LONGstorySHORT with LESSLIE WILCOX

PBS Hawaii

GUEST: MINNIJEAN BROWN TRICKEY 2
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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 *personally*.

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.