

## Teachers at Central

"Every class I walked into that day, a contingent of students got up and left. And they said, "We're not coming back as long as you're here. Teachers were afraid. I could , acceptance. A smile here or there. But, they were cautious too. Because the word was out. You could tell the word was out. If you are friendly to those kids, we will do things to you.

--Terrance Roberts

"My English teacher...she was so terribly unwelcoming. She said to me one day, "Why do you come to our school? Why don't you go back to your school?"

-Terrance Roberts

There were some classes where the teacher did not control the classroom. It was on an individual basis, based on how good the teacher was, as to whether they could control the bad apples.

-Elizabeth Eckford

"Other classes I had to be constantly vigilant and watchful because all sorts of things could happen. And, you could never be certain that any appeals to the teacher would work. My English teacher...she never saw anything. I would say, "This happened, and that happened," and she would say, "I didn't see it."

-Terrance Roberts

I said, I would never forget. Mrs. Pickwick is her name. She was the dearest woman that ever lived. Because it was only in her class every day that I felt safe. She was very tiny, but anybody who walked near me, she would say, "No, no, no, no. You move over here." And that was from the first day I was there." This woman was a tower of strength."

--Melba Pattillo

"My Algebra teacher (Helen Conrad) was a woman who said to the class when I first walked in, "There will be no nonsense in this class. We are here to learn Algebra." That was so nice, because it meant I could relax in her class.

**Reproducible 3.19****Page 2 of 5**

## 2. Daisy Bates writes:

One day Gloria [Ray] started on her way down from the third floor of Central High School. She had taken only a few steps down the flight of steel steps when she heard a woman's scream from behind her. Gloria quickly connected the scream with some impending danger to herself. And she was right.

A boy had silently been following her down the stairway. He was about to lunge at her to push her down the flight of stairs. The scream had alerted Gloria to the attack from behind...

Many of the teachers — particularly the younger ones — did everything within their power to protect the nine students. Some went out of their way to help the students catch up with work they had missed when they were barred from entering the school in the first weeks of the term. Concerned over the lack of protection given the Negro students within the school, the teachers took it upon themselves to oversee the hallways in between class breaks. In this way they attempted to discourage the segregationist students from torturing the Negro children.

One of the teachers had been standing in the doorway of her classroom looking down the stairway. It was she who had witnessed the attack on Gloria and had screamed the alert.\*

Central High School in 1955, two years after plans for a second high school were announced in 1953. For thirty years, Central High was the city's only white public high school, attended by the parents, grandparents, and extended families of the 1957 students.

Today, developmental psychologists speak of children rising to the expectation levels of the adults in their lives. At Central High, the expectations for excellence and a tradition of achievement were an essential part of the school's identity and history. Certainly, the middle group of Central High students was composed of average students and achievers. However, a small number of students likely descended to the low expectations of their adult community and negatively acted out as they were encouraged to do.

But a pervasive expectation for excellence characterized Central High's academic, athletic, and citizenship activities. The Class of 1958 had a group of top achievers who felt a competitive push to surpass previous school achievements.

Our school's 50-year history since 1927 was full of achievements against which we were going to be measured. Being runner-up, just a contender or challenger, was never an acceptable choice. Being challenged to be more, to be better, to excel, to win, to be number one was what Central High was all about. The real challenge, however, was not only to excel but to be well-rounded and make your grades as well. It was what our parents, teachers, coaches, and the community expected.

Ralph Brodie, Class of 1958

Students who felt the push to excel could choose among many academic courses and extracurricular activities at the large school. Debate, cheerleading, band, spirit squad, football, basketball, and track offered broad opportunities. In their two previous years at Central High, the senior class of 1958 had gained the confidence to surpass the school's already high achievements. That preparation also gave some of them a keen insight into the inequities of the world in which they lived.

I knew from my conversations with Ernest Green that his preparation for our physics class and our college prep courses was not as good as what I had received at Central High. It was clear to me that "separate but equal" was absolutely not true.

Glennys Oakes Johns, Class of 1958

## Academics and Citizenship

I remember Mrs. Reiman being very adamant about Student Council representatives conducting themselves in the highest way. Some students tried to protest in a silent way by wearing black on a predetermined day, but Mrs. Reiman was very concerned that no Student Council Representative was participating in this demonstration because we were supposed to set an example and be leaders.

Jenny Lee Shumate, Class of 1960

All students have stories about a favorite teacher who exposed them to the issues and values of the larger world, a person who helped cultivate the students' capacity to understand and interact on new levels.

A. L. Lape, my band director, absolutely refused to let members of his band get caught up in all of the disruption taking place around us, even though we could look out of our fifth floor homeroom every morning and, after the arrival of the 101st Airborne, see the gun placements on the roof of our school. Or Josephine Felock, my English teacher, who was convinced that her students were going to graduate from high school with the ability to both speak and write the King's English, or we would have to deal with

her. Without teachers like these, who did their utmost to ignore the socio-political events swirling around them—as well as other members of our faculty whose only concerns were educating their students, to the best of their ability, it is difficult to imagine what could have happened to the education process that year.

Woody Mann, Class of 1958

The graduating class of 1957 had twenty-two National Merit Semifinalists, earning the school an academic ranking among the Top 38 high schools in the nation. The 1958 graduating class, despite the enormous disruptions of that school year, included nineteen National Merit Semifinalists, 13 percent of all those selected in Arkansas.

Another seven National Merit Semifinalists can be credited to Central High in 1958. These were students who transferred to the new Hall High School for their senior years.<sup>100</sup> Those students had been taught by Central High's teachers as sophomores and juniors. Because the National Merit Exam is usually taken during the first two months of the school year, the combined total of twenty-six National Merit Semifinalists for Central and Hall High in 1957-58 was due to the academic influence of Central High.

Achievements of this magnitude reflect the outstanding work of a committed faculty. Many Central High students from that time have strong recollections of the educators who influenced them.

My eleventh-grade American History teacher, Miss Emily Penton, left a great impression. She demanded nothing but respect. And she got it! She never used the blackboard. She never had a written test paper. She never used an overhead or a movie film. She would just tell you the story of America. She could stare at you, and you crawled into the corner if you didn't focus. She had a magic that I have never seen before or since.

John Taylor, Class of 1959

When the high schools closed in 1958-59, the Little Rock School District began offering televised classes, and Penton was selected to give the eleventh-grade American History class. That process was soon prohibited by the courts, but Penton's historical commentary on how America came to be had already gained a large audience. According to Taylor, so many viewers contacted the television station that a six a.m. television show, "Good Morning with Miss Emily" was scheduled. Penton told stories from American history for the remainder of the school year.

Teachers like Penton and the variety and quality of programs at Central High were superior to many offered in surrounding school districts. As a result, white parents in those communities often made tuition arrangements or accommodations with relatives and friends at Little Rock to have their children enrolled at Central High.

Teacher dedication did not waiver during the 1957 crisis. The faculty had been instructed by Matthews to maintain discipline and to teach. They did so by consistently maintaining an atmosphere of normalcy. The political problem was the Governor's responsibility. The education of students was theirs, and they were determined that no one, not even the governor, was going to stop them from continuing what they had been doing for many years.

Mr. Matthews and the two Vice Principals, Mrs. Elizabeth Huckaby and Mr. J. O. Powell, were each like The Rock of Gibraltar through all the upheaval and unrest. They received threatening phone calls, verbal and written abuse, but they were always in control, which was very reassuring to the teachers. The faculty members became a close group that nurtured each other as sometimes happens when individuals are placed in situations of danger or great stress.

Carol Ann Lackey Patterson, Typing Teacher

Many Central High teachers believe they were able to meet their professional responsibilities because of Matthews' leadership. He wanted the desegregation process to succeed and the school year to

continue as normally as possible. He wanted his teachers to be able to teach, his students to grow, the school to maintain its excellent national reputation. In normal times, his positive influence on the Central High staff would have been exemplary. For his work and suffering in that turbulent year of desegregation, Industrial Arts teacher Paul Magro said, Matthews should have received the Freedom Medal.

When we spoke with Matthews, his response was to maintain our dignity, protect our students, and teach as though it was a normal time. He was criticized by some for not expelling all of the troublemakers. We must remember, five decades later, that school discipline and policy is not the same. Back then, study hall and on-site discipline were generally effective. An expulsion was very final and, often, the expelled student did not finish school. As an educator, this was not Matthews' goal for a student.

Elizabeth Riggs Brandon, English Teacher

### Citizenship Training at Boys State and Girls State

Since 1940, the American Legion in Arkansas has sponsored Arkansas Boys State, a one-week summer program for high school juniors. A corresponding program, Arkansas Girls State, has functioned since 1942. The programs include lectures on democratic ideals and philosophies, stories of famous American leaders, and participation in elections for offices in mock cities, counties, and states. The programs had a distinct influence on the citizenship and respect for the law exhibited by Central High student leaders. In turn, these students had a strong influence on their classmates through their high visibility as both athletes and school leaders.

Central High sent seventy-one members of its junior class to Boys and Girls State in 1957. Some of the delegates transferred to Hall High School that fall, but approximately eight to ten percent of Central High's 603 graduating seniors in 1958 attended the summer programs as juniors.

The programs have been a training ground for future politicians and civic leaders. That influence on young people gained national exposure through a brief film clip widely used in the 1992 presidential elections. The film showed a young Bill Clinton as a Boys State delegate to Boys Nation in 1963 shaking hands with his idol, President John F. Kennedy, on the White House lawn.

Elections of Central High students to officer positions at Girls and Boys State in the summer of 1957 reflected the quality of students attending and the high esteem in which they were held by their peers. Three Central High girls—Janice Shepherd, Gail Blossom and Madge Gregory—were elected as associate justices of the Girls State Supreme Court, Justyn Matlock was elected to the Legislature, and Helen Ruth Smith was runner-up in the Lieutenant Governor's election.

Central High boys made history earlier that summer when Ralph Brodie and Bill Hicks were elected Boys State Governor and Lieutenant Governor, respectively. It was the first time that Boys State's top two officers had been selected from the same school. Two additional Central High students were elected to top positions: Ronnie Hubbard as Treasurer, and Bruce Fullerton as Senator and Boys Nation delegate.

In the summer of 1958, a Central High student again made history at Boys State when, for the first time, a school's delegate was elected governor two years in a row. Wendell Ross was elected Boys State Governor, and Central High students won an additional four top positions that summer.

"The over-arching theme of the American Legion program was the rule of law," Brodie said. "We were taught respect for the courts and saw the fundamental basis of our democracy at work in the privilege of voting."

Brodie did not remember any racist comments or overt actions in the summer of 1957. Although he did learn some years later that a number of the Legionnaires who were responsible for Boys State in 1957 held strong segregationist attitudes, their views were not evident at the time, he added.

With training in the "rule of law" so recently impressed on them, the Central High delegates to Boys State and Girls State returned to school in the fall of 1957 and watched in dismay as the high ideals of democracy and equal opportunity were trampled on by state politi-