

## reviews

**Carlotta Walls LaNier, with Lisa Frazier Page, *A Mighty Long Way: My Journey to Justice at Little Rock Central High School*. Ballantine/One World, 2009. 284 pp.**

As a consequence of the *Brown vs. Board of Education* ruling in 1954, Little Rock, Arkansas's Board of Education made plans to comply with the Supreme Court decision beginning in the 1957-58 school year. Although the plan called for gradual integration in only one school, African Americans hoped that school integration would be a step toward gaining full civil rights. The African American students who enrolled in Central High School hoped for increased educational opportunities. The audacity of those hopes helped sustain the nine students through a year of taunts, threats, harassment, violence, and retaliation for their pioneering efforts.

As a sophomore, Carlotta Walls was the youngest of the nine black students to attend Central High in 1957. She was also one of only two students to return to Central High in her senior year and graduate from that institution. Carlotta then left Little Rock to pursue a college education and eventually a career in real estate. The desegregation experience was a seemingly closed chapter in her life. When the story resurfaced as a made-for-TV movie in 1980, Walls LaNier was living in Colorado with her husband and two children. She had not yet told the story to her children and had failed to mention it to even close friends.

Like Walls LaNier, the other students who desegregated Central High in 1957 had all moved on from Little Rock, pursuing education, careers, and family life outside of Arkansas. They were first reunited during the thirtieth anniversary celebration and have subsequently met for the fortieth and fiftieth anniversaries. They also have formed the Little Rock Nine Foundation to raise college scholarship funds. Collectively, their story is now both famous and commemorated annually in Little Rock. But as Walls LaNier points out in her prologue, while the Little Rock Nine are fused in the public mind, they are still 'nine distinct personalities with nine different stories' (xvi). Fifty years after the events, Walls Lanier was ready to tell hers in *A Mighty Long Way: My Journey to Justice at Little Rock Central High School*.

The memoir is framed by political leaders who are significant to Walls LaNier. Former President Clinton, who as Arkansas's governor had welcomed the nine pioneers to the Governor's Mansion in Little Rock during the thirtieth anniversary celebration, wrote the foreword as a long time friend and champion of the Little Rock Nine; the final chapter of the memoir focuses on the presidential campaign and election of Barack Obama. Walls LaNier includes photographs of herself and her family dressed in their formal attire to attend Obama's inaugural ball. The book, however, is not about politics, not explicitly anyway. The memoir is

about Walls LaNier's family—the family that supported her decision to attend Central High and gave her the resources to survive and succeed.

The early chapters of the memoir include Walls LaNier's childhood recollections of her family—both close and extended—as well as research into her family's history. Walls LaNier identifies the values that she learned in her childhood as pride, determination, self-sufficiency, and an understanding of the value of education. When her eighth grade teacher passed around a sign-up sheet for those who wanted to attend Central High the following year, Carlotta weighed the options, recognized the educational advantage of attending the premier high school in the state, and put her name on the list. Because the family values were so naturalized, she did not even mention the decision to her parents, not to hide it from them, but because 'in my mind, I had done what my parents expected. They had told me all my life that a good education was paramount and that I should always strive for better. Central clearly seemed the better choice for me, so my decision didn't stick out in my mind as one that needed much discussion' (45).

Walls LaNier admits that she was also naïve, not initially recognizing that there would be such strident opposition to school integration. Like other Central High memoirists, she documents the events of that volatile year through the lens of her personal experiences. She also, however, documents the toll on her family. Her family struggled economically because her father, for the first time in his career as a skilled brick mason, had trouble finding jobs. In the late winter of her senior year, the family home was bombed, clearly an act by segregationists, yet her father and two young black men (one a long-time childhood friend of Carlotta's) were accused of the crime. While her father was released after two days of violent interrogation, the two others were convicted. Walls LaNier devotes one chapter to her reunion with Herbert Monts, her unjustly punished friend and neighbor.

From the vantage point of fifty years, Walls LaNier recognizes the 'mighty long way' she traveled from a naïve teenager to the head of the Little Rock Nine Foundation which has raised nearly a million dollars for its scholarship program; the mighty long way from being escorted into school by armed guards to being a part of the crowd in Denver's Mile High Stadium the night Barack Obama accepted the Democratic Party's nomination for president. She recalls soaking up 'every bit of this historic moment—the faces, the cheers, the energy, the joy, the hope for this young man who looked like me. I had seen this country at its worst, and now I was able to see and touch the monumental change unfolding before me' (268). Carlotta Walls LaNier began her journey in hope and while she does not claim that justice has been achieved, she does suggest that one must step forward and begin the journey if justice is to be a possibility at all.

*Janelle Collins, Arkansas State University*