

'Life is more than a moment'

Once adversaries, 'Little Rock two' to bring message of racial reconciliation to IUB campus

By Jayne Spencer

On Labor Day 1957, photojournalist Will Counts was on the scene when a young black woman named Elizabeth Eckford, textbooks in arms, made her way through a hostile crowd at Little Rock, Ark., Central High School. Behind her, a young white woman named Hazel Bryan shrieked with disdain.

The 15-year-old Eckford had just been turned away by Arkansas National Guardsmen after she attempted to enroll at the all white high school. Counts snapped the photograph.

The image of the two young women is now considered one of the top 100 photographs of the century by the Associated Press.

And it was Counts, a professor emeritus of journalism at Indiana University, who arranged for the two to meet face to face for the first time.

The occasion was the 40th anniversary commemoration of the desegregation of Little Rock's Central High, an event that Counts once again documented on film. President Bill Clinton and Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee symbolically opened the doors of Central High to the original "Little Rock Nine," the courageous teenagers who had withstood the racial hatred of the times to desegregate the school.

Years before the anniversary meeting, Hazel Bryan Massery had called Eckford to apologize for her actions in 1957. Massery said she had felt like "the poster child for the hate generation, trapped in the image captured in the photograph...and I (knew) that my life was more than a moment."



Will Counts' 1957 photograph of Elizabeth Eckford (upper frame, foreground) is one of the 100 top photographs of the century, according to the Associated Press. Counts photographed Eckford and her former tormenter, Hazel Bryan Massery (at left, in front of Little Rock's Central High School) at the 40th anniversary of the school desegregation effort. The two women will speak at IUB Monday.

In 1998, Massery told *The Guardian*, "I am not sure at that age what I thought, but probably I overheard that my father was opposed to integration.... But I don't think I was old enough to have any convictions of my own yet." Later in life she changed her mind; she had thought of Martin Luther King as a "trouble-maker", but realized "deep down in your soul, he was right". She took the initiative of contacting Eckford, leading to an "awkward" first meeting, but then a real friendship. Both women faced angry feelings from friends and relatives in Little Rock, which remains largely physically segregated.

She appeared with Eckford and the rest of the Little Rock Nine on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, and at the 40th Anniversary Celebration of integration at Central High. The reunion provided an opportunity for acts of reconciliation, as noted in this editorial from the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* on the first day of 1998:

"One of the fascinating stories to come out of the reunion was the apology that Hazel Bryan Massery made to Elizabeth Eckford for a terrible moment caught forever by the camera. That 40-year-old picture of hate assailing grace — which had gnawed at Ms. Massery for decades — can now be wiped clean, and replaced by a snapshot of two friends. The apology came from the real Hazel Bryan Massery, the decent woman who had been hidden all those years by a fleeting image. And the graceful acceptance of that apology was but another act of dignity in the life of Elizabeth Eckford."

Both women still live in Little Rock, Eckford in the family home where she lived in high school, only blocks from where Counts, a Little Rock native himself, had lived. Eckford and Massery have attended a workshop on racial healing together and have made joint public appearances to sign a poster featuring Counts' photograph of their reconciliation.

Counts had been with the *Arkansas Democrat* for only three months on Labor Day 1957. Dressed in a "blend-in" flannel shirt and armed with his beloved 35mm camera, he was able to move freely through the crowds and was accepted as a native son--unlike the three *Life* magazine staffers who were attacked by the mob and arrested by the police. His photographs were runners-up for the Pulitzer Prize that year.

A Life Is More Than a Moment: The Desegregation of Little Rock's Central High recently has been published by the IU Press and contains many of the 1957 photographs, as well as recent photographs of many of the protagonists of the earlier shots. Counts' work is supplemented with essays by journalists Robert McCord and Ernest Dumas, with an introduction by the Rev. Will Campbell, one of the ministers who walked with the black students as they attempted to enter the high school.

Source: Indiana University (<http://www.iuinfo.indiana.edu/HomePages/102299/text/counts.htm>).