A poignant moment on a wintry Nebraska night drew tears and a standing ovation - the result of an apology more than 53 years in the making.

Minnijean Brown Trickey, one of the "Little Rock Nine" who integrated Central High School under armed guard in Arkansas, spoke Jan. 18 as part of Peru State College's Distinguished Speaker Series.

In the audience sat Wanda Jones of Falls City, Neb., who was a senior and a fellow student at Little Rock Central that fateful year, 1957. After the speech, Jones, who is white, publicly apologized for the abuse endured by her former schoolmate, who is black.

Jones herself had not taunted or disparaged anyone. She was not sorry for something she had done, but rather for what she had not done - speak up.

She apologized for her silence.

"People were stunned," said Daniel Hanson, Peru State president. "Then they started to realize they were witnessing something unique, even with historical significance."

The two women, who had never met, embraced and wept. Hundreds stood and applauded.

"Tears scalded down my face," Trickey said in an interview last week. "I had no idea that I would be so touched. We think we have all that behind us and we're fine, but we were so wounded by that whole experience 53 years ago."

Said Jones: "Something like this was magical. There was peace for all of us."

For the nine black students who entered the previously all-white Central High in September 1957, there was little peace. The school was being integrated three years after the U.S. Supreme Court's landmark decision, Brown v. Board of Education.

The nine were selected for their academics and their temperament - because they were to public education what Jackie Robinson had been a decade earlier to major-league baseball. They knew this wouldn't be easy, but it was worse than they expected.

Segregationist Gov. Orval Faubus called out the National Guard to "maintain peace," but the nine students were met by an angry mob and stayed home for 19 days.

A federal court ordered Faubus to remove the guardsmen, but segregationists still heckled the students. President Dwight Eisenhower ordered 1,200 troops from the 101st Airborne to escort the black students and protect them.

Even after the crisis eased, some white students made life difficult. A favorite harassment, Trickey recalled, was walking close behind the black students and stepping on their heels, sometimes with metal taps on the bottoms of the white students' shoes.

Three times, she said, students threw soup on her in the cafeteria. Finally, she retaliated by dumping a tray that included a bowl of chili on a student, for which she was suspended. Later, Minnijean Brown called a female tormenter "white trash" and was expelled.

Wanda Jones says she witnessed the infamous "bowl of chili" incident.

"The big problem," Jones said, "was the silence that had taken place. No one had spoken up in Minnijean's defense. I was silent. I didn't even think of standing up. We were told by teachers and officials to stay quiet and mind our own business."

Minnijean Brown Trickey said that of the more than 2,000 students at Central High, probably 100 were what she calls "terrorists."

Today she still gives 10 to 12 formal presentations a year, teaching nonviolence. A prominent theme - whether it relates to racism or bullying or other matters - is the importance of not staying silent.

"That, indeed, is what most of the kids did," she recalled. "Who do you support when you stand by and do nothing? So much of my energy was in trying to maintain some kind of dignity and to keep myself alive."

She graduated from a private high school in New York, majored in journalism at Southern Illinois University, married a fisheries biologist, had six children and lived for a time in Canada.

She served in the U.S. Interior Department and in 1999, with the other members of the Little Rock Nine, accepted the nation's highest civilian award, the Congressional Gold Medal. Now 69, she lives in Little Rock.

The older and the further away from 1957 she gets, she said, the more she appreciates what she and the other eight young students did - and the lives they have led.

As teenagers, she said, they stood up against institutional racism. Looking at photos and film of herself and the others, she said, brings back that history-making time, one of the landmarks in the U.S. civil-rights movement. America was watching.

"I think it gave Americans a snapshot of who they were, and maybe hadn't thought about before," Trickey said. "It caused people to have to decide if they were going to be like those who opposed desegregation. It made people think."

Jones said she has thought over the years about the difficult integration of her high school in 1957. But it was only when she read that her former schoolmate would be speaking at Peru State that she knew she had to attend - and at long last break her silence.

Only once before, Trickey said, had a fellow student apologized to her - on "The Oprah Winfrey Show" in 1997. At Peru last month, she was told only that a Little Rock Central grad would attend.

Jones had tried to arrange a private meeting before last month's speech, but it didn't work out. So she stood up in the auditorium and - though her apology was decades late in coming - she quoted the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. as saying, "The time is always right to do what is right."

This is Black History Month. But the story of Minnijean Brown Trickey and the other students in the Little Rock Nine is part of American history, not just black history.

That point wasn't lost on Peru senior Caroline Keenan, an Omaha Benson High graduate, who is white. A history and English major who plans to teach in high school, she escorted Trickey on campus.

"To meet this woman who changed history when she was younger than I am now was just incredible," said Keenan, 22, the college's student trustee on the Nebraska State College System board. "When she received that apology, it was like witnessing history - fascinating, heart-wrenching and so moving."

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Caption:

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Also among the famous "Little Rock Nine" were Elizabeth Eckford and Terrence Roberts. The nine African-American students were escorted to class by the 101st Airborne on President Dwight Eisenhower's order, yet they still faced taunts.

Peru State College students talk with Minnijean Brown Trickey after her speech last month. One said she was moved to witness the apology of Trickey's former classmate for staying silent when black students were abused.

Color Photo/1

Wanda Jones and Minnijean Brown Trickey attended Central High School in Little Rock, Ark., 53 years ago when it was racially integrated. Jones apologized last month to Trickey for staying silent when she was being harassed.

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