and the President of the United States Dwight David Eisenhower supporting the 1954 Supreme Court decision, we felt that we really did matter as people in this country.

LAUER: Mr. Green, hang on because Julian Bond is a civil rights leader who teaches the history of the movement at the University of Virginia. Mr. Bond, good morning to you.

JULIAN BOND: Good morning.

LAUER: I want to point out that you are the same age as the Little Rock nine, you lived in Pennsylvania at the time, how aware were you of the incident at Little Rock?
BOND: Oh immensely aware. This was the first, televised civil rights clash of the 20th century. Ernie Green, Elizabeth Eckford, Minnijean Brown—all of these young people were well-known to me, I didn’t know them personally—they were on TV, they were in magazines, they were in newspapers… And those three weeks that Ernie Green talked about, between their first attempt and their final victory, were just played out on TV screens. Everybody knew the Little Rock Nine.

LAUER: Just because these students were able to finally make it through the doors of that school, didn’t mean everything was fine in Little Rock and other cities across the country, so what was the most important thing, Mr. Bond, that came out of that incident?

BOND: Well that the federal government, reluctantly and only after prodding by Mrs. Bates, Dwight Eisenhower finally ordered out the army to protect these rights. This is the first time in 80 years that federal troops had been used to enforce the rights of Black Americans. And that feeling was a good feeling. It spread across the country. And you had the feeling that when push came to shove, the government would protect you.

LAUER: Mr. Green, lets fast forward 40 years because although there have been changes, some people especially in Little Rock say, not all that much has changed. Some students we talked to say although there is integration at high school now, there is still self-segregation in practice. What has been the change?

GREEN: Well I think Little Rock is a good metaphor for the rest of the country. There’s been a lot of movement, a lot of progress. I wouldn’t deny that. But the real issue left is to try to get at places like Little Rock to allow every citizen, poor youngsters as well as middle class youngsters to take advantage of education, of decent jobs. And Little Rock Central High School, while it has maintained some significant academic courses, it has to figure a way to get all kids into the main stream. That—computer sciences, trigonometry, and Greek and German and whatever other languages they are teaching are available to everybody. And I hope that this attention is one of the things that I think this celebration are, the recognition does—it puts the spotlight, it raises the questions, it brings the camera again on the issues, the thorny issue of race. And as my friend Julian Bond has said, we still have a lot yet to do.

LAUER: Mr. Bond I mentioned you’re a teacher. You talk to students all the time, about the movement, the Civil Rights Movement. How much do they know about the Little Rock nine?

BOND: When they come to me they generally don’t know anything about the civil rights movement, except Martin Luther King and Rosa Parks and the Montgomery bus boycott. I think they’re interested in discovering that here are people not much different then they are, at least in age. That these teenagers in 1957, dared this mob, took this incredible harassment. Elizabeth Eckford mentioned that when she came home from school that day, her dress was so wet with spit she could wring it out. And when my students hear that they’re horrified. And I think they, as I did, when I was Ernie Green’s age when he was a high school student in Little Rock, ask themselves: If I’m ever measured in this way, will I be equal to the test? These nine people served as an immense inspiration to other young people around the country. They were heroes and heroines to the rest of us. They were the poster children for the civil rights movement.