



Testament: The Little Rock Nine



Grade Level: Secondary

Cast:

Narrator 1

Narrator 2

Mr. Simms — school administrator

Jefferson Thomas — one of the nine students

Melba Pattillo — one of the nine students

Terrence Roberts — one of the nine students

Gloria Ray — one of the nine students

Thelma Mothershed — one of the nine students

Minnijean Brown — one of the nine students

Bonnie — classmate

Carlotta Walls — one of the nine students

Jane — classmate

Mrs. Adams — teacher

Elizabeth Eckford — one of the nine students

Mr. Andersen — school administrator

Mrs. Thomas — school administrator

Ernest Green — one of the nine students

Secretary — governor's secretary

Governor Orval Faubus — Arkansas Governor



Setting:

In 1954, the Supreme Court decision *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education* addressed the issue of segregation in schools, making it unconstitutional to deny African-American students access to the same quality of education as their white counterparts. In response to this, Arkansas, a southern state entrenched in a deep tradition of segregation, adopted a slow-moving policy of desegregation known as the Blossom Plan. The plan was designed to stall the start of desegregation in Arkansas public schools until the fall of 1957 when it would begin at Little Rock Central High School. From there it was planned that it would filter down through the lower grades over the course of the next six years.

In September of 1957, nine African-American students were selected to be the first to enter Little Rock Central High School: Thelma Mothershed, Minnijean Brown, Elizabeth Eckford, Gloria Ray, Jefferson Thomas, Melba Pattillo, Terrence Roberts, Carlotta Walls and Ernest Green. On September 4 a large group of angry protestors and the Arkansas National Guard acting under the instructions of Arkansas Governor Orval Faubus blocked their attempt to enter the school. The nine students were called names and spat on before they were chased from the school. The incident left little doubt that desegregation in Arkansas would not be an easy process.

Scene 1

Narrator 1: In a bus parked down the street from Little Rock Central High School, the nine students are sitting together. They are receiving instructions from an official of the school who is speaking with them about the procedures for the day. Since they first attempted to enter the school a few weeks earlier, they have remained at home, trying their best to keep up with their school work while awaiting the next move by those working on their behalf.

Narrator 2: Outside of the school, a large crowd of protesters and journalists suspect that a new attempt by the students to enter the school might be under way. Prior to the weekend, President Dwight D. Eisenhower negotiated with Governor Faubus' office to have the National Guard removed from the school grounds. A much smaller and less imposing group of Little Rock police officers replace them. The police are told to control the crowd, but they are significantly undermanned. The date is Monday, September 23, 1957.

Mr. Simms: All right, here's the situation. I think that we all saw a couple of weeks



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ago that there isn't any way of getting you folks through the front door of the school safely. That mob is full of nasty people who don't want to see change of any kind.

- Jefferson Thomas:** But I still don't understand all of this stuff. All we want to do is go to school.
- Mr. Simms:** Now, son, you're smart enough to know that what's going on with that crowd over there has much more to do with the changing of long and stale ways of thinking than it does with your wanting to go to school.
- Melba Pattillo:** But I heard them say that they were going to kill us if we tried to go in.
- Mr. Simms:** Nobody's going to be killing anybody. It's just a group of ignorant, bigoted, old ways of thinking, that's all. Like a scared bunch of dogs. They're probably afraid that you'll wind up being smarter than their kids.
- Terrence Roberts:** I've seen some of those kids in the soda shop. They probably should be scared. They aren't exactly what I would call smart.
- Mr. Simms:** Well, smart or not, I want you to remember also that this thing that you are doing is more extraordinary than you know. The sound of your footsteps as they walk through the halls of this school will echo in the ears of millions of other students as they make similar footsteps in similar schools throughout the country for this and many generations to come.
- Gloria Ray:** I can't imagine how it could possibly be important for me to be stomped to death by a bunch of angry racists.
- Mr. Simms:** I promise you that your children and your children's children will thank you for the opportunities they will be given from the things that you are doing today.
- Crowd:** Two-four-six-eight, we don't want to integrate!
- Mr. Simms:** OK, when we pull down the street and you step out of this bus, I want you to walk calmly through those doors of the school right over there. Once inside, there will be a student waiting to escort you to the principal's office. You'll get your class schedule, and someone will escort you to where you're supposed to go. I don't think that any of



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you are in the same class, so I'll tell you now that I've arranged for you to all meet together at the end of the day in the event that none of this nonsense has died down; and we'll get you out the same way that we're going to get you in. Any questions?

Thelma Watershed: (raising her hand)

Mr. Simms: Miss Watershed, I believe.

Thelma Watershed: Is it going to be like this all year?

Mr. Simms: Oh, sweetheart, I'd like to say that it won't be; but I don't know for sure.

Minnijean Brown: Is there anything that you do know for sure?

Mr. Simms: Yes, that you are without a doubt that bravest group of young men and women that I have ever had the pleasure to know. Now, let's get to school.

Scene 2

Narrator 1: Once inside, the students separated to their classrooms as had been arranged prior to the day. However, word began to filter through the crowd assembled outside the school that the students were brought inside through a side door. Angered at being fooled by the school, the crowd grew more intense and angry than they had been earlier in the day.

Bonnie: (Sticking a foot out and tripping Carlotta) Oh, did you have a nice fall?

Carlotta Walls: Excuse me.

Bonnie: What are you even doing here? No one wants you here. You'd be lucky if you make it out of here in one piece today.

Carlotta Walls: I'm here to learn, just like you. All I want to do is learn.

Bonnie: The only thing you're gonna learn about in here is how to take a beating. You won't be learning anything out of a book. I know that much.



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- Jane:** Why are you even talking to this piece of trash? She doesn't care about anyone but herself.
- Carlotta Walls:** That's not true.
- Bonnie:** I just don't see why you have to come in our school and mess everything up for us. I don't see any of us coming to your school and turning your lives upside down.
- Carlotta Walls:** Why would any of you want to come to one of our schools? You're the ones with all of the nice buildings and the new books. You can't help but learn in a place as beautiful as this.
- Jane:** Yeah, well, I don't see any of us doing any learning now.
- Mrs. Adams:** (Entering the room) Everyone, get away from the windows and have a seat. I know there's a lot of excitement around here today, thanks to our new student over here and her eight friends, but we have a job to do and until they tell us otherwise, we better get started.
- Crowd (outside):** Two-four-six-eight, we don't want to integrate! Somebody said that they're already inside the building. I heard that they snuck them in through the side door ... they're inside the building.
- Mr. Simms:** I'm sorry to interrupt your class, Mrs. Adams, but I'm going to need to see Miss Walls in the hallway right away.
- Mrs. Adams:** Miss Walls, grab your books. They need you outside.
- Students:** Go home ... get out ... stay out ... don't come back!
- Mrs. Adams:** Miss Walls, I expect that you'll see to it that this mess gets cleaned up before you consider coming back. We have many students with bright futures in here that expect to learn when they come to school. This circus of yours isn't doing any of us any favors. I wish the nine of you would think of that before you consider coming back.
- Carlotta Walls:** Yes, ma'am.

(outside the classroom)

- Mr. Simms:** I'm going to ask that you stay right next to me and don't move from



my side, do you understand?

Carlotta Walls: Yes, sir. May I ask what is happening?

Mr. Simms: Well, it seems that those folks outside might not be as harmless as we initially thought. The police say they're unsure whether or not they can keep them under control. If they do manage to work up enough anger to break through and get into the building, there's no telling what they might do.

Carlotta Walls: Where are we going?

Mr. Simms: There are a number of cars waiting in the basement for us to get you out of here. I don't think that we can take a chance with the side door again; since they know that's how you got in, and they'll be waiting.

Scene 3

Narrator 2: Located in the basement of the school was a parking garage where a number of cars stood waiting to escort the students safely past the growing mob outside.

Mr. Simms: Listen up, everyone. We're going to get you out of here nice and quietly but only if you do exactly what I say. Does everyone understand?

Elizabeth Eckford: (raising hand)

Mr. Simms: Yes, Elizabeth, what is it?

Elizabeth Eckford: Sir, I thought the whole challenge was to get us into the school. Now that we did that, I'm not sure that I quite understand why we have to rush so much to get out.

Mr. Simms: That's an understandable question, Elizabeth, and I can see why you would wonder about that. As I explained to Miss Walls, that group of folks outside has worked itself into quite an awful anger. In fact, they're so angry, they're angry at being angry, which is probably making them even angrier.

Students: (nervous laughter)



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- Mr. Andersen:** I don't quite see anything funny about this situation. Folks have a right to be angry when the people that they voted for don't see to it that their wishes are carried out.
- Mr. Simms:** All right then. Let's not start our own thing down here. We'll all just agree to acknowledge that several different opinions happen to exist on this issue and leave it at that. Sometimes there's a need for change on a larger, more universal level that calls for us to sacrifice some of our more personal and local needs.
- Mr. Andersen:** You see, that's just the type of political baloney that they're trying to fill our heads with.
- Mrs. Thomas:** Enough already. That crowd out there isn't getting any smaller; and if they found out that the kids were in the school, then it's only a matter of time before they find out that we're down here. Save your debate for some other time.
- Mr. Simms:** She's right. Kids, get in the back seat of the cars and crouch down on the floors. Do not lift your head up for any reason until your driver tells you that it's safe to do so. Do you understand me? For no reason are you to lift your head or show any part of yourselves that might make the folks outside know that you are in the back seat. No matter what you might hear, just stay down; and we'll get out of here in one piece.
- Ernest Green:** I'm not going out of here like that. We didn't do anything wrong. I'm not scared of a bunch of angry, old men. Just let them try and do something.
- Mr. Andersen:** You listen to me, young man. You will do exactly as he says and not a thing else. Truth be told, I couldn't care less if anything happens to any one of you, but this has very little to do with your safety at this point. This has to do with the safety of any one of these men who are putting themselves between you and that mob out there. Each and every one of us has a family that we are looking to get home to. Some of us are already making our families' good names suffer because of this.

Scene 4

- Narrator 1:** In the office of Arkansas Governor Orval Faubus, several television stations are tuned to the news coverage of the events taking place at



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Little Rock Central High School. Staff and administrators are working feverishly to keep the governor apprised of changes to the situation.

Governor Faubus: It's happening just like I said it would. I told the president that it was going to be a mistake to pull the National Guard out of there. He thought that I was doing it to keep those kids from getting in, but I was just trying to save some lives. I know these people. I govern these people. They're not ready for integration, especially if it's going to be forced down their throats.

Secretary: Sir, I have President Eisenhower's secretary on the telephone. He says that you are to get on the phone and hold for the president.

Governor Faubus: All right, clear the office everyone. I'm not altogether sure how this is going to go. (pause as the room clears) Hello.

President's secretary (on the phone): Please hold for the president.

President Eisenhower: Orval, I've got to tell you, that looks like one heckuva mess going on down there. I thought we talked about this. That mob outside of that school of yours is nothing short of disgraceful.

Governor Faubus: Sir, I tried to make myself clear that I would not be able to guarantee the safety of the students if we took the National Guard out of there. I simply don't have the manpower.

President Eisenhower: That's nonsense, Orval, and you know it. You'd have plenty of manpower if you wanted it, but the bottom line is that you don't want this integration thing happening on your watch. That National Guard wasn't there to protect anybody. They were there to prevent those kids from getting into that school. You know it as well as I do.

Governor Faubus: But, sir ...

President Eisenhower: But nothing. You're up for reelection soon. You know full well that if you don't make it clear that you're doing everything you can to prevent this integration from happening, your constituents will hold you responsible; and you'll be punished for it when the time comes to vote.

Governor Faubus: With all due respect, sir ...



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President Eisenhower: I'm going to stop you right there, Orval. Little Rock's Mayor Mann dropped me a telegram asking for my help; and I don't see any reason why I shouldn't. So, effective tomorrow, I will be federalizing the Arkansas National Guard.

Governor Faubus: Sir?

President Eisenhower: That's right, Orval — until we can get this all cleared up; they'll be working for me. I'm also sending down 1,200 members of the Army's 101st Airborne Division out of Fort Campbell in Kentucky.

Governor Faubus: The Screaming Eagles?

President Eisenhower: That's right. The one and only. Each student will be assigned a personal escort from this unit that will not only make sure that the students get into the school safely but also will stay with them throughout the day to make sure that nothing's going on that shouldn't be.

Governor Faubus: Sir, I have to say that I don't see how this is not going to be a distraction. You do realize that this school is much bigger than just this group of nine students? What kind of impact is this going to have on all the rest of those kids who haven't asked to be a part of this?

President Eisenhower: Quite frankly, Orval, that horse has left the barn. You had a chance to do this your way, and you chose to turn it into a circus. This integration is going to happen, Orval, whether you want it to or not. You didn't do yourself any favors by letting it get to me. Now, you're just going to have to sit back and watch the way it plays out like the rest of us.

Governor Faubus: Well, I don't ...

President Eisenhower: We're done here, Orval. I look forward to giving you a telephone call tomorrow once those kids have completed their first day to congratulate you on working with me to bring a peaceful end to this.

Governor Faubus: Yes, sir. Thank you.

Epilogue:

On September 25 the nine students entered Little Rock Central High School under the



promised protection of the 101st Airborne Division. These soldiers stayed with the students through November before the Arkansas National Guard which escorted the students throughout the remainder of the year replaced them. Despite the presence of the soldiers, those still in favor of segregation persisted in their efforts to drive the nine African-American students from the high school. The students were subjected to daily physical and verbal harassment. Such tactics eventually proved too much for student Minnijean Brown, who was expelled from the high school prior to the end of the year for responding to the abuse by dropping her lunch tray on two of her tormentors and referring to a girl who hit her as “white trash.” The other eight completed the school year with Ernest Green becoming the first to graduate in May of 1958.

The following August, with the backing of Governor Faubus, the Arkansas State Legislature canceled the 1958–59 school year for the three public high schools in Little Rock rather than integrate them. Several federal court rulings followed as a result; and in the fall of 1959, the schools reopened as part of a completely integrated system.

The bravery and perseverance of the nine students in the face of great adversity is remembered as a turning point in our nation’s cultural relations. In 2005 a statue entitled *Testament* was placed on the grounds of the Arkansas State Capitol depicting the nine students and their first cautious steps onto the school’s campus in September of 1957.

Discussion Questions:

1. What 1954 Supreme Court decision made public school segregation illegal?
2. Who was the governor of Arkansas who used the National Guard to prevent the students from entering the school?
3. What was the name of the battalion President Dwight D. Eisenhower brought in to escort the Little Rock Nine into school?



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Brown v. Topeka Board of Education
2. Who was the governor of Arkansas who used the National Guard to prevent the students from entering the school?
Governor Orval Faubus
3. What was the name of the battalion President Dwight D. Eisenhower brought in to escort the Little Rock Nine into school?
The Army's 101st Airborne Division — the Screaming Eagles
4. What was the name of the plan the state of Arkansas adopted for desegregation?
The Blossom Plan
5. Why did the nine students have to leave Little Rock Central High School prior to the end of their first day in classes?
The mob of protesters outside was on the verge of overwhelming the police.