

THEN AND NOW:

THE IMPACT OF THE LITTLE ROCK NINE

AN INTERVIEW WITH ERNIE GREEN



*Fifty years have passed since nine determined black high school students braved racial epithets and threats of violence from angry white residents of Little Rock, Arkansas to desegregate Central High School. The determination of these nine young men and women forced President Eisenhower to send in federal troops to protect them, conveying a message to other southern school districts that the Supreme Court's decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* would be enforced. Ernie Green was the lone senior among the nine, and he became the first black student to graduate from Central High School. He went on to a successful and prestigious career, serving as director of the A. Philip Randolph Education Fund, assistant secretary in the Labor Department under President Jimmy Carter, a partner at Green and Herman, and owner of E. Green and Associates. He has been with Lehman Brothers since 1987. He was interviewed by FOCUS magazine about his recollections of the desegregation of Central High School and its meaning today.*

FOCUS: *What was the political environment like in Arkansas in 1957 at the time of the effort to desegregate Central High School? How much did Arkansas reflect the national struggle over desegregation?*

Mr. Green: Racial politics were pretty much decided by locality. Delta racial politics were very hostile, very pro-segregationist. Around Little Rock, though, which was the central part of Arkansas, people were generally a lot more tolerant than they were in the Delta. I think Governor Faubus felt challenged by eastern Arkansas. State Senator Johnson, who was a very avid outspoken segregationist, was threatening to run against Faubus. So my view is that Faubus felt that he had to play his race card. And Central came along at a time that he had to show that he could hang with the rebels and segregationists.

The political leadership in Little Rock thought they had an agreement that he would support desegregation of Central. The University of Arkansas law school and med school had admitted black students going back to the early '50s, so there were a small number of black students attending school there. Plus, the year before, the buses were desegregated,

the library was desegregated. And the school board was sued by the NAACP to comply with the '54 decision. Most southern communities, while they were being sued by the NAACP, either ignored it or certainly tried to drag it out and didn't comply. The Little Rock school board saw this as a way to comply, and their approach to gradual integration was to do it by groups of classes starting at high school.

FOCUS: *How aware were you of the historic civil rights efforts taking place?*

Mr. Green: Clearly, the reaction in the local newspapers to the '54 decision made me aware—I was 12 or 13 at the time. There were two newspapers in Little Rock. The morning paper was *The Gazette*, which was always a lot more tolerant to us black folks. The evening one was *The Democrat*, which was always a lot more hostile to us. And in my view, if *The Democrat* said go left, I was going to go right. *The Democrat* had a huge banner on the '54 decision that this was the end of the southern way of life, the end of the world. And I said, well, if that's the case, then this has got to be a great

decision! And then the beginning of the Montgomery bus boycott in 1955—that made an impact. And Rosa Parks. And I was beginning to follow Dr. King's career. I was very cognizant of the Till murder, and the picture that ran in *Jet*—that really made a big impression on me.

FOCUS: *Why did you decide to transfer to Central High School?*

Mr. Green: We were asked in the spring of '57 who was interested in transferring to Central. I signed the sheet of paper, indicating that I wanted to transfer, as I think large numbers of students did. And I didn't pay a lot of attention to it. Then they went through a weeding-out process of picking students that they were going to allow to transfer. As the summer wore on, they began to quietly invite the students whom they were ready to recommend to transfer down to the school board for a discussion. There were 20-odd students whom they had agreed to admit as transfer students. The others decided not to attend.

So while they picked us, we were also kind of self-selected. As a teenager, I would try to do almost anything. I was not unaware of the

consequences. But if you're an adult, you've got a job, a mortgage, and all of that—it makes you think twice about whether you want to go into this cauldron. But also, the one defining thread among all nine of us is that there was family support, adults or an adult in the family who really thought that this was the right thing to do and was willing to take the consequences of doing this. My dad had passed. But my mother was a schoolteacher, my aunt was a schoolteacher, and my grandfather, who also played a big role, was a former postman—so we were a middle-class black family in Little Rock that went back a number of generations. But they were willing to stand up for that. And I think that's been the strength of the Civil Rights movement throughout all of this. There were little people who took a stand.

FOCUS: Was the level of hostility a surprise or did you anticipate it? How did you deal with it?

Mr. Green: The level of hostility in the beginning clearly was a surprise. The summer before going to Central, I worked at a country club in Little Rock. I was a locker room attendant at the club. And I struck up conversations with members' kids who were my age. We found common items to talk about. I also had a job cleaning up a downtown shoe store during the school year in eleventh grade. And it turned out that this store, on Saturdays, had a big black clientele, so I got pressed into being a salesman. There were a couple of high school guys who also were salesmen, and we developed a friendship of sorts. So while you had segregated existence, Little Rock was the kind of southern community that you had whites maybe living on the same block as black families.

But my expectation was that there would be some resistance to our going to school down there. I wasn't oblivious to it. My hero, my standard of getting through that, was Jackie

Robinson. You have to endure for a while, but if you proved that you could handle the work, then people would begin to accept you.

Of course, the first day with the National Guard and the incident that happened with Elizabeth Eckford—she was the one that the mob followed—it didn't take you long to figure out that this was going to be a lot tougher than I had imagined. But I think that first day or so also made me realize that as difficult as it was going to become, this was one of those things that would allow something to change about how black people are perceived.

FOCUS: What happened with some of the white students, the young people at the country club and shoe store? When the hostility erupted, how did they react?

Mr. Green: I think with each of them, obviously the relationship changed a lot. One of the people is a fellow who would become a fairly prominent businessman. I'll never forget—Ira and I had conversations, used to shoot the bull. And the first day that the local paper published who the transfer students were going to be—the first time that they revealed our names—Ira came screaming into the club, and at least by my memory, started off the conversation, "How could you do this?" And I said, "Do what?" Obviously, as long as I was the locker room attendant and not trying to cross over and be a member, the world was all right.

There were no white students at Central during the course of that year who attempted to befriend us. In a physics course, I had a lab partner who attempted to maintain a relationship, and there were one or two others. And as I got closer to the end of the year, and closer to graduation, there were a few students who began to come forward and become supportive. But in the middle of the year, we were pretty much isolated and supported ourselves.

But the other part of it was that the segregationists put pressure on any white student who was trying to befriend us. In some cases, we were told that people were threatened, and families and businesses were threatened. So it was really a period of terror during which the segregationists went after anyone and everyone.

FOCUS: Since you were the only one who transferred to 12th grade, you were the only one who graduated that first year. How did you feel walking across the stage?

Mr. Green: Tremendous. I had accomplished what I came there for. The police and the military were very fearful that there was going to be some attempt at violence toward me during the graduation ceremony. That night, I was oblivious to all that.

In the course of the ceremony, they were giving recognition to students and scholarships and awards. As a condition of going to Central, we had had to agree not to participate in any extracurricular activities. I had played in the band since junior high school; some of the others had been in the choir and other activities. We had to forego all that. So the night of graduation, they're giving out all these awards and recognition. When they got to my name, it was just my name. But I had a certain sense in the back of my head that I really didn't need any recognition, that what I had accomplished that night was enough. And it turned out that, in the audience, sitting with my family, coming from Pine Bluff, which is about 40 miles from Little Rock, was Dr. King. He sat with my mother, my aunt, my brother, and other family members. So I always say I'm one of the few Americans who Martin Luther King attended graduation for.

FOCUS: Gary Orfield of the Civil Rights Project has documented the re-segregation of public schools. There is tension between those who say we should focus on quality of schools,

not integration, and others who say that integration is an integral part of quality education. Where do you stand on that?

Mr. Green: You know, the goal and the reality are two separate things. And I think we get lost—both policy people and the advocates—in not being able to distinguish between the two. Bluntly speaking, we need federal policy that helps get us to our goal. We've been going back and forth about it for a number of years. I think that not having the goal of a desegregated society is a hindrance. And I think we always have to have that as a goal in front of us.

It seems to me that all of this in the last forty or fifty years provided options for a number of people. The story that gets forgotten, which is an important piece of what the Joint Center does, is the explosion of the black middle class in the last forty years. Maybe this was a group of people who were prepared to take advantage if you just gave them a way. Well, what's un-American about that? The task for us is, can these options be spread to a wider base? Fifty years ago, we thought that students having an opportunity to go to Central would widen opportunities for us. And fifty years later, we were right.

But if you go back to Little Rock, there are young people there who don't see those options, don't see the opportunity. They're restricted. Central gets touted as still an outstanding urban school, and by most measures, it is. It's probably like the better schools in most cities. It's got a lot of advanced placement, really great opportunities for high flyers, and it probably has general studies for a large number of minority students. Right in that complex, we have to figure out how to move the general students to these other options. The reality is that there is a larger number of minority students who are in general studies.

So you still have to have the goal of trying to have this as an open, desegregated society. That's

a goal worth fighting for. That's the only way, it seems to me, they can compete. Fundamental change in opportunity in this country is through education. In many ways, the nine of us represent what education can provide for American young people, particularly youngsters of color. And to me, it is really the same issue today. Good solid quality education must be supported; and that support is very important.

FOCUS: Conventional wisdom now assumes that talking about race as such is a political loser. So you see some think tanks talking about ways to address poverty, but not talking about the issue of race, racial discrimination, or institutional racism. Do you think that's an effective approach?

Mr. Green: I don't see how you can avoid discussion about race. Du Bois referred to race in the 20th century as America's biggest problem. And going into the 21st century, I think it's still a problem. My hope is that things like this 50th anniversary recognition of our having gone to Central highlight the importance of the discussion. I thought that the focus that President Clinton had with his Initiative on Race was very important, and I think it's even more important now.

You really have to raise it as a conversation about race, and not try to sweep it under the rug. And I hope that whoever the new president is starts the conversation so that it is seen as an advantage and a strengthening of the country—where we go and how we improve things—rather than a discussion of the history of divisiveness. I would hope that with a change in federal policy, a change in administration, that it becomes a higher priority. We've had all of this divisiveness about affirmative action and whether somebody else is taking something out of somebody's pocket. The benefit to the country is that if everybody's pockets are full, you have

more to work with. Hopefully, we can continue to redefine the issue in this way, as I think President Clinton tried to do. And hopefully, during the next eight or twelve years we will have a more positive focus on why racial disparities are not good for the country and why we need to have change.

FOCUS: Have the "Little Rock Nine" stayed in touch?

Mr. Green: We are constantly in touch. We have a foundation. The world of email and instant communications and computers allow us to stay connected. And on the 24th of September, by the time this interview is published, we will be holding a huge fundraising scholarship gala in Little Rock. We expect to have 1,200 to 1,300 people attending. We sold the event out. We are going to do nine scholarships, a mentoring program. And we're going to repeat this each year, have each of these nine scholars reach back to try to support another group of students coming forward. So we are pushing on.

You know, since we're at this benchmark, the question that we get all the time is, what's changed? Has anything changed over the last fifty years? Well, I say, of course. But you know, it hasn't changed for a lot of people. And the benefits have been fairly uneven. What makes the conversation on race possible is that organizations like the Joint Center, and these nine, ten thousand elected officials around the country—they're the ones who really conduct the conversation. When the rubber hits the road, they have to come up with policies and programs. But I think all of it is not huge policy activities. Part of it is just a belief that you can change things around.

FOCUS: Thank you very much. □

For information about the Little Rock Nine Foundation, please go to www.littlerock9.com.