New book explores Little Rock women’s painful journey


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SPECIAL TO THE COURIER

On Sept. 26, 1957, Elizabeth Eckford, one of nine students selected to integrate Little Rock Central High School, walked past a large, hostile crowd, some of them waving Confederate flags, as she approached the massive brick building.

Turned away by two National Guardsmen, with guns raised, Elizabeth headed toward the bus stop to return home. Three girls fell in behind her; one of them, Hazel Bryan, her face contorted with hate, shouted, "Go home, nigger."

A photograph by Will Counts of the Arkansas Democrat-Gazette, capturing the moment, became an icon of the civil rights movement.

In "Elizabeth and Hazel," David Margolick, a contributing editor to Vanity Fair, recounts the remarkable experiences of two women whose lives were changed forever by the encounter they had that day. It is a story, beautifully told, of heroism – and, alas, an achingly painful account of the obstacles that stand in the way of racial reconciliation.

A heavy toll

Margolick helps readers remember – or learn about – the cruelties endured by pioneers for racial justice. Inside Central High, he indicates, segregationists set the tone. With two of them rarely in class together, the Black kids felt isolated.

Teachers as well as students did not hide their opposition to desegregation. When Miss Emily Penton (whose history class emphasized that slavery civilized Blacks and the Ku Klux Klan protected White women) collected money for a subscription to a newspaper, she refused to touch Elizabeth, asking her to put her coins on her desk.

These experiences exacted a heavy toll. Elizabeth left Central before graduating, enrolled in Knox College, then moved to Central State University in Wilberforce, Ohio.

She drifted from job to job, had two children out of wedlock, suffered from depression, and tried to take her own life, before (years later) settling into permanent employment as a parole officer.

A new life

As Elizabeth struggled, Hazel Bryan had her own odyssey. Disenchanted with her church, she explored New Age alternatives, studied belly dancing, participated in peace movements and social work – and changed her attitudes toward Black people.

"Declaring that life is more than a moment," Hazel apologized to Elizabeth and the two women struck up a friendship. They went to home and garden shows, shopped for fabrics, confided in each other about their kids, and made joint appearances at events commemorating the school desegregation crisis.

Elizabeth, who had been unemployed for two decades, acknowledged that Hazel helped give her a new life. The middle-aged odd couple posed for a photograph that became a reconciliation poster.

Different views

But, Margolick reveals, the friendship did not endure. Noting that Hazel refused to blame her parents for her intolerance and pleaded amnesia about the events of Sept. 4, Elizabeth concluded that she hadn’t really taken responsibility for her...
Hazel began to feel that Elizabeth was relentlessly negative, refusing to admit that Little Rock had made any racial progress at all. Even worse, Elizabeth treated her as if she were on permanent probation.

Hazel told Elizabeth she did not want to make any more joint appearances with her – and removed the reconciliation poster from her library wall. "Quietly, unceremoniously," Margolick writes, the "experiment in racial rapprochement was over."

True reconciliation, Elizabeth insisted, comes only after an honest acknowledgment of the past. It can occur, Hazel countered, only when former antagonists let go of hatred and resentment and move on.

In 2011, Margolick concludes, while the racial chasm has narrowed, Blacks remain wary while Whites feel distrusted and disparaged.

Elizabeth and Hazel came oh-so-close. Let’s hope, along with Margolick, that "somewhere down the road, when no one else is looking, they will find a way to meet."

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Last Updated ( Thursday, 06 October 2011 14:59 )