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## The Chili Incident

From *Warriors Don't Cry* by Melba Pattillo Beals.

On Tuesday, December 17, when we had one more day to go before vacation, five of us entered the cafeteria. Lunchtime was always a hazard, and recently even more so. I had been avoiding the cafeteria, eating my sandwich alone in any safe place I could find. The cafeteria was such a huge place, with so many of our attackers gathered at one time. There were no official-looking adults or uniformed Arkansas National Guardsmen inside. Without fail, we knew we could expect some form of harassment.

As always on Tuesday the hot lunch was chili, which Minnijean loved. So while I took my seat with the others, she got in line to buy her chili. Ernie emerged from the line ahead of her and sat down at our table. As Minnijean made her way back toward us, her tray loaded down with a big bowl of chili, we saw her hesitate. She had to inch her way through a tight spot where mostly boys sat at tables on either side of her path. She had stopped dead in her tracks. We all froze, realizing she must be in trouble. We could see two boys near her — one directly in her path. Something awful was happening, but there was no way any of us could do anything to rescue her. We had been instructed that in such instances we were never to move toward the person in danger for fear of starting a riot.

I was panic-stricken. Minnijean was being hassled by those boys. Snickering among themselves and taunting her, they had pushed a chair directly in front of her. For a long moment, she stood there patiently, holding her tray high above their heads.

It was all I could do to hold on to my chair and not go to help her. Like a broken record, the words played over and over in my head — intervening on her behalf would blur the lines between who was the victim and who was the person at fault. If other white students joined the melee to rescue the other side, we'd have a brawl. They outnumbered us at least two hundred to one. Still, I wanted to go to her, move the chair, take her tray, tell her to back up and go another way, do something, anything.

As more and more people realized something was brewing, the chatter in the cafeteria quieted down. I could tell Minnijean was trapped and desperate, and very fast running out of patience. She was talking back to the boys in a loud voice, and there was jostling all around her.

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Frantically I looked around to see if there were any adults nearby who could be trusted to help. We had come to believe that the vice-principal for girls, Mrs. Huckaby, made some efforts to be fair during these situations, but she was nowhere in sight. I beckoned to Minnijean to go around her hasslers, but she was standing perfectly still. It was as though she was in a trance, fighting within herself.

Later she would explain that the boys had been taunting her, sticking their feet in the aisle to trip her, kicking her, and calling her names. But we were not close enough to see details of the dilemma she faced. All we saw was her wavering as though she was trying to balance herself — and then her tray went flying, spilling chili all over two of the boys.

Everyone was stunned, silent for a long moment. Her attackers sat with astonished looks on their faces as greasy chili dropped down over their heads. All at once, our people who were serving food behind the counter began to applaud. This was greeted by an ominous silence and then loud voices, all chattering at once, as the chili-covered boys stood up. I wonder whether we'd ever get out of there alive. Suddenly a school official showed up, and Minnijean was whisked away, while we were hustled out of the cafeteria.\*

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\* Melba Pattillo Beals, *Warriors Don't Cry*.

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At the beginning of the school year, Jane Emery, the co-editor of the *Tiger*, Central High School's newspaper, wrote an editorial that said in part:

You are being watched! Today the world is watching you, the students of Central High....

Will you be stubborn, obstinate, or refuse to listen to both sides of the question? Will your knowledge of science help you determine your action or will you let customs, superstition, or tradition determine the decision for you?...

The challenge is yours, as future adults of America, to prove your maturity, intelligence, and ability to make decisions by how you react, behave, and conduct yourself in this controversial question. What is your answer to this challenge?

As you read about the various ways students at Central High responded to that challenge, use colored pencils to underline the choice they made and at least one consequence of that choice. Choose one color for the choice and a second color for the consequences or results of that choice. Which choices made a difference?

1. In 2004, Elizabeth Eckford sat down with CNN and recalled the events of the 1957–1958 school year at Central High School. When the reporter asked her about the atmosphere at school, she replied:

We were physically assaulted every day. The principal's rule was that, no matter what was reported, he wouldn't act on any reports if a teacher didn't corroborate what we said happened. So, in essence, students had free reign to attack us every day. It was a coordinated group of about 55 students who attacked us out of 1,900 students at the school.

A lot of people think, "We didn't know what was going on." People around me that I saw didn't react to what they saw or what they had to have heard. They turned their backs. It was impossible to have a friend. This was not anything like a normal environment. Anybody that would talk to us got a lot of pressure.

There are two students I want to talk about that persisted in talking to me in speech class. Actually I was a very, very shy person, but I felt comfortable, felt that I belonged in that one class. At the end of the day, two people treated me like a human being (starts to cry). And when they just ... they persisted in talking to me every day like any other student. They didn't ask me something to see what "it" sounded like. They just talked to me.

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I didn't know what happened to them. I knew something had to be happening to them. I didn't find out until 1996 what had happened to them. There was a boy and there was a girl. The boy was a senior, and there's a graduation picture of him standing next to Ernest Green and a bunch of students in the background looking at them and talking about them, just 'cause he was standing near Ernest Green.

But I found out in '96, because I had talked about these students over the years. In the '60s I started naming them. So, they had heard about me, and what it meant to me.

One girl named Ann Williams I found out didn't live in Little Rock. She said her family lived on a farm outside the city, and that her father had to hire armed guards for their home.

And the other student is Ken Reinhardt. Ken was harassed. He'd been knocked down, one time, he said, right in front of the gym teacher and the gym teacher did nothing.\*

2. In an article entitled "Fear Is Portable," Terrence J. Roberts writes of his algebra class: Algebra class was a haven for me. The teacher, Mrs. Helen Conrad, let it be known from the first day that she would tolerate no nonsense from anyone who opposed my presence. She was emphatic about it and the class responded accordingly. It was in this class also that I met Robin Woods, a white student who shared her textbook with me. Since my books and other school supplies were routinely destroyed by fellow students, I would come to class often with no supplies. Robin simply pulled her desk next to mine and we shared her book — an act that did not win her friends or favor. Her act of kindness was interpreted as a violation of the social code that outlawed any contact between black students and white students, especially black males and white females. Students who befriended any of the nine of us were labeled "nigger lovers" and shunned by those who wanted to preserve the old social order. Robin did not allow that kind of thinking to interfere with her choices.\*\*

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\* <http://www.cnn.com/2004/LAW/05/17/eckford.transcript>. Reprinted with permission.

\*\* Terrence J. Roberts, "Fear Is Portable" in *President Dwight D. Eisenhower and Civil Rights*, <http://www.eisenhowermemorial.org/DDEandCivil%20Rights-screen.pdf>.

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3. In her memoir, *Warriors Don't Cry*, Melba Pattillo Beals recalls a choice a classmate made on a cold day in March:

As I stood alone outside the Sixteenth Street entrance of Central High, I was shivering against the cold, waiting for my ride home that Friday afternoon. I was immersed in fantasies about my quiet, safe weekend. My body was there, but my mind was somewhere else.

Suddenly there was a voice in the distance, calling my name, jolting me from my thoughts. "It's nigger Melba." It was Andy's voice shouting at me. [Andy was a white student who harassed Melba.] My heart started beating fast. He was more than a block away, coming up from the playing field with a group of his friends. They were walking fast, almost galloping. Even if I started running, I couldn't out-distance all of them. I looked around frantically, searing for help.

"Hey, Melba, you gotta get out of here." The second voice was much closer. I wasn't alone. There was a sleek, muscular boy, about six feet tall, wearing a varsity jacket and a cap, with a bushy shock of blond curls peeking from beneath it. He was leaning against the passenger side of a 1949 Chevy parked at the curb, only a few feet to my left. Was he one of Andy's friends, who'd come to corner me and hold me there? His face looked familiar to me. He resembled one of those big tough boys who got their kicks taunting me. But why wasn't he coming toward me, shouting ugly words like the others?

"Nigger, nigger on the wall, who's the deadeest of them all," Andy shouted as he hesitated, waiting for his friends. Now they were only about a quarter of a block away. "Stand still, don't run, 'cause if you do, it'll be worse for you," Andy shouted.

What now? My mind scrambled to figure out what I should do.

"Melba," the blond boy whispered my name, "listen to me. I'm gonna call you 'nigger' — loud. I'm gonna curse at you, but I'm gonna put my keys on the trunk of this car. Get out of here now. My name is Link, I'll call you later."

"But I can't do that..."

"You don't have any choice," he whispered. "Go!" I turned to see that Andy and his friends were only a short distance away. I wasn't even sure that I could make it to the car...

"Hey, Andy, we're gonna have us some nigger tonight." I heard Link shout as he walked away from the car, toward them. I grabbed the keys and ran around quickly to open the door on the driver's side. I hopped in and locked all the doors.

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By the time I turned the key in the engine, Andy was clawing at the lock, while the other boys popped off the windshield wipers, and tried to get into the passenger's side. Link stood glaring at me with an anxious look on his face, spewing hate words just like them. I pressed down the clutch, shifted into first gear, and the car jumped forward. Andy was still running alongside, holding on to the door handle, but as I sped up, he had to let go.\*

After that incident Link would often contact Melba to warn her of threats from his friends.

4. Jane Emery was a white student at Central High. She was the co-editor of the *Tiger*, the school paper. She wrote the editorial on page 1 of this reproducible. In a 1999 interview, she recalled a choice she made at the end of the school year:

Towards the end of the year, graduation, Mrs. Huckaby [the vice principal of girls at Central High School] called five of us into her room ... and she said ... [during graduation] one of the five of us would be walking with Ernest Green. And so we could decide what we wanted to do, and Ernest understood if we were uncomfortable....

There were five of us brought in ... And I was the middle person, so of the five people, I would be the one, and so since they didn't know who was going to be absent, they would call five of us. And I didn't realize that I was going to be it. And I said, "I have no problem, I'll walk with him," and I really thought that was silly. And I didn't think anything about it.

[Then] we started getting obscene phone calls [at] my home. My mother really got scared. I mean things like ... "Are you a nigger lover, are you going to walk with him? You want your daughter to marry a nigger?" And it went on 'til late at night, and my mother took the phone off the hook, but she was absolutely scared to death, you know like the house was going to be blown up.... I was angry at the [whites] who did that, who really angered me. So, that just made me more determined that I was going to walk with him. And I walked with him, that was the first I ever talked to him."\*\*

\* Melba Pattillo Beals, *Warriors Don't Cry*. Abridged edition. Archway Paperback, 1995, pp. 171–172.

\*\* Beth Roy, *Bitters In the Honey*. The University of Arkansas Press, 1999, p. 224.