A Class Act
Ruby Bridges talks about how she made history—just by going to school

Imagine being the only student in your class. Parents keep their kids at home rather than allow them to go to school with you. Mobs of angry people scream at you as you enter and leave the building each day. For your protection, bodyguards escort you to and from school.

That’s what life was like for first-grader Ruby Bridges in 1960. Fifty years ago, she became the first black student at an all-white school in New Orleans, Louisiana. Ruby was just 6 years old, but she played an important role in helping African-Americans gain equality in the United States. Today, she is viewed as one of the heroes of the civil rights movement.

Separated by Color
In 1960, the United States was a different place than it is today. In many areas, mainly in the South, African-Americans were segregated, or separated, from whites. African-Americans weren’t allowed in many restaurants and hotels. Many states had separate schools for white students and black students.

In 1954, the U.S. Supreme Court had ruled that segregation in public schools was illegal. But Louisiana and several other states ignored the ruling. In September 1960, a federal judge ordered Louisiana schools to integrate.

Words to Know
integrate (in-tuh-grayt) verb, to include people of all races
racism (ray-sih-zuhm) noun, unfair treatment of people, based on race

Civil Rights in Schools
Ruby Bridges’s integration of a New Orleans school was just one of the many key events in the long battle for equal rights for all Americans.
He set a deadline of Monday, November 14, 1960. Earlier that year, Ruby Bridges had been selected to become the first black student to attend William Frantz Public School. Three other black girls were chosen to integrate a different school in New Orleans.

**A Difficult Year**

Nothing could have prepared Ruby for her first day at William Frantz. U.S. marshals drove Ruby and her mother to school. As the officers walked her to the building, protesters shouted and shook their fists. Ruby didn't make it to class. She and her mother spent the day in the principal's office. They watched through the office window as angry parents pulled their kids out of class. The message was clear: Ruby was not welcome at the all-white school.

Ruby says she was too young to realize what was happening. "I was never really afraid because I wasn't quite sure what was going on," she told *Scholastic News* Kid Reporter Abigayle Lista.

On her second day, Ruby met her teacher, a white woman named Barbara Henry. She brought Ruby to her classroom—which was empty. All the white parents had taken their children out of the class. For the rest of the school year, Ruby would be Mrs. Henry's only student. "She wasn't just my teacher," Ruby explains. "She was my only friend in school."

Even with her teacher's support, Ruby still had a hard time. "I wasn't allowed to go to the cafeteria or play on the playground," she says. "What bothered me most was the loneliness in school every day."

Eventually, though, things got better for Ruby. The crowds of protesters slowly disappeared. As a result of Ruby's bravery, more black students joined her at William Frantz the following school year.

**Lasting Lesson**

Today, Ruby visits schools to talk with students. She encourages kids of all races and backgrounds to be accepting of one another. "[My experience] has inspired me to want to continue to make a difference in this country," she says. "I think that racism is ugly and so unfair. And I believe that we all need one another."

—Natalie Smith, with *Scholastic News* Kid Reporter Abigayle Lista

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**1957**

Nine African-American students are blocked from integrating an all-white high school in Little Rock, Arkansas. President Dwight D. Eisenhower sends federal troops to ensure that the students are allowed to enter the school.

**1960**

Six-year-old Ruby Bridges integrates William Frantz Public School in New Orleans. Three other girls become the first black students to attend nearby McDonogh #19 Elementary School. Protesters gather at both schools, and riots break out in the city.

**1964**

President Lyndon B. Johnson signs the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The act outlaws segregation in schools, businesses, and public places. It protects the rights of women as well as those of people of every race, color, religion, and nationality.