Time Brings About a Change: Updating *Warriors Don’t Cry* in 2007

Grandmother always said that time brings about change, and as time moves forward, our significant life events become a series of snapshots in our minds.

Today, at age sixty-five, I realize she was so right. I am alive and well, and my head is filled with life-event photos, some events that I thought would be my undoing. These days I have little fear of what is to come because I realize it is all ultimately part of a wonderful mystery, unraveling with each day.

But when I first heard Grandmother’s wisdom, I was fifteen years old, frightened, and caught up in the middle of a political firestorm over racial segregation. Eight other teenagers and I stood at the center of the tug-of-war between the U.S. government, Arkansas’s governor, and the angry white mobs intent on halting integration in Little Rock’s Central High School.

At the time, I had no idea of the impact or importance of our successful entry and very difficult year as students inside Central High. It would turn out that our determination to remain in school, despite having to tread through a jungle of hatred and human torture from segregationists, would help to change the course of history and grant access to equality and opportunity for people of color. My younger brother, Conrad Patillo, would become the first black U.S. Marshal in Arkansas’s history. In the years to follow, a black
woman would become Little Rock's mayor. Many African-Americans would serve in the same legislature that fifty years ago voted to halt integration. And yes, Central High's population would diversify and even flourish under a black principal.

On August 20, 2005, hundreds of people, many of them white Arkansans, gathered on the grounds of the Arkansas state capitol for the unveiling of statues of the nine of us. On this day, many of the people who once scorned us have come to congratulate us for standing our ground, for claiming our equality, for completing that year at Central High School against all odds.

This was a place where it is said that the Ku Klux Klan had gathered in their white robes back in 1957 to plan our demise. But today, the area is filled with admirers: whites, blacks, Asians—human beings of every description. There are also more than one hundred news reporters and flashing media cameras; with dignitaries, U.S. senators, state legislators, and ministers; and with the city's uniformed police officers (yes, members of the same Little Rock force once dispatched to keep us out of Central High in 1957) who were there this day to protect us, to ensure passage through the crowds and safe entry onto the stage.

My attention was riveted to the black cloth draped over my statue, which appeared to be even taller than my five feet eight inches, though considerably slimmer than my now senior body. I couldn't help wondering. What does the statue really look like? Does it truly resemble me at age fifteen?
"Pull the cord—now," one of the program coordinators whispered. Suddenly my hand reached out, and I pulled. The audience applauded wildly—then fell into a weird, whispering silence. I stood frozen, my eyes and my person riveted on the statue. I thought, My God—it's me—me, with a ponytail, a young face, a tall, thin body clutching my books to my chest. It is me, poised, ready to attend a day at Central High. I felt as though I must hug this innocent, wide-eyed young girl; I must shelter her wounded spirit.

Suddenly the throng of reporters was pushing forward, moving closer, only a few feet away, determined to get pictures of me and the eight others as we stared at our young images. We nine were oblivious as we examined our younger selves. We were overwhelmed with tears, immersed in the moment, emotionally weeping at the sight of the nine statues, so real, so commanding. When we nine are together, we become one, falling into lockstep, anxious, happy to be together once more. Now we were crying together, grateful we had made it to this moment, alive and celebrating on a spot where we might have been hanged.

This year, 2007, marks the fiftieth anniversary of the integration of Central High. To celebrate that occasion, a coin will be available from the U.S. Mint, a Little Rock museum will be opened, and former President Clinton will host a celebration. It will be a week of galas and joyous cavorting. Huge committees of Little Rock's finest have convened over the past two years with the sole purpose of creating the right
events at the right times to attract people and publicity from around the world.

Going forward, I am grateful for this time of celebration but I don’t want it to obstruct all our perceptions of the fact that there is a lot of work still to be done. We have only survived and triumphed in round one of the bouts that have made and continue to remake America. There are so many more steps to be taken to achieve human equality.

The first round of this battle was never about integration, in my opinion. It was always about access — access to opportunity, to resources, to freedom. The enemy was more visible, the battle lines drawn in plain sight. What I call the “new racism” is about success —- success in terms of cultural, social, and economic status.

I have achieved so much: more than one hundred awards for courage, including this country’s highest award as voted by the U.S. Congress, the Congressional Gold Medal; doctoral degrees and status as a professor and international speaker; and “bling” in many circumstances. And yet, when I go house-hunting, I am often denied the chosen location because to the person selling the house I am just another “maid,” “Aunt Jemima,” or second-class citizen, as always.

Until I am welcomed everywhere as an equal simply because I am human, I remain a warrior on a battlefield that I must not leave. I continue to be a warrior who does not cry but who instead takes action.

If one person is denied equality, we are all denied equality.

— Melba Patillo Beals