

Reflections on the Little Rock Nine

By Terry Howard, Diversity/Inclusion Director, Texas Instruments

Several columns (**July 2007**) ago I told you about my being called the "N-word" by some young idiot while I was out walking one day. As you can imagine, I got lots of interesting e-mail about that one. At the time, that incident interrupted my thoughts about a trip to Little Rock, Ark., we were planning to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the famous Little Rock Nine. Oddly, I can now rationalize that maybe getting dinged by the N-word was my preparation for the trip.



Terry Howard

Have a question or comment?

If you have questions about diversity issues or suggestions for topics to be covered in this column, send an e-mail to w-howard1@ti.com.

Well, we did go, 10 of us in all – a mix of Asian, white, black and Latino – from First America, Tyson Foods and Cisco Systems. But first some context. It's essential that you click on the following link before reading further: [Little Rock Central High School National Historic Site](#).

Now one of the first things you'll see is a picture of Elizabeth Eckford, a 15-year-old black girl in dark sunglasses surrounded by an angry mob. Many of you may recognize that one. The Associated Press rated it as one of the 50 most important photographs of the century.

I've longed dreamed of having conversations with people who in my mind embody sheer courage. Plus I've always wanted to hug Elizabeth. On Nov. 9, I finally got to do both. And my life will never be the same. Never. So after a week of painstaking writing and editing, here's my story.

I stared at my shaking hands after that walk down tree-lined Park Street in front of Central High, the exact same route Elizabeth took 50 years ago. The difference, of course, was that screaming mobs were nowhere to be seen during my walk. There weren't any national guards or TV crews. Unlike Elizabeth, no spit – one of the most demeaning acts of mankind – nor death threats came my way. Mine took three



Reflections on The Little Rock Nine

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minutes; hers probably felt like three hours. Yet I trembled.

And I wasn't the only one. Wrote one person later: "Walking down that sidewalk toward the school after the park ranger had told of Elizabeth's plight was heart wrenching. Thank you so much for hugging me and letting me cry."

The sheer size of Central High, five stories tall, is mind-boggling. When you see it for the first time, it doesn't take long for its significance in the struggle for civil rights in the U.S to sink in. Now if I was awestruck and intimidated by it, try to imagine what it was like for nine black children attempting to enter knowing full well that they were not wanted there. It's tough to come up with words precise enough to describe my emotions as we followed our tour guide to the first floor.

Although school was in session, I found the inside of the building eerily dark. My imagination trailed my eyes to the dark corners, the gloomy stairwells and left me wondering about the dangers that lurked, the verbal and physical abuses that leapt serpent-like out of the shadows and injected such venom, such irreparable emotional damage, on those nine children as they moved from class to class. I thought about the many eyes, inside and outside, that looked the other way. And I trembled.

"I found the school 'haunting,' said a person afterwards. "To think of what went on in those hallowed halls ... to CHILDREN!"

As a parent, my stomach churned as I tried to comprehend what went through the minds of their parents, the heroes behind the heroes, when they sent them off to school every day into the unknown, the uncertainty, into the dangers seen and dangers not seen. And I trembled.

We peered into the large auditorium, slipped quietly down a stairwell where members of The Nine were known to have been shoved and spat down upon, and ended up huddled together in the huge cafeteria. A few obligatory questions emerged from our group and punctured our silence as we walked, contemplated and whispered.

Suffice it to say, we were emotionally spent when we left through one of several exits in the back of the building where, we were told, The Little Rock Nine were secretly rushed out by national guards to awaiting cars to avoid reporters and angry throngs of students and parents. We crossed the street, assembled in a small park drenched in the autumn sun, reflected, hugged each other and fought back the tears knowing full well that we'd just experienced something huge, something indelible, something life-altering.

We wanted to talk, needed to talk, tried to talk but instinctively knew that mere words wouldn't work. So we splintered out in different directions to sort through our feelings individually.

We then reconvened across the street at the Little Rock Nine national historic site that opened in September, stepped gingerly through a group of student visitors, past the front desk and immersed ourselves in the **black and white pictures, the videos and the books and memorabilia that captured the events of that time.**

A short time later we walked into a small hotel conference room and there sat Elizabeth Eckford, the Elizabeth Eckford.

Ripened by the passage of time, and the burden of pain, her facial features were largely unchanged. The high cheekbones, the ones that hoisted those famous sunglasses that deflected the saliva and hid the fear and humiliation, were the same. Her presence was a commanding one. There was a halo-like aura about her. As we listened to Elizabeth, clearly the hurt was still there, anesthetized somewhat by the years. One person wrote to me later: "Despite that strength, you could hear the pain in her voice and sense the personal wounds that she suffered and still bears."

During the next hour she recounted those turbulent events of 50 years ago. She was our conduit, our real time hyperlink between the then and the now. She put a face on our just-completed walk through the hallways of Central High. She told us about the different directions in life the original members of The Little Rock Nine had taken and what her life has been like over the years.

Ms. Eckford riveted us as she talked about the blatant harassment her son encountered in the military, the support by their families, the largely untold story of the tremendous pressure and threats well-meaning whites encountered when they tried to stand up for justice.

Elizabeth concluded by talking about the tremendous tension between letting go and moving on, about reconciliation and what it was like to meet face-to-face with one of her tormentors a while ago. She saw herself then and sees her now as just an ordinary person, but said: "Sometimes ordinary people can do extraordinary things under the right circumstances." Those are the prophetic words that flowed from the lips of a person who knows; someone who can rightly and unilaterally utter them from firsthand experience.

In the end, you couldn't help but admire Ms. Eckford's willingness to relive the past, to permit us to reopen the wounds, to ask questions she's answered thousands of times throughout the years. What we saw in her was an extraordinary brand of courage, someone who accepted her unasked-for place in history, her responsibility to tell an American – correction, a human – story that many want to hear and many others would rather forget, rationalize or deny altogether.

For decades I wanted to meet and hug that courageous little black girl behind those large dark sunglasses in that famous picture. On Nov. 9, 2007, I finally got the opportunity.

And I trembled!

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