

GUEST: MINNIJEAN BROWN TRICKEY 1

LSS 121 (LENGTH: 27:16)

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Aloha no and welcome to another Long Story Short. I'm Leslie Wilcox of PBS Hawaii. Hard for many younger folks to believe, but within the lifetime of today's grandparents, many public school districts on the Mainland were racially segregated – whites in this school, blacks in that school. And when the highest court in the land declared in 1954 that public schools could no longer be segregated, some schools simply did not comply. Nine African-American teenagers showed courage and dignity in the face of angry mobs. Which is why the University of Hawai'i School of Social Work at Manoa invited Minnijean Brown Trickey – of The Little Rock Nine – to share stories with students. And, why we invited her to share stories with us.

Minnijean Brown Trickey is a teacher, a writer, a lecturer. And in 1957, she was a high-school junior who wanted a better education than the one offered at the poorly funded, all-black school where she would have gone if the U.S. Supreme Court hadn't opened the way for public school desegregation. She became one of the Little Rock Nine, nine young African-American students who enrolled in all-white Little Rock Central High in the state capital of Arkansas.

I gotta say, I've always been fascinated by what happened in 1957, but it's hard for me to identify with it, because we didn't have schools like that here, and there was not angry mobs, 250 National Guard people at the door of the school. Can you tell me what your life was like before you tried to enter the school?

Well, I guess you didn't have to undo a situation such as blatant segregation in schools, 'cause you didn't have slavery. So I think, yeah, it might be difficult for a part of the country that hasn't had that experience to really kind of come to grips with it. But basically, imagine a place where a Black person can't go to a hotel, or water fountains were labeled, Colored and White, restrooms were in different places and labeled Colored and White. Trying on shoes was in the back of the store. We weren't allowed, or it was frowned upon, trying on clothing in a clothing store. And we sat on the back of the bus. So I mean, I thought, Well, if I can go to school with teenagers who are like me, who are thoughtful, intelligent, creative, some of this stuff will just go away, because it won't make sense to them, the same as it doesn't make sense to me. So it's kind of a whole way of thinking, and a whole way of life that was based on White supremacy and Black inferiority; as simple as that. I didn't like it.

At that young age, you were already real clear on that.

I didn't like the conditions of segregation. They weren't pleasant. They devalued me. I was at risk for breaking the law, because those facilities were the way they were by law. It was illegal to go to a circus and sit next to a White person, for goodness sakes; or not go to the circus at all. **S** ; I really wanted to go to that, but I couldn't go to that auditorium; Blacks could not go to that auditorium. So it's about getting denied everything that's kind of fun or that's exciting, or that you can grow from, or learn from.

S by Rodgers and Hammerstein. Interestingly, there's a line in the musical which says, "Racism is not born in you. It happens after you're born!" And a song, "You've Got to be Carefully Taught." Today, Minnijean is doing the teaching and telling the story of The Little Rock Nine. In 1954, in court case known as Brown versus the Board of Education, the U.S. Supreme Court declared racial segregation to be unconstitutional. Yet, schools in the South remained segregated. When nine African-American students enrolled at Little Rock Central High, the Governor defied the law of the land and sent in the Arkansas National Guard to keep out the black teens. President Dwight D. Eisenhower intervened and he deployed Army troops to escort the students into the school. They were met with physical and verbal abuse, hostility and death threats – not just that day or week, but continuously, for months. Minnijean Brown and eight other students became known as The Little Rock Nine. And their steadfastness changed the lives of every African American.

Would you take us back to that day that you reported for your first day at Little Rock Central High School?

Well, I'll go back further than that and say in May of 1957 on the bulletin at the school, they announced, If you live in the central district and you want to go, sign up. And I did. M-m; said, you know, it's there, it's in my neighborhood; why not. And two other girls, my best friends signed, and put their name on. And in the summer the uh, school board—we went to meetings, and they said, Well if you come, you can't talk back; people will probably call you names, but you can't respond. And you can't participate in any extracurricular activities; you can only go to school. Do you still want to go? [chuckle] And I think the expectation was we'd say no; and some of us said yes.

You were willing to be uncomfortable in school.

Right. And my thought was, I'm beautiful, I've got a smile to die for, I'm talented, I'm smart; who couldn't love me. Couple of weeks, it's over. And I think maybe all of us felt that, How could this be any other way? We can make friends, we will manage this. And then the school board published the names of the people they had chosen in the newspaper, and that's the night the windows started breaking in my bedroom. And then on Labor Day evening, Governor Orville Faubus did a special television appearance, saying that he was putting units of the Arkansas National Guard around the school to protect the peace. Well, I don't know the codes; I'm a kid, and my parents didn't quite get it. And they asked our parents not to come to school. So eight of us met—were assembled there, and walked to right just a half block from the school, and then walked, and were met by the Arkansas National Guard. Now, on the other end of the school, Elizabeth Eckford was a girl who was mobbed. She rode the bus to school. And there are some amazing photos of her being tormented by people. And we walked up to the Guard, and they put their—closed ranks for us, and then opened back up for White kids, and we were pretty bewildered. So we just went home.

Bewildered. And the Little Rock 9 were thrust into a pivotal time in the American Civil Rights Movement.

I could hear the sound of a crowd; it sounded like a sports event.

The mob, meaning adults on the outside of the school?

Yes. Yes; as well as some students. It sounded like a football game or something. And we were taken to these two police cars. One group was told to put blankets over their heads; we were told to keep our heads down. It was in the basement of the school, and um, one of the main policemen said, When you start driving, do not stop for any reason. And so they screeched out of the side of the school. In the meantime, the mob is beating up this report—these three Black reporters who came to do their work, and it's all on film. And they were going to storm the school.

What did it feel like? I mean, did you feel surrounded by hate?

I did. I felt let down, because, despite the fact that I lived in a segregated society, I'd done all these pledges that we do, anthems, and actually heard myself say, Freedom and justice for all. And I go to school one day, and it didn't mean me. And I can't say—that was how I felt. I felt—my heart was really broken. And one of the other nine talks about having a really sheltered, good life; and suddenly, it becomes this other life. So I think for all of us, it was a similar thing. But even in a segregated society, there's a level of protection and care. And suddenly, we're in a—we're receiving all this hate, which we had no idea existed.

What were people saying to you, in this mob?

Well, it was more like a roar. I don't think there was an individual voice. It was more, Go back to Africa, lots of N-words, go home. Yeah; but it was collective roar, I think, that was so frightening. Had it been one person or two people calling names, I don't think we would have felt so strongly about it. But it was—and I talk about it turning my head to see the mob; a lot of women. And I was really flabbergasted by that. These were women who were apparently trying to protect their own children. White women screaming that I couldn't go to that school. And so I'm assuming they thought they were protecting their children. But at the same time, they were abusing children in a very brutal and hateful way.

The U.S. Army would finally take you to school.

Yes. President Eisenhower apparently—I would propose that after seeing the reporter beaten, felt something had to be done. And apparently, you know, it was the Cold War and we were spreading democracy around the world. And I've read quite a lot in the Eisenhower Papers, about Eisenhower, and I would propose that it was the Cold War that caused him to send troops to Little Rock. It was you know, federal versus state powers.

It wasn't a partisan battle, because Eisenhower was Republican, and so was your governor, who was insisting on being a hero for segregationists.

Right. So I'm not gonna tell you that any of it made sense.

Well, what was it like when you did gain entrance to school, and you were a student with your fellow schoolmates?

You've been fighting the roar of the angry adult White mob; what about the kids in the school?

Well, the 10¹st Airborne Division dispersed the mob, which meant that it was a lot quieter. And we were surrounded by soldiers, and had inside the school, each a guard, a personal guard.

Did a guard ever say anything to you, saying he understands your position, or he believes in what you're doing?

Anything like that?

Well, all the guards were White, and they were young men. My guard was from Kentucky, and should we actually have a conversation, horror or horrors; White man talking to Black girl, oh, my god. So we had to sort of talk very quietly. And what he would do is, somebody would spray oil on the floor for you to slip; he'd say, Move over. People didn't really attack so brutally with those guys with us. 'Cause the first few days, they wore fixed bayonets. It's my understanding their guns were not loaded, but they wore battle dress. So they calmed it down considerably. But inside the classrooms, we had to sit in the back. So you'd have to go to—either somebody would try to trip you as you go to your back seat. And then you'd get to your seat, and it would be soiled; it would have thumbtacks, it would have spit, it could have feces, could have glass. I mean, you're not gonna sit there, but you're gonna get the message that this chair, which is yours, has been mutilated, and this is where they want you to be. So it wasn't physical, particularly, but it was really deeply psychological. And people could spit with the guards there. And they could, well, one guard with Melba Pattillo, who wrote this book called Warriors Don't Cry, which is about her experience, someone threw acid in her face, and her guard quickly took her to the water fountain and splashed it out of her eyes.

And there was no punitive action for all of these insults and attempts to hurt?

Well, we realized at first, you know, they would say, Well, did anything happen? And then the question would be, Did his teacher see it? So the rule was, if a teacher didn't see it, it didn't happen. So we stopped telling; we stopped reporting. We didn't dare tell our parents, 'cause they wouldn't let us go back.

Well, your dad didn't know how bad it was, because you weren't telling him.

Well, we couldn't. Because they would have said, You can't go. And we were going. So we protected our parents from the horror of it, because we knew we wanted to keep going.

And the drive to keep going was to live on the principles that you were trying to believe in.

Yes, to force—and I think a lot of the Civil Rights movement that came later, and in part as a result of these beautiful children who stepped out, was to force these United States to act upon what it always said it was. And I guess that's what our obligation will always be in this society, is to—if you want to use the word force, through nonviolence, a society to live up to its ideals, and those words that it tells us it is, and those words that it told us nine kids that it was. And we knew immediately that it wasn't true, but we also felt that we were gonna make it true. And that's an interesting sort of way of looking at it.

So that was the condition you were facing in school every day at the time your dad wrote this telegraph to the President?

Would you read that?

I would.

Because I haven't seen it in a while.

Your dad writing to the President of the White House says, We, the parents of nine Negro children enrolled at Little Rock Central High School, want you to know that your action in safeguarding their rights have strengthened our faith in democracy now as never before. And we have an abiding feeling of belonging and purposefulness.

Yeah. I think my dad and other dads—well, that was a composite letter to reinforce Eisenhower's commitment to us. Because I think that the parents, as well as the NAACP, felt that without that protection we would be killed.

At the end of the school year, the only 12th grader from the Little Rock Nine, Ernest Green, graduated – an achievement that brought Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. to the graduation ceremonies. Minnijean Brown was not there. The most articulate and forceful of the Little Rock Nine had been expelled. One day, following longtime taunting by a white female student – she called the girl “white trash.” The school climate became more toxic than ever for her. A group of white male students confronted her in the cafeteria. She dumped a bowl of chili on her antagonists.

Don't ask me what happened. When I got to the vice principal's office, one of the boys who had the most chili was there. And she said, What happened? And did you do it on purpose? And I said, It was accidentally on purpose. And he said, She didn't do anything. Well, they weren't interested in what he said, particularly.

And?

I was told to go home, and I was suspended. And I can't remember for how long; it was near Christmas holiday. So I don't remember. But when I returned, there was war declared on me. The 101st left in November and the Arkansas National Guard protected us.

But the kids were up for war?

The kids were ready to pay Minnijean back. And so it was just constant kicks; just things, thrown things. We had, you know, we couldn't leave our books, because people would pee in our lockers, or they would break them open and rip up our books, and just little stuff that just would drive you crazy. But so they were really out for me, I think. It's hard to know, because we weren't telling each other what was happening. But this group of five girls followed me for about two weeks; and my heels were bleeding, because they could walk on your heels, and nobody could see; and they could kick you in assembly. So our legs were all black and blue for the—all of us, for the entire time we were there. And I was starting, really, to get worn down. And my heels were raw. And they'd scab over, and then, and I was hiding it from my mom, because I really didn't want her to know. And they followed me all the way up to my homeroom, calling me names, and laughing at my clothes, and snickering, and as I'm walking in the homeroom, somebody threw a purse. And I picked it up, opened it, and it had six locks, combination locks in it. Stupid me did not keep it for evidence. And I just dropped it to the floor and said, Leave me alone, white trash. Well, guess what? The teacher heard me.

But hadn't noticed these other things?

Did not notice the purse, did not see the five girls, did not—and I went down the girls' vice principal, and she sent me home, and they said I was gonna be expelled, and we appealed it, and did all kinds of things. Now, I have to add to that; in 1984, when Elizabeth Huckabee, no relation to Mike Huckabee, was writing her memoir; and a movie was to be made. And she wanted my character; she wanted me to sign a release. And I said, I won't sign a release, because I don't like the way you've portrayed me. You know, I've suffered for being maligned for using those two words. And she says, Well, Minnijean, we expelled you because you were gonna be killed. And I said, Yeah; so I've spent all these years feeling guilty. You've never told me, you never told my parents. And I've been disgraced for my whole life for being expelled from Central. But that's kind of off the record, and I'm the only person who kind of knows that.

And it wasn't just one bold move, one brave day; it was months and months, and days and many, many moments and fears and anxieties and danger.

Yeah; it was. And I understand it much better now. And I'm still working on figuring it out. And I guess it's a good thing, because the work I do is about—I'm so compassionate, well, but with a sharp tongue. It is about how we all work in this society, how we must come together in some basic way. I didn't choose it. It just came to me, to be this person, to believe this way, to work among and with all people in the interest of, you know—well, should we say freedom, or should we say democracy; all those big words. But should we work together somehow to live in harmony?

To this day, Minnijean regrets that race-related comment as a teen, about white trash, and explains she just got worn down by the relentless abuse she was dealing with as a teenager. Her place in American history remains intact. When she walked through the doors of Central High, she stepped into a defining moment for the civil rights movement. Her life's work has been to build understanding and to promote freedom and equality. We'll ask her to share more stories, on a personal level, next week as we continue this Long Story Short conversation with Minnijean Brown Trickey. Please join me then. I'm Leslie Wilcox of PBS Hawaii. A hui hou kakou.

Did you have occasion to talk with one of the White children who was trying to humiliate you? Did you ever have a talk later down the line with any of them?

I did, actually. Two years ago, I got to talk to the person who was the boy who got the most of the chili, in the chili incident where I dropped my tray and it splattered. These guys were pushing, slamming against me.

They were slamming against you in the cafeteria?

In the cafeteria, and I just dropped the whole thing. He said he wished he had been the kind of person who spoke up, but he was just trying to go to school. And he also said he didn't get suspended; they told him to go home and change his clothes.

GUEST: MINNIJEAN BROWN TRICKEY 2

LSS 121 (LENGTH: 26:51)

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Aloha no! I'm Leslie Wilcox of PBS Hawaii. Welcome to another Long Story Short. Last week, Minnijean Brown Trickey shared stories from her days as one of The Little Rock Nine – the teenagers who, in 1957, entered the previously all-White Little Rock Central High School in Arkansas watched by armed soldiers, an angry mob and a worldwide audience. Today, in Part Two of our two-part conversation, Minnijean speaks more

I'd like to start by telling you what happened at the end of my conversation with Minnijean Brown Trickey. When the cameras shut down, our technical crew comprised mostly of college students learning high-definition television production applauded. Then they shook her hand and hugged her. Now, our studio is quite chilly. But at that moment, you could feel the warmth, the aloha. You could see it the students' faces. And I could see it in Minnijean's smile. She's sharing living history, speaking with an unmistakably authentic voice.

I know you've had occasion to talk with folks who live in Hawaii, even though you don't live here. What are your thoughts about the racial situation here? You know, people like to say we're a melting pot, but that's a little optimistic. Yeah. And I worry about sort of platitudes about a given society. The people here know whether they're a melting pot or not. It has great possibility. And I worry about melting. I worry about having to melt. I think we should be able to work together with our cultural beliefs and world views and ideas. I think we can still work together. We don't have to give up everything to be able to work together.

And do we want a melting pot? I have a friend who says, We should be a big, chunky stew.

Absolutely. And that's what's beautiful, and that's what enriches us, and that's what gives us other information and possibility. And it's that precise mixture that enriches us all, in my opinion.

Minnijean Brown was one of the African-American teenagers to become known as The Little Rock Nine. In 1957, these students enrolled in Little Rock Central High, the largest school in Arkansas' state capital. The Governor unlawfully and physically kept them from reporting to class by stationing hundreds of National Guard personnel around the school's perimeter. The President, Dwight D. Eisenhower, sent in troops from the U.S. Army to escort the nine students to school. It was a tumultuous time for our nation and for 16 year-old Minnijean.

When I've seen clips of all of those confrontations at the school over so long a time, over months, of course, I really felt for the nine children, one of whom was you. But as a parent, I found myself thinking of your parents. I mean, it must have been so hard to let you go, and not know whether you were gonna be truly safe.

And we weren't safe. But the bravery—we are given credit for bravery, but the parents were the brave ones because they followed our lead; because they knew that it was important, not just for us, but for the world. After the first day, seeing all the chaos and violence, we all knew this has to be, it must be. There's no way of explaining that. But we were together on that. But they always said, You don't have to go. You don't have to go today, you don't have to go tomorrow. Are you sure you want to go?

Were you always so sure you wanted to go?

Well, I kind of framed it in a way; But Ma, I gotta go, because I gotta see what they're gonna think up to do to me tomorrow. You know, and so I guess we used different ways of dealing with difficult situations.

And none of your schoolmates – none of them dropped out either?

We couldn't; it was just way too important. I admire those children; I just am fascinated by them, what they did, how they did it. And I'm trying to recover some of the ways that made it possible to keep going. But it ends up being sort of, They don't want me here, I'm coming anyway. And maybe that's how we have to look at things. And sometimes I don't want to describe us as brave, 'cause I'm not sure if we were. We were scared every minute. 'Cause we got death threats at home. At night, my windows were broken in my bedroom. My father lost his job; other parents lost their jobs. So the terror never really stopped. It just became a test of wills. And now that I'm older, I know, my goodness, we were in such danger. And it makes me shake; now. At the time, my defiance was so powerful that it kept me going. Resistance, I call it. And that's something we all have.

Did your family consider stepping back when your father lost his job?

Well, it's too late, because you've already done the deed, you've already had the audacity to try to go to Central High School, the bastion of White education. You've already blown your thing. Everybody's angry, people are furious, people are paying you

back for having that much uppitiness, I guess, is the way it's been framed over, you know, three hundred years, that if you dare to think yourself a full person.

I know there were angry White mobs; I know there were jeers and insults, and worse by your fellow students, White students. Did you get any pushback from other Blacks?

I think initially, I think people weren't sure. Because I think we have to think there'd been small inroads of integration in small towns and in the South, just few and far between. But I think there was a great hope. I mean, there were two school systems; one superior, one inferior. I think any group of people hopes for that change. I mean, we got old books that were so old that so many pages were missing, and they were from forever ago, and they were dog-eared. And I think young Black kids and families saw the possibility that we would, you know have an equal education, that we would have the same opportunity for education that White kids had. So I mean, when they built a new school, but they didn't equip the science lab. And they built a new school, and it didn't have this facility, and the—we were the secondhand kids. And I think people thought that this will stop. So I'm not sure if I remember anybody saying—maybe somebody said, You've gotta be crazy to do that. And they were right. [chuckle] **I think of your parents. And you know, most parents are hopeful their children do well in the academics, and they don't, you know, they don't struggle with how tough the classes are, and they get along with their classmates. But your parents were dealing on an entirely quantum different level of concern.**

Of course. And if yeah; this is, this is a great conversation, because people don't ask deep questions often. The whole idea that—and I think a lot of the Civil Rights movement worked this way. That the young people were doing things that the grownups couldn't do, because in fact, they would lose their jobs. And they didn't put us there; we put ourselves there and asked them to come with us. There's a line in a freedom song, I'm on My Way to Freedom Land. And one of the lines; If you don't go, don't hinder me. And another line is, If my mama don't go, I'll go anyhow. It was about seeing a different vision, and hoping that it wouldn't stay the same.

Minnijean Brown was suspended and expelled from Central High. Out of concern for her safety, she was transferred to a school in New York. She graduated from college and lived for many years in Canada. Now she's back in Little Rock, Arkansas, where she continues her work as an educator and a crusader for civil rights and the environment. The events of 1957 surely shaped the rest of her life.

I got punished for the behavior that they were exhibiting. And it was very unfair. And I knew it was unfair, but it wasn't shown as unfair. It was, She was a bad girl, she talked back. You know, I should have been perfect. Now, I understand that I needn't have been perfect to go to Central High School, that those were outrageous expectations. But I was just sixteen; so I didn't know what I know now.

And so there was a lot of learning that took place in those months, but much of it probably wasn't academic.

I don't remember a single thing. I don't remember learning anything. I spoke French with a really terrible Southern accent, and when I went to this school in New York, this French teacher, I think I hurt her ears when I spoke French.

That's where you went after you left Arkansas?

Yes. So I don't remember learning any lessons.

Except hard knocks.

Except how, maybe how we survive in a difficult situation. But I was a bad girl, because I asked the history teacher, Why is it we only have one paragraph on slavery in this one-thousand-page American history book? And that we were all happy? You gotta be bad sometime. [chuckle] But that's considered bad; that's considered uppity.

And you did that at Little Rock?

I did.

You didn't get shut down easily by any means.

Well, I'd ask it in a very Southern accent, in a very soft way. But I asked it all the same. And I think all of us did that. That we shouldn't have had to be grateful to go into that brutal situation. And so one more little thing that I think is interesting, and I hope you have space for it. Someone did a doctoral dissertation on the females, gender issues at Little Rock, and talked to a group of White girls, forty years later. And said, We hated that Minnijean, we hated her; we hated her, we hated her. And he said, Why did you hate her? And they finally concluded, Because she walked the halls of Central High like she belonged there. Wow. Wow.

There you go. You were the object of much racism. I would wonder if it tended to make you want to dismiss and hate Whites.

Well, I guess I didn't learn. [chuckle] That wasn't really what I learned at Central. I learned that people can be used for bad purposes, if they allow. I think the mob was incited by the governor, the kids were acting on beliefs that had been part of our American belief system for a very long time.

So you're giving them an out?

I'm not giving them an out, but I am what I'm trying to explain, especially to young people that there are structural things that have created our beliefs and our attitudes, and where we live, and how much money we make, and who's valued and who isn't; and that the only way that we can dismantle that is to pay attention. So I also know that as soon as I left Central High School, I forgot all about them, and went into the school that was integrated. I had a great time, I realized all those things about myself,

which hadn't been realized in my life before. I was arrested for sitting in, I've been in jail, I was in Mississippi for a time, I was really active at my college. It was an amazing, wonderful, hopeful time. And in that process, we have to work with other people, that not any one group can save the world alone. And I work with everybody, and will hang out with everybody, and will interact with everybody; and have had wonderful opportunities to do so. It's an educational thing that has to take place everywhere. It has to be in the elementary schools, it has to be in high schools. It definitely has to be in the universities, that there is an obligation; we can't just have like African American history over there, and mainstream history here, which doesn't, you know—

Right; it's not boutique.

Yeah.

It's not boutique history.

You don't get to shop around; it has to be embedded in all our social relations. How do we get here, and how do we get out?

Before what happened at the school, did you push the envelope, did you go drink at the other fountain, or slip into a place you weren't supposed to be?

Well, you can't really go into a place, 'cause you're not allowed. But I would, yes, drink out of the White fountain, or I would sometimes sit in the wrong place on the bus, and promptly get kicked off the bus. The bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama had happened, but people had been doing that all along, because it seemed so ludicrous. It doesn't make sense; it didn't make sense then, it doesn't make sense now.

What kind of kid were you? Were you fiery and an activist, or did that activism happen later?

Oh, I was—h-m, I've never been asked that question. I was concerned about things, and I argued with my parents during the Eisenhower-Stevenson election. And I told them, How can you vote for Eisenhower; you have to vote for Stevenson. Don't ask me why.

But at that time in your school, would you have been voted most likely to ...

No, not at all.

--to break the bounds and be part of a historical case and—

No. Absolutely not.

Were you quiet?

I was, I was a bookie; I read all the time. I thought I could sing, so I would try to sing every once in a while.

[chuckle]

But I don't think anybody, I certainly didn't anticipate that I would be the person I am now. Inside, I thought deeply about things; but outside, I don't think I expressed it.

You've moved back to Arkansas, and you have occasion to drive by Central High School. What are the emotions you feel as you go by?

Well, I'm really involved, kind of, with Central High School because my daughter is a park ranger with the National Parks Service and she's teaching me things. She is at a visitor center, so all kinds of people come in. People come in from all over the world; they tell her and the other rangers how Little Rock, the experience affected them fifty years ago, if they're older. Young people come in and ask questions.

And the school and the government never gave you an apology for what happened?

Yes, in 1997—

Okay; this is many years—

I'm not sure—

--after the fact.

--if it was an apology. But the governor, who was Mike Huckabee, the President was Bill Clinton, and the mayor opened the door symbolically to allow for us to come in. That was very moving.

What do you think it is about you that allowed you to get through that as you did, and continue to fight the same battle in other ways, as you moved along?

M-m, well, it's kind of, what—you know, you asked, why did we go to Central. Somebody had to do it. And we just happened to be the ones who did. And somebody's gotta do all this other stuff too, individually, and collectively. And it keeps me—I work with lots of young people; it keeps me knowing what their issues are, it keeps me on the ground, not being in some kind of tower, not knowing what young people are concerned about. And it enriches me. It inspires me. It just keeps me going. I working with young people is so inspirational to me. And it also invigorates me, and I'm gonna be—I'm sixty-six. I need some of that energy to circle through me.

But the disappointments and the hardship you've experience along—and the losses in activism haven't hardened your heart, haven't made you have a sense of resignation about anything?

Well, I think they've given me the right to have a sharp tongue, and to challenge complacency and complicity. And I do that when I can. So I feel, both, I have the privilege of being an elder, as well as a Civil Rights person, to transfer from that time to now. Young people are, What is this about? I don't get it. It doesn't make sense to me. Why doesn't this change? Why are we in this state? Why are we so warlike? Why are we so violent? Why do we have the highest prison rate in the world? They're still—they're confused, and I'm confused; and we need to have these talks together, and so I continue to be reinvigorated.

Sometimes I do get really cynical; I can do a really good cry in my pillow, I don't hide my feelings anymore. I don't feel—if I'm talking and somebody asks me something that takes me back I just go ahead and feel it. So there's something to maturity.

What came first, your activist ideas or the experience at Little Rock?

That's a great question. And I think it's, I think I found who I was at our first press conference. They asked, Why do you want to go to Central High? And I didn't say, Because it's there, which is what a teenager would do. I said, When we are giving our lives in the war and working hard, it's all right. But when we ask for equalization, we're turned down. And I discovered that girl about fifteen years ago. And that was really special to me, because that's who I am. Those are the beliefs I've had, I continue to have them. I sound so like me, me, me. But I look upon the Little Rock experience as a training ground for things that were to come in my life.

What was harder than that?

What was harder than that, I think, is watching my kids have to deal with the same kinds of things that I had to deal with, and that was—that's been hard. Because the whole idea for desegregation in schools, for dismantling Jim Crow, for various civil rights acts, that the purpose of that, the purpose of going to Central High School was to stop it, change it, make it go away. And to have my own children and people's children of various ethnicities and world views have these experience, this kind of experience, hurts me. And I'm very sorry that we haven't done that whole work, we haven't finished that work.

When you say we haven't finished, how close are we?

I don't know. I tell my kids, Put some rhinestones on my walker.

[chuckle]

Wheel me up. Because it looks like that's my life's work.

Yeah.

And it's good work; it's ...

I mean, it's a bad reason to have job security, racism.

Oh; well, It's not even about, you know, like work. It's not about a job. It's just a way of life. It's what I do.

And I hope Minnijean Brown Trickey keeps on doing what she's doing – sharing her story of principle, passion and perseverance. A warm mahalo to her, with aloha, from her new friends in Hawaii. If you'd like to share your thoughts with Minnijean, please send an email to Long Story Short through our website at www.pbshawaii.org and we'll forward it . For now, as always, we have to keep this fascinating Long Story Short. Mahalo for joining us. I'm Leslie Wilcox. A hui hou kakou.

I gotta tell you. I'm really surprised that you live in Arkansas; so do many of the people who were at the high school when you were mistreated, and you've never really had any kind of outpouring of, Oh you know, those were different times, and we didn't know better, or that was a poor way to handle it. Nothing like that. Not really; not one-to-one.

That's the nature of the discussion of racism in the nation. We are doing it; we can't do it. We have a hard time; we're looking at, we're watching scenarios where we can't talk about it. What does that mean? What's wrong with us? We can talk about everything else.