

## **Ruby Bridges had a Friend (but she didn't know it)**

*“Two, four, six, eight \_*

*We don't want to integrate.*

*Eight, six, four, two \_*

*We don't want no jigaboos!”*

I hear that chant to this day. It's in my head where it will live forever. When I think of that day, I see my school in my mind's eye. William Frantz Elementary is in the 9<sup>th</sup> Ward of New Orleans. Frantz is three stories high and light grey. It is sort of U shaped, takes up one square block with a playground behind the building.

I see the crowd. We are a blur of angry faces shouting a chant. Every age is here, all angry. It seems to my heart to be just yesterday. The chant goes on and on and on. Two, four, six, eight we don't want to integrate; eight, six, four, two we don't want no jigaboos.

At age 10 I am a red-haired blue-eyed freckle faced child living in foster care. My mother is a drunk and sometimes she shows up at school beat up and drunk. I get teased and feel shame for being her child. Today is a day to feel proud and stand up for my people with all my heart and soul. I have learned the chant so with gusto I shout very loudly.

We all know those rich people uptown are not having to deal with this. They have power and we don't, so desegregation would be put upon the lowest of the low. At ten I don't fully understand all of it but I know what the grown people say.

That day my foster father, whom I call Uncle Lester, stayed home to walk me to school. He NEVER walked me to school. We walk out the front door of 1933 Piety Street turn right at the corner which is Johnson Street. At Desire, I see lots of grown folks with their children coming to join us from the left and right. The same thing happens as we cross Gallier, Congress Independence, Pauline Streets. By then we are a big noisy crowd, which reminds me of walking to a Mardi Gras Parade. Everyone is in the street. We turn left on Pauline and walk over to Galvez. In front of my school at 1900 Galvez. We stand behind the usual Mardi Gras barricades between Alvar and Pauline.

The weather was cool, with hardly a breeze we stood there for a long enough time for me to study the grass growing in the cracked banquette (sidewalk). Occasionally a car pulls up and we shout, but no horrid person steps out.

I am in front of my friend Linda's house directly across from the entryway to school. All over are police, plus a few uniforms I don't know. Black and white cop cars with red bubble lights line the street. We wait. Nothing happens. And no white child steps inside our school.

We are a solid block of ice that not even a blow torch could melt. Today it is us in the 9<sup>th</sup> Ward against them with the power to do this in our neighborhood.

Suddenly there is a car. Slowly it stops directly in front of me. I see her step out wearing the shoes I have on. My mouth clamps shut; I feel like I am in her place. My mind whirls, my mouth gets salty. A tear rolls down my cheek. Quickly I wipe it with my sleeve. I hope no one sees me. The sounds make me shudder at least 500 people are screaming at her. Scary. I stare at her. She is a tiny girl circled by 4 huge men with armbands that say "MARSHALL." I feel like my drunken Mama has me by the throat.

A voice in my head says to me, "NEVER again will I act like this!"  
The thoughts tumble over each other in my young brain.

"God she is littler than me!"

"Where is her Mama?"

"There she is, why aren't they holding hands?"

"Why is she walking alone?"

My mind goes on:

"What are we doing?"

"God she must be scared."

No one has noticed my silence, it is just me and her, both of us struggling to breathe in a pool of anger that sticks like molasses. She makes it safely inside my school and is gone. I turn and ask my Uncle Lester. "Can we go home now?"

After that Monday, school just stops and stays stopped. I hear people are still protesting, but I never go down there. Grown people are

deciding what happens next a long time passes. Finally, a decision is made.

Armand Duvio, President of the Ninth Ward Private Elementary School Association, has made a deal with a different parish.

My Aunt Mary speaks, "You are going to school in Arabi."

"Arabi, we never go there it's too far?" I protest.

"You gonna ride a bus."

"I don't wanna ride the school bus," I say.

We ride the bus to Carolyn Park Elementary in Arabi. We overcrowd that school for a short while. They don't like us; I do the best I can to learn but the classes are not working for me. I don't feel as good about school as I did when I was at William Frantz with my favorite teacher Miss Ansardi. I wonder what happened to her. I hear hardly no one goes to Frantz these days.

Next, we go to school in the Domino Sugar Refinery Warehouse on River Road in Arabi. The warehouse/school is full of mice. I hate it when the boys stomp on the poor things. They didn't ask us to come here. We have walls but no ceiling except the one that looks like it is 80 feet up. So, when teachers talk each side of the wall hears the other. We don't learn a whole lot in the warehouse. When we go outside to play the small yard is full of mud, and we can see the huge ships above and behind the levee across the street. Fog happens all the time on the river so school is damp.

Last, we go to the Ninth Ward Private Elementary School. The parents built it out of concrete blocks, it is next to the SPCA. That school is ok, it is noisy with sounds of dogs barking right next door. We have several teachers and I spend the rest of my elementary time there.

Next, I will go to Joseph Kohn Jr. High which is just one block from Frantz. Things are normal in Jr. High. There are no black kids since New Orleans has decided to desegregate one grade per year. I will go all the way to high school before I see a black person in my school.

When I am in high school, I buy my first car a 1956 Chevy. I have made friends with a couple of black girls (Rashida and Dianah) who rode the bus with me. When I got my car, I invited them to ride with me. I picked them up and rode down Galvez Street with my buddies and those who didn't like it could kiss my white fanny. Thus began a life of rebellion and self-education related to the world black people endured.

Rashida, Dianah and I went to see their elementary school on Esplanade. Inside its wooden stairs curved thin in the middle from years of use and should have been replaced. The desks were wooden and the books sitting on those desks were yellowed with age and falling apart.

Finally, I understood why a black family would put their child through what seemed like hell on earth to attend what had been an all-white school.

Over many years I have worked to be the one voice that stands for the rights of people who are considered "other". It has been my mission to be the one person who knows the truth about "Those People" no matter which those they are.

While it is true, I have “white privilege” I can’t toss it aside. What I can do in this era of white supremacy is tell the truth of the results of bigotry.

New Orleans lost tourists that year. Places that sold school clothes sold half as much as usual. The city once known as “The City that Care Forgot” could no longer be known that way. After much research in the New Orleans Main Library I have learned it did not happen just because we in the 9<sup>th</sup> ward were bigots. It was planned by politicians and we were the easiest pawns to manipulate. That does not mean we were not racists, back then it was a rare white person who was not a racist in New Orleans. To this day there are plenty of them still living there.

The plan was hatched by Governor Jimmy Davis who wrote “You are my Sunshine”. With the examples of Little Rock and Virginia where schools closed, still the idea of only two solutions was presented to all involved. Either desegregate or close all schools.

The majority of politicians in Baton Rouge decided to fight, so they stood with Davis and took over the New Orleans School Board. They spread fear like it was butter on toast, and we ignorant people ate with gusto. They picked the ninth ward on purpose and we knew it.

There were also people who wanted to keep schools open. Many religious leaders signed a petition to gain that end. Professors at Tulane mostly, and also LSU, wrote in solidarity to keep schools open.

Some of those folks paid for their outspoken behavior. Some white people showed no interest at all. Some formed a group called Save Our

Schools, not pro or con on desegregation but desiring to keep schools open.

There were white parents who became active and formed the Committee on Public Education (COPE). Both groups were afraid the State would overrule keeping the schools open. White moderates were afraid of standing up for fear their own children would suffer, and suffer some did. Of the 23 white students that went back to Frantz only 2 stayed the course. Some parents lost their jobs, some moved their whole family out of state because a cross was burned in their front yard.

What I say today is look out. White supremacy is gaining ground, it does no one in America any good to let that happen. I am not keen on standing up for "others", because it is scary. But I will do it until I pass from this earth because if I do not, I know evil can make me sick to my stomach again and I have already had enough.