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COMMEMORATING INTEGRATION: LITTLE ROCK NINE SIXTY-YEAR ANNIVERSARY

By Taylor Wilkins

In 1957, nine young men and women made the brave decision to be the first African-American students at Little Rock Central High School. The integration drew national attention, especially when Governor Orval Faubus ordered the Arkansas National Guard to prevent the integration. By September 25th, President Dwight D. Eisenhower had to order the 101st Airborne to protect the students and ensure the integration would take place. The students became icons for the Civil Rights movement and known as The Little Rock Nine. In fall 2017, Little Rock Central High School commemorated the 60th anniversary of the integration by holding a multi-day event the week of September 25th. The event included speeches from members of the Little Rock Nine and former President Bill Clinton. Adjunct professor of history and Harding Academy social studies teacher Angela Adams attended the commemoration and recounted her experience in an interview with *Tenor of Our Times*.

When asked about her time at the commemoration, Adams replied, “All the events that weekend were special. Saturday provided a chance to hear from some Little Rock Nine members that do not have books, like Gloria Ray. She lives overseas, and I knew less about her than the members that published books. A highlight from Sunday was hearing from their children on what it was like to have parents in history books. On Monday, all of the living Little Rock Nine spoke, as well as historian Henry Louis Gates, Governor Hutchison, and President Clinton. It was truly amazing.” The weekend was not only a personal experience; it also inspired Adams’ passion for passing down this important part of Arkansas history in her classroom. “It is something I will always remember and will make teaching this topic even more rich from now on.”

The most memorable part of the weekend for Adams was hearing President Clinton speak. She loved that “he didn’t use notes and weaved together things the other speakers said, current events, and history, bringing everything together in an impressive way.” She notes

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that she has “never experienced a speaker that held such power over an audience before,” and many in the audience were brought to tears.

For Adams, the most important lesson she learned from the event was not to stay neutral in times of injustice, adding “it was a minority of students who committed the most heinous things against the Little Rock Nine. Most people were silent witnesses to the terrible things that happened to [the Nine]. That is applicable to our world. You are not innocent when you watch horrible things happen and stay silent. They teach us to not be silent witnesses to injustice.”

Adams also said that the commemoration gave her hope. When she looks “at the past and see the challenges we have faced before,” she knows there is hope for the future, and the Little Rock Nine is a great example of that very hope. For Adams, The story of the Little Rock Nine is “a reminder of a brave heritage that I am heir to,” and that they give her courage when she faces adversity. For Arkansans, Americans, and others across the globe, the commemoration testified to the resilience of the Nine and the lessons that can be learned from assessing our past to inform the present.