**An ovation, an apology for civil rights icon**

Over a period of 53 years, only one former student who attended Little Rock Central high School in 1957 had ever apologized Minnijean Brown-Trickey. That year, more that 2000 students either participated in, or stood as silent witnesses to, the unspeakable atrocities again the human sprit that Minnijean and eight other black students endured, as members of the little Rock nine.

The student who apologized to Minnijean did so nearly 40 years later, in front of 20 million people, on the Oprah show, becoming the first person in history to do so.

Tuesday night, Jan. 18, Wanda Jones of Falls City became the second.

Brown-Trickey was the featured speaker on the Peru State College compute that night, as part of the Distinguished Speakers Series. After a moving speech by he civil rights activist, whose place in history was written as a 16 year old, Jones approached the podium, and said to a packed audience – “In the words of Martin Luther King. The time is always right to do the right thing. ‘I was one of the white students at Little Rock Central High School in 1957, and I stood by silently. I am here tonight to finally break that silence.”

The auditorium was so quiet that you could’ve heard a snowflake fall.

Several African American audience members seated behind me gasped.

Ad, I knew that this moment was bigger than a 49 year-year-old woman like me, who was raised in small-town Nebraska, could possibly understand.

In May of 1954, Brown vs. the Board of Education of Topeka, KS, declared that the racial segregation of U.S. schools was unconstitutional.

When all legal wrangling’s, injunctions, and appeals failed, the school board in little Rock, Arkansas, decided it had no choice but to comply with the federal ruling. Its schools would be integrated, starting the fall of 1957, with Little Rock Central High School.

The decision sparked outrage from every corner of the state. White students who were interviewed on TV vowed to stand firmly against the integration. (One interview featured blond, blue-eyed boy said, “it’s alady been proven that they don’t have the same mental compacity that we have.”)

Parents protested. The KK and numerous other organizations threatened violence. Governor Oral Faubus called out the National Guard supposedly to maintain order.

Then the black students showed up for their first day of school, thousands of students, parents, and Arkansas residents stood united in protest. And the National Guard, instead of maintaining order blocked the door the black students were taunted with threats of lynching. They were ridiculed with vile hate speech, humiliated spat on.

And they were turned away.

Little Rock may, Woodrow Mann, asked President Eisenhower to intervene. The president ordered the army to go to Little Rock to enforce integration

On September 25, the Little Rock Nine made its formal attempt to enter the school.

“I wore a pretty dress and new shoes that day.” Brown Trickey recalled. “I looked really cute, and all I knew was that I just wanted to go to school.”

Meanwhile, across town, Wanda Jackson (Jones) a 17-year-old white girl whose father worked at a cotton gin, and whose mother did menial labor a state senator, prepared to go back to school for her senior year.

She had been raised in the cotton fields, where she worked right alongside members of the black community. On Sundays, here family sometimes attended a black church “because the music was glorious.” So her family didn’t hold the same ingrained beliefs that some of the other Little Rock residents did. But still, she was a white gild who could go to school anywhere she wanted.

When each of the girls walked onto the Central High campus that morning, they were met by tanks, soldiers with guns, and police officers with Billy clubs.

“When I saw a police officer’s hands shaking, even though he had a billy club and a gun, I knew I had reason to be scared,’ Brown-Trickey said.

I was frightened,” Jones said. “It felt like a war zone. There were guns everywhere, and I didn’t understand what was going on. Our family didn’t have TV, and we only listened to radio at night, so we had no idea why the army was even there. I was escorted to my class, and was told to be quiet and mind my own business.

She had no idea that, outside history was in the making. She had no idea that 1,200 soldiers were needed so that nine teenagers could go to school

The black students were escorted inside that day, under armed guards. Both torment continued. Regardless of the atrocities omitted against them, they were told not to react. They were verbally abused daily, Spat on. Had food dumped on them? And if they responded, they were immediately suspended. Or the torment got worse.

“One of their favorite methods of torture was walking on our heels,” Brown-Trickey said. “And some of them wore metal plates from tap shoes, just so it would hurt more.”

It seemed like the white students were allowed to do anything they wanted. In order for them to be reprimanded, the infraction had to be exceptionally offending, and had to be witnessed by an adult.

Minnijean endured al that she could take. In December of that year, she report reportedly dumped a bowl chili on a white boy, and was suspended for six days.

“It wasn’t just a bowl of chili.” She said during her PSC speech. “It was the whole tray, Chili, Cinnamon roll. Milk. A fork and spoon. And I dumped it on two boys, not just one.”

She paused in reflection.

“But nowhere does anyone mention the three bowls of soup that were thrown at me that semester.” ‘Wanda Jones remembers the chili incident. She was in the cafeteria that day.

“No one stood up for her,” Wanda said. “Not me, not anyone. And the abuses the endured were endless.”

The following February when Minnijean called a girl “white trash” for taunting her, and hitting her with a purse the board expelled Minnijean. She enrolled in New Lincoln High School in New York City, where she eventually graduated.

But her role in history had already been written, with indelible ink. In stone.

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* Fifty-three years later, as wisps of snow blanketed the Peru State College campus like a shaken snow globe. Minnijean Brown-Trickey was in the theater 90 minutes before her presentation, doing a sound check. I was there waiting. I approached her, and told her that I honored to be there. She asked my name.
* We spent 20 minutes talking about her story.
* It was obvious that the would were still fresh. The pain still ran deep. She teared up just talking about that awful semester, the chili incident, and the unbelievable and unbearable hatred that she felt from people who didn’t know her.
* “I just wanted to go to school,” she said, still perplexed after all these years.
* “There were 20 good students, 120 bad, and more than 200 who stayed silent. Who did the 2000 stand for? Not the good kids. Certainly not us. Who did they stand for?’
* As she spoke abut it softly---just he talking to me---she started to cry. I said, “May I?” and then I hugged her close. I felt her body shake. Maybe it was because she now knew that s former little Rock student would be in the audience that night. Maybe it was because a middle-aged white woman from small-town Nebraska was offering solace rather than hatred.
* Maybe it was because we were in a place of higher education, and he only escort she needed was the student body president who took her to dinner.
* As she walked out the door, I told her that I was looking forward to her talk. Then, she disappeared into the wintery night.
* An hour later, she gave speech to a packed house. She told the story again, like she has done so many times. Wanda Jones and her friend, Dora Nussbaum, sat in the front row, seated beside me and my daughter Cassie, whose favorite movie since childhood has been the Ernest Green Story. Ernest was one of the Little Rock Nine, and he graduated fro Central High in 1958. At graduation, he sat directly in front of Wanda).
* When Minnijean finisher her speech, Walked to the microphone, and gave her heartfelt apology.
* “I want to personally apologize for own behavior that year, and for the behavior of the other students who stood by silently, too.” She said, “God bless you. You are an extraordinary woman, and I am simply an ordinary student.”
* On stage, Minnijean cried quietly. When she pulled herself together, she walked to the podium and whispered, “That was magical, it was liberating for me, it was liberating for you and it was a lesson for all of us – that it’s never too late. It’s never to late.”
* She took two shaky steps away from the podium then, and as Wanda walked up on stage to hug her, the audience jumped to its feet.
* The standing ovation was partly for Wanda Jones of Falls City, because, after 53 years, she realized that the time to do the right thing was now. But really, the ovation was primarily for Minnijean Brown Trickey, who had the courage, as a 16-year-old student, to face down unparalleled bullying, and sanctioned indifference. The ovation was an apology from the entire audience, for the atrocities that this woman ha been forced to endure a6trocities that I now understand, she cannot forget.
* Because, you see unlike the rest of us, this 16-year-old woman relives the pain of 1957 every day. Unlike the rest of us, she is not allowed to move beyond her past. The Little Rock Nine is central to her life. It may be part of American civil rights history, but Minnijean Brown Trickey lives and breathes the Little Rock Nine to this day. Because of something that she had the courage to do as a teenage student. A winner of the Congressional Gold Medal. An icon in the civil rights movement.
* But she is never allowed to forget it.
* As Wanda wrapped her arms around Minnijean, the audience wrapped its collective arms around both of them. It was our way of telling Minnijean that we would never allow anyone to hurt like hat again.
* As I listened to the applause, I vowed to never stand by silently if an injustice like the Little Rock Nine occurs around me.
* And, I understood then that – THAT this is why Minnijean Brown Trickey remembers – so vividly – the excruciating pain that hatred and indifference can inflict.
* We owe it to her, and to the Little Rock Nine, to do the same.