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Politics Team

CONVERSATION AIR DATE: Feb. 18, 1997

Ruby Bridges: A Class of One

SUMMARY

In 1960, 6-year-old Ruby Bridges Hall became the first African American child to desegregate an elementary school. In honor of National Black History Month, Hall discusses her memories of the first day she entered her new school in New Orleans, her first year when she was in a class of one, and her efforts to improve education.



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Transcript

CHARLAYNE HUNTER-GAULT: On November 14, 1960, the nation watched as six-year-old Ruby Nell Bridges walked into William Frantz Elementary School and into history. A federal court ordered the New Orleans school system to desegregate, making Bridges the first African-American to attend the elementary school.

RUBY BRIDGES HALL: That first morning I remember mom saying as I got dressed in my new outfit, "Now, I want you to behave yourself today, Ruby, and don't be afraid. There might be a lot of people outside this new school, but I'll be with you." That conversation was the full extent of preparing me for what was to come.

CHARLAYNE HUNTER-GAULT: Her walk inspired the 1964 Norman Rockwell painting "The Problem We All Live With," a small black girl escorted by four federal marshals walking to school beside a wall bearing a scrawled racial epithet and the letters KKK. Harvard psychiatry Professor Robert Coles witnessed the scene in New Orleans. He has written a children's book about Ruby Bridges' experience called "The Story of Ruby Bridges."

In the book Coles reminds children of the heroism of Bridges' action, showing her facing an empty classroom because angry parents kept their children home and all but one teacher refused to teach a black child. Today in Washington U.S. Marshals honored Ruby Bridges Hall at a ceremony celebrating Black History Month. One of the marshals who accompanied her 36 years ago remembered that day.

CHARLES BURKS, U.S. Marshal (Ret.): We expected a lot of trouble, but, as it turned out, it wasn't nearly as bad as we thought, even though Miss Bridges probably thought it was.

For a little girl six years old going into a strange school with four strange deputy marshals, a place she had never been before, she showed a lot of courage.

She never cried. She didn't whimper. She just marched along like a little soldier. And we're all very proud of her. (applause)

CHARLAYNE HUNTER-GAULT: And Ruby Bridges Hall, in turn, thanked the marshals.

RUBY BRIDGES HALL: I wish there were enough marshals to walk with every child as they faced the hatred and racism today, and to support, encourage them the way these federal marshals did for me.

I know there aren't enough of you, but I do hope that I have inspired some of you today to join me again by dedicating yourselves to not just protecting but uplifting those you touch because that will enable us to rise together as a people, as a nation, and as a world.

CHARLAYNE HUNTER-GAULT: Here with us now is Ruby Bridges Hall, and welcome. You were six years old when you went into that school. Did you have any idea at that age what you were getting into?

RUBY BRIDGES HALL: No, I really didn't. I remember that morning my mom saying to me, "Ruby, you're going to a new school today. I want you to behave." I remember the federal marshals driving up in the car and us being in the car driving to the school.

I also remember the conversation that was going on in the car. Federal marshals were explaining to us how we should get out of the car and how to walk once we arrived in front of the school.

CHARLAYNE HUNTER-GAULT: Did they tell you there'd be nasty people there, or--

RUBY BRIDGES HALL: Oh, no, not at all.

CHARLAYNE HUNTER-GAULT: Nobody prepared you for that?

RUBY BRIDGES HALL: No. And I kind of feel like that was a good thing because it's--it would have been very frightening for me as a six-year-old to hear what I might actually see once I got there.

CHARLAYNE HUNTER-GAULT: It would loom large in your imagination.

RUBY BRIDGES HALL: Yes.

CHARLAYNE HUNTER-GAULT: And yet when you confronted it and saw it, do you remember your reaction?

RUBY BRIDGES HALL: Driving up I could see the crowd, but living in New Orleans, I actually thought it was Mardi Gras. There was a large crowd of people outside of the school. They were throwing things and shouting, and that sort of goes on in New Orleans at Mardi Gras.

I really didn't realize until I got into the school that something else was going on. Angry parents at that point rushed in and took their kids out of school. And my mother and I sat in--

CHARLAYNE HUNTER-GAULT: You mean, you sat there as they paraded the other kids out of the school. You saw that?

RUBY BRIDGES HALL: Yes. And I didn't quite understand what was going on, but they seemed very upset, and they were shouting, and pointing at us because we were sitting behind some glass doors.

CHARLAYNE HUNTER-GAULT: You and your mother?

RUBY BRIDGES HALL: My mother and I in the principal's office. And we sat there all day because we were not able to go to class because all of this was going on. So I actually didn't attend class until the very next day.

CHARLAYNE HUNTER-GAULT: And what happened then?

RUBY BRIDGES HALL: The very next day upon arriving at the school the federal marshals escorted me to my classroom, and once I got there, the teacher was there. There were all these desks and no kids. And I actually thought I was early that day.

CHARLAYNE HUNTER-GAULT: You thought you were early.

RUBY BRIDGES HALL: I thought I was early.

CHARLAYNE HUNTER-GAULT: You mean, you still hadn't grasped the enormity of this and what was going on?

RUBY BRIDGES HALL: Not at all. And actually what had happened is that all the kids were taken out of the school, and the school at that point was boycotted.

CHARLAYNE HUNTER-GAULT: How long did it stay like that?

RUBY BRIDGES HALL: That lasted for over a year.

CHARLAYNE HUNTER-GAULT: You went to school every day.

RUBY BRIDGES HALL: Yes.

CHARLAYNE HUNTER-GAULT: Tell me about that.

RUBY BRIDGES HALL: Every day I went to school. My teacher, who was actually from Boston, accepted that job not knowing that the schools were going to be integrated that day.

But she taught me, and every day I would arrive. She would greet me, take me to my classroom, and it was just her and I.

CHARLAYNE HUNTER-GAULT: And she would teach you as if she were teaching a whole class?

RUBY BRIDGES HALL: Exactly.

CHARLAYNE HUNTER-GAULT: Did you come to create a bond between the two of you?

RUBY BRIDGES HALL: We got to be very, very close. As a matter of fact, I met her again last year. I had not seen her since then, 35 years actually, and I met her, and she said, "You know, it's funny, I just realized that neither one of us ever missed a day of school." And I said, "You're right. I don't know what we would have done."

CHARLAYNE HUNTER-GAULT: In Bob Coles' book, he writes of that teacher looking out the window, thinking that she saw you one day talking to this mob, but you weren't really. Tell me what was going on.

RUBY BRIDGES HALL: Well, the story is that I prayed. And I don't actually remember that, but it sort of comes from the fact that my mother said to me, "Ruby, if I'm not with you and you're afraid, then always say your prayers."

And that's something we were taught. I was raised that way. If I had a nightmare, I would go to her bed at night, and she'd say, "Well, did you say your prayers," and I would say, "No."

And she'd say, "Well, that's why you had the nightmare. Go back and get on your knees." And so she said, "If I'm not with you, then say your prayers."

CHARLAYNE HUNTER-GAULT: So you used to say your prayers a few blocks away.

RUBY BRIDGES HALL: Yes.

CHARLAYNE HUNTER-GAULT: But this day you forgot.

RUBY BRIDGES HALL: Yes.

CHARLAYNE HUNTER-GAULT: Until you got in the middle of the mob.

RUBY BRIDGES HALL: Right.

CHARLAYNE HUNTER-GAULT: So you just stopped--

RUBY BRIDGES HALL: And said my prayers.

CHARLAYNE HUNTER-GAULT: What did you say?

RUBY BRIDGES HALL: I don't actually remember the prayer.

CHARLAYNE HUNTER-GAULT: It's in Bob's book.

RUBY BRIDGES HALL: But I prayed, yes.

CHARLAYNE HUNTER-GAULT: It's quite beautiful.

RUBY BRIDGES HALL: I prayed for the people. That's what I did. And so that was actually--that tells me that I was really afraid because that's when I would say my prayers.

CHARLAYNE HUNTER-GAULT: You prayed for those people who were being mean to you?

RUBY BRIDGES HALL: Yes.

CHARLAYNE HUNTER-GAULT: That's pretty amazing. When, if ever, did things get better?

RUBY BRIDGES HALL: Not until much--well, actually better the next year because at that point the school was totally integrated.

CHARLAYNE HUNTER-GAULT: So everybody came back?

RUBY BRIDGES HALL: Everybody came back. But later on, it's always important for me to point out that there were some families who actually felt like this was okay, white families, that their kids attend school with a black child.

But you have to keep in mind that they also had to cross a picket line to do that. And so there were very, very few people that had the nerve enough to do that, to subject their child to that.

CHARLAYNE HUNTER-GAULT: And your own family paid a price, right?

RUBY BRIDGES HALL: Oh, definitely. My father was always against the idea. He felt like, you know, why subject me to that; just send me to the black school that I had been going to, I could get the same education there.

But my mother was very persistent, and she insisted on it and finally convinced him to go through with it.

CHARLAYNE HUNTER-GAULT: But he lost his job.

RUBY BRIDGES HALL: He lost his job. He came home one night and said that his boss said that he could no longer keep him there working.

CHARLAYNE HUNTER-GAULT: Too much pressure.

RUBY BRIDGES HALL: Because there was too much pressure. Everybody knew that it was his daughter that was going to this white school, and so he had to fire him.

CHARLAYNE HUNTER-GAULT: Even your grandparents suffered.

RUBY BRIDGES HALL: My grandparents, who were sharecroppers in Mississippi at the time, had been living there for 25 years on this farm, and they had to leave Mississippi. They then moved to Louisiana, which is where they live now. But even the people that they sharecropped for said that, you know, everybody knows that it's your granddaughter that's in the school, and we're going to have to ask you to leave.

CHARLAYNE HUNTER-GAULT: You talked about the three things that sustained you during that time: prayer, faith was one, your family, and friends.

RUBY BRIDGES HALL: Yes. That was very, very important. I don't think that my parents could have gone through what they did without the whole community coming together. We had friends that would come over and help dress me for school.

Even when I rode to school, there was people in the neighborhood that would walk behind the car. I actually didn't live that far from school, and so they would actually just come out and walk to school with me.

CHARLAYNE HUNTER-GAULT: What impact did that experience have on your life?

RUBY BRIDGES HALL: It took me a while to really realize just how important that sacrifice was that my parents made. And having four kids myself, I--

CHARLAYNE HUNTER-GAULT: Four boys, right?

RUBY BRIDGES HALL: Four boys--I struggled quite a bit trying to raise them, and I soon found out that what I really wanted to do is to work with kids. And something happened in my family. I lost my brother a few years ago. He had four daughters that I took in and started to raise.

I then found out that they were sort of raising themselves, and it just hit me that we're not concerned about each other's children anymore.

CHARLAYNE HUNTER-GAULT: So your focus today is totally on education?

RUBY BRIDGES HALL: Education, children, and family.

CHARLAYNE HUNTER-GAULT: And has the school system changed that much in all those years? I mean, do you still grapple with some of the same problems?

RUBY BRIDGES HALL: Yes. Some of the same problems. The biggest problem, I think, is that parents are not as involved with their children's education as they used to be.

CHARLAYNE HUNTER-GAULT: So it's not the racial aspect as much as it is--

RUBY BRIDGES HALL: I don't think so. I don't think so. I started the Ruby Bridges Foundation in the hopes of bringing parents back into the schools and taking a more active role in their kids' education.

I believe that if I can bring resources into the school that the public school system can do but ultimately what we want as parents is a good education for our kids. It doesn't matter who they sit next to.

CHARLAYNE HUNTER-GAULT: Well, Ruby Bridges, thank you for joining us, and Bob Coles' book, all the proceeds go to the Ruby Bridges Foundation.

RUBY BRIDGES HALL: Yes.

CHARLAYNE HUNTER-GAULT: For that purpose.

RUBY BRIDGES HALL: Yes.

CHARLAYNE HUNTER-GAULT: Well, all the best.

RUBY BRIDGES HALL: Thank you.



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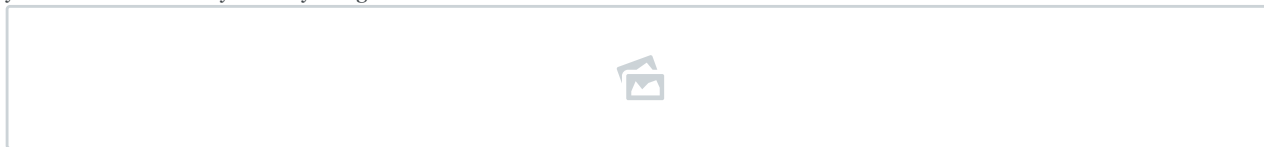
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thank you ruby bridges.i am a big fan of yours

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Nav • 2 years ago

Great going Ruby..

Your MoM rocks.. :-)

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Colby · 2 years ago

the movie was ok but i didn't like it when she couldn't go to school with white people because. And because she so many people surrounding her as she tried to get in everybody kept disagreeing if she could go in or not!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

3 ^ | v · Share ›



Sydni · 2 years ago

Good interview Ruby you r my hero

5 ^ | v · Share ›



Dillard1744 · 2 years ago

ruby bridges was a true believer

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hippo house · 3 years ago

The Ruby Briges Story on DVD the movie is fantastic it should be watched by all intrested in her story you won't stop crying in some scenes.

6 ^ | v · Share ›



hippo house · 3 years ago

The Ruby Bridges DVD movie is excellent to watch

6 ^ | v · Share ›



Francisco Decorion · 3 years ago

A very encouraging story. More power to the Ruby Bridges family.

6 ^ | v · Share ›



Allie Williams · 3 years ago

I really enjoyed this interview. I bought the book, "The Ruby Bridges Story" for my granddaughter when she was eight years old. It became her favorite book, then I got the movie and we watch it together often. I emphasize the fact of how strong and brave Ruby was as a little girl. My granddaughter, Desiree is ten years old now, and has learning disabilities(dyslexia) that makes her feel that she's not smart. I tell her that God made you this way because He knew that you are strong and will work harder than the other children to learn, just like Ruby. God's blessings to Ruby and her family.

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