

Melba Patillo Beals: A Shero for All Seasons

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Melba Patillo Beals is one of my *sheroes*. You must meet her. She is both amazing and inspiring! Melba and eight other African American youth volunteered to desegregate Central High School (CHS) in Little Rock, Arkansas in 1957. She had no idea just how dangerous or meaningful that mission would be. Her decision to attend and the fierce opposition to integration by the white citizens of the city, the Governor, and racists from neighboring states put Melba and eight other high school teens (labeled the *Little Rock Nine*) on a collision course of historic proportions. Even the President of the United States got into the dispute supporting Melba's and her friend's Constitutional right to attend the all white high school.

The Supreme Court had ruled on May 17, 1954 that racial segregation was inherently unequal. Three years later, Melba and her friends volunteered to be the first to attend the all white school as the laws allowed. The Governor, however, opposed such a move and sent members of the Arkansas National Guard to block their entry. He inflamed the passions of the white majority opposed to integration. Ugly mobs threatening violence gathered in front of CHS to stop the teens from going in. The Little Rock Nine arrived, but quickly had to flee for their lives. The story made national and international headlines.

President Eisenhower stepped into the fray, siding with the Little Rock Nine. He forced Governor Faubus to remove the National Guard troops from blocking the entrance to CHS and allow the students to enter the buildings (a governor of a state must enforce not disobey federal laws). With US Army military escorts Melba and her friends were reluctantly permitted entry into the school. Melba quickly found out that getting into CHS was the easy part. Once in the buildings the nine students suffered racist - driven, violence, harassment, and tortuous persecution from the white students.

The awful truth is that a lot of whites preferred Melba and her friends dead rather than to have their presence "pollute" their racially exclusive high school. The students, teachers and administrators, police, the religious leaders, merchants, and political leaders of the city and the state; were all fiercely opposed to having black students attend CHS. However, Melba and her eight partners, with the support of the National Association of Colored People (NAACP), the courts, their families, and sheer will power to pursue justice through a quality education would not be denied.

White parents taught their children attending CHS how to express hatred by inflicting physical pain and emotional injury on the black students. The plan was to hurt and intimidate the nine students into quitting. The teachers formed part of the conspiracy. When the assaults began, the police looked the other way. The few teachers and students who wanted to do the right thing were frustrated and prohibited from helping – or else. Nevertheless, a few took the risks and are celebrated by Melba in her book.

Read her book, **Warriors Don't Cry**, to walk with Melba through the halls of the high school from hell as she describes her daily struggles to stay alive and excel. She will become your *shero* as well. Melba was only 15 when the struggles to get a quality education began. Her losses were staggering. She lost her innocence, naiveté, and peace of mind. Her faith was put to the test big time. The experience punched holes in her self confidence. Salt was poured into her wounds. She suffered indignities that made shambles of her 16th birthday, cheapened her humanity, and endangered her safety and that of her family. The pain would not stop. It became so unbearable – that she thought of killing herself. Here is a list of some of what she experienced:

- Chased by mobs shouting racial slurs
- Barely escaping the clutches of a rapist
- Harassing phone calls at all hours of the night
- Having home under KKK surveillance 24/7
- Realizing that the police were part of the problem
- Dispersion of friends to different hostile classrooms
- Denial of participating in extra curricular activities
- Suspension threats for acts of self-defense
- Taunts to invite aggression leading to expulsion
- Teachers refusing to help victims or to discipline culprits
- Helplessly watching friends get assaulted
- Stabbings with pencils and other sharp objects
- Tripping on the legs of bullies
- Dodging burning rolls of toilet paper while on stalls
- Being shoved down stairs cases
- Befriended then rejected by students to cause pain
- Punched while walking through school hallways
- Wiping spit from face
- Finding locker broken into and stuff missing
- Discovering peanut butter and broken glass on seat
- Clothing damaged by ink, urine and smelly filth
- Slaps in the face
- Gym showers suddenly turned to hot scalding levels
- Clothes taken from gym shower area put in toilets
- Deflecting from face exploding fire crackers tied to wires

- Losing friends who did not want to be in harms way
- Seeing mom lose her job over school integration
- Black community anger over making waves
- Coping with crisis of her parents divorce

Melba confided in her beloved grandmother India about her desire to end it all through suicide. The two had a heart to heart talk on the outcome of such a decision. Snapping out of her desire to call it quits; Melba shares the meaning of her relationship to her family and how she became resilient and motivated to continue in her quest to excel:

During those days I felt close to her, and I knew I had been silly for wanting to give up. Several times she looked at me and said, “*Don’t you know, child, how much I love you, how much your mama loves you? Whenever you think about going away from this earth, think about how you’d break my heart and your brother’s heart. You might as well take your mother with you because she’d be beside herself.*”...She made me get a project I really liked and encouraged me to keep on top of it. I chose the blast-off of the Explorer, the satellite that put our country into the space race...Grandma studied up on the topic, and we talked for hours while she taught me how to do the quilting for Mother’s birthday present.

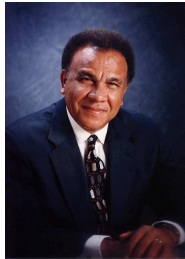
Melba returns to the tortuous conditions at CHS because she was loved by her family. Looking up to her loved ones meant getting down to the difficult work of excelling in school in spite of the adversity. Melba wanted an education as much as, if not more than, a racist society did not want her to have it. She knew more education meant having more options. Getting out of oppressive circumstances required putting up with the painful reality impacting her and the other eight students. She put her life on the line to have access to what too many of us take for granted and do not always take seriously. Education is the passport out of ignorance, out of poverty, and out of hostile environments. It will also allow you to work where you live to dismantle walls of separation with educated people from every identity group in the community.

I have read her memoirs, **Warriors Don’t Cry**, *twice* and recommend that you read it at least once. In spite of their abuse and emotional turmoil Melba and her peers finished that awful school year and advanced the cause of civil rights in our country. The Little Rock Nine are recognized as civil rights champions in the annals of history in the USA.

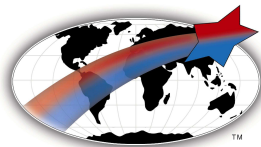
Go through the book and then let her book go through you. Feel the power of Melba being hated and refusing to hate in return. Apply her principles of resiliency and learn to bounce back from adversity. Adversity and not the easy life will build and shape your character. The ugly, horrible, abusive stuff that’s causing injury

today – if it does not destroy you, will make you stronger tomorrow. That's' what happened to our shero.

Keep your eyes on the prize. When you get knocked down - get up. Refuse to stay on the ground. The harder Melba got hit the more determined her movements forward became. Strip yourself from crippling excuses that frustrate your journey to the head of the class. Quit making a career of indulging in self pity. Emulate Melba. She gave her family and those yearning for a more just society, the gift of an educated self. Do likewise. Live the truism: "Flee not from the storm; rather learn to dance in the rain." Dare to thrive, achieve, and excel in the face of dangerous distractions in hostile surroundings and against painful obstacles in your path. *And, may her force be with you!*



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