Interview with Ernest Green
August 26, 1979; September 15, 1979
Production Team: D
Camera Rolls: 3-6, 9
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Interview gathered as part of ***America, They Loved You Madly,*** a precursor to ***Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years (1954-1965).*** Produced by Blackside, Inc. Housed at the Washington University Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection.

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Note: These transcripts contain material that did not appear in the final program. Only text appearing in ***bold italics*** was used in the final version of Eyes on the Prize.

00:00:00:00 — 00:02:35:00

[sound roll 2]

[wild sound]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER #1:
—PLEASE.

ERNEST GREEN:
Ernest Green. Little Rock, Arkansas.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER #1:
THANK YOU.

[cut]

INTERVIEWER:
AND MAYBE I CAN GET YOU TO, TO KIND OF JUST BRIEFLY...

ERNEST GREEN:
Talk a little bit about that? Oh, all right.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER #1:
WE'RE GONNA ROLL.

INTERVIEWER:

OK.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER #1:
LET'S ROLL.

[camera roll 3]

[picture begins]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER #1:
ROLLING.

ERNEST GREEN:
Yeah, the, it was in August, early August, I was working for a, as a locker room attendant at a country club. It was white. In fact it was a Jewish country club, because in the South, Jews were not allowed to join the other country clubs, so there were a number of them with enough money to go ahead and form their own. So I had this job, it was in the locker room that summer as a towel attendant. And we got called down to the school board office, one evening. I was informed that afternoon that I was one of the students selected. I didn't know who the other students were. I didn't know how large the number was. And for the first time, when I got down there, I met the other eight students. Now, four of them I knew. We grew up, lived in the same neighborhood, same church, went to junior high school and the earlier grades at the same time. But the next morning, the newspapers ran the names of the, of the nine, nine of us who were going to Central. And I'll never forget, I went back to work the next day, this young guy, who was about my age, his folks were members of the club, he came up to me and said, how could you do it? I said, what do you mean, how could I do it? He said, you seem like such a nice fellow. And, you know, why is it you want to go, go to Central. Why do you want to destroy our relationship? And, first time it begin to hit me that, that going there was not going to be as simple as I had thought the first time when I signed up. I was still committed to go but it made me know at that time that it, it was going to mean a lot to a lot of people in that city, particularly, particularly to white folks. And—

[cut]

[wild sound]

ERNEST GREEN:
—from then on, events started to cascade. We had a—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER #1:
WE'VE HAD A MAGAZINE—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER #2:
RUN OUT.

[cut]

[camera roll 4]

[slate]

00:02:36:00 — 00:07:09:00

CAMERA CREW MEMBER #1:
SPEED.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER #2:
ROLLING.

INTERVIEWER:
LET'S GO BACK TO THAT, THAT SUMMER. AND DID YOU EXPECT, WAS THERE TROUBLE EXPECTED EVEN THOUGH YOU WERE APPREHENSIVE?

ERNEST GREEN:
Well, I wasn't any trouble expected. I think given, given the fact that there had been other schools in Arkansas that had, that had been integrated. Fort Smith, Arkansas and some others. The buses in Little Rock had been desegregated without any problems. The library and the university, the medical and, and the law school had admitted some blacks. So it was an expectation that there would be problems, minimally, nothing of a major cause célèbre that would put Little Rock on the map, as it occurred. And only, the first inclination we had of it, that I had of it, maybe some other folks and may-, maybe Daisy and some others were aware of it, but the night before we were, we were to go to school, the Labor Day—Monday night, schools traditionally started in Little Rock the Tuesday after Labor Day—Faubus came on TV and indicated that he was calling out the National Guard to prevent our entrance into Central because of what he thought were threats to our lives. He was doing it for our own protection. [laughs] Even at that time, that was his, that was his line. And that the troops would be out in front of the school and they would bar our entrance to, to Central, for our protection, as well as for the protection and tranquility of the, of the city. So only that Monday night that I know that I wasn't going to be able to go to school the next morning. Now, that night also, Daisy called us all up and told us that we were gonna go to school as a group and to arrange to meet at her house, and there were a number of ministers that I was not aware of but had been involved in trying to lay a groundwork to have this, the integration of the schools reasonably accepted by the people in the, in the city. So that morning, eight of us gathered at Daisy's house; Elizabeth wasn't there. And we went by car to Central, to the corner of 14th Street and Park. It was about eight o'clock that morning. And we made an attempt to go through the troops and were denied access to the front of the school. And we went home after that. Elizabeth had missed the call; she didn't have a phone I think. And that morning she was at the other end, two blocks down 16th, where there was nobody, no supporters at least, none of the ministers, none of the people that had helped us provide transportation up to the school. And that she was down there facing the mob by herself. None of us knew that until we got home after school. So that was the first day at Central. And then we were out of school for three weeks after that. While the litigation between the, the state

and the federal government, and finally, it was the day after my birthday, I think it was the 23rd of September, we went to school after they finally withdrew the National Guard. This is before the troops came. And we stayed in school only a half a day, because again we were unaware [coughs] that there was a mob outside the school and that was about to break through the police barriers. So, about noon that day, we went home again and looked at the footage on, on TV. It looked a lot more frightening watching it on TV than what we were experiencing inside the school. We stayed out a day and a half after that. And then the morning after, Eisenhower sent a thousand paratroopers to Little Rock, and the next morning we went to school with the assistance of the 101st Airborne Division.

00:07:10:00 — 00:08:50:00

INTERVIEWER:
WHAT'S IT LIKE TO BE SIXTEEN YEARS OLD AND BE SURROUNDED BY MILITARY HARDWARE?

ERNEST GREEN:
That was more military hardware than I'd ever seen. Went to school in an army station wagon, and I al-, I think if anything stays on my mind as long as I live, this does: that there was the colonel in charge of, of the detail escorting us to school, was, was from South Carolina, he told us that. And he had a very thick Southern accent. And he went to great pains to assure Mrs. Bates and the other parents that were there that he was there to provide protection. And that seemed, what I knew about, about Southerners, so incongruous that this guy with this deep southern accent was going to provide us with our protection. But, ***when we got into the jeep—into the station wagon, rather—and the convoy that went from Mrs. Bates' house to the school, it had a jeep in front, a jeep behind. They both had machine gun mounts.*** There were soldiers with rifles. ***And then*** when we got to the front of the school, ***the whole school was ringed with, with paratroopers and helicopters hovering around***, and ***we*** walked, ***marched up the steps***, and walked up the steps ***with this circle of soldiers with bayonets drawn. I figured that we had really, [laughs] we had really gone into school that day*** without any problems, ***and...***I guess, given the problems we had getting in there, ***walking up the steps that day was probably one of the biggest feelings I've ever had. I figured I had finally cracked it***.

INTERVIEWER:
CUT FOR A SECOND.

[cut]

[wild sound]

00:08:51:00 — 00:09:22:00

ERNEST GREEN:
Labor Day, the, the removal of the National Guard. I mean, barring us going in, the removal of the Guards, then our going back in...only about four or five events in there.

INTERVIEWER:
FAUBUS PULLS THE GUARD AFTER—

ERNEST GREEN:
After the local police were trying to theoretically prevent the mob from coming through. And then after that, then Eisenhower calls in the, the army.

00:09:23:00 — 00:10:04:00

INTERVIEWER:
AND ONCE THE ARMY IS THERE, FOR HOW LONG? FOR THE REST OF THE...

ERNEST GREEN:
The army is really there for the rest of the school year, they, they are on, on campus in the school for about three months just before Christmas. They pull out of providing protection for us, personal protection for us, right around Christmas. Then when we come back in January, there are no longer the paratroopers in the school. But they stayed in the city throughout all of that school term. In fact, when I graduated that, that May, they were on duty at the, at the stadium.

00:10:05:00 — 00:10:10:00

INTERVIEWER:
THE GRADUATION WAS AT THE STADIUM?

ERNEST GREEN:
Yeah.

[cut]

[picture begins]

00:10:11:00 — 00:11:25:00

CAMERA CREW MEMBER #1:
ROLLING.

ERNEST GREEN:
The morning that we went to, went to school, Daisy had called us all up to meet at her house. And, eight of us showed up. Elizabeth wasn't there. We got to school, we were at one end of the school, 14th Street, and Elizabeth was at the other end, 16th Street. Neither group knowing where the other was, because it's a big place, two blocks separating it. And we just made a cursory kind of attempt to, to enter school that morning. Elizabeth attempted to go through the guards and had the mobs behind her. It was only with the help of this woman, her husband was on the faculty of a black college there, Filanda Smith, who escorted her to the

bus, and finally saw her home, did Elizabeth really get out of any physical danger, of the mob really doing physical harm to her. And none of us knew that until we got home that afternoon and were, we met at Daisy's house, Elizabeth there, she was in tears. The rest of us had, had not experienced anything like that.

00:11:26:00 — 00:12:01:00

INTERVIEWER:
WHAT DO YOU THINK THAT DID TO HER? I MEAN, STANDING THERE?

ERNEST GREEN:
Well, ***it has to be the most frightening thing. I mean, because she had a crowd of*** a hundred, two hundred ***white people behind her, threatening to, to kill her. She had nobody, I mean, there was not a black face in sight anywhere. Nobody that she could turn to as a friend except to this woman came out of the crowd and guided her through the mob and onto the bus and got her home safely.***

00:12:02:00 — 00:13:31:00

INTERVIEWER:
AT THE, BEING IN THE SCHOOL THAT DAY, THE TIME YOU DID GET INTO SCHOOL.

ERNEST GREEN:
Well, when we finally got in the school, I do remember that the, a number of students, jumped out of the windows, the segregationists, that they refused to attend school with us. And we were guided to our homeroom and our, our, our classes. And I was in the Physics class, and a monitor came up from the principal's office, and told me that I was to go to the principal's office. When we got down there, the other eight students were there. And at that time we were told by the principal that we would have to be sent home forgot our own safety, that the police were having difficult holding the guards, holding the, the mob back at the barricades, and that if they broke through, they could not be responsible for our safety. They didn't have enough protection. So we were whisked out of a side door, and went home. And I didn't have any idea how big the mob, mob was outside the school until, again, until after, after we got home. It was almost like being in the eye of a hurricane. You never saw all the turmoil around you. Inside it seemed quiet, the school was quiet, the students were friendly. The teachers seemed helpful. And we were ready to, after three weeks, ready to go ahead and, with our class work, and catch up with the work that we were behind on.

00:13:32:00 — 00:14:30:00

INTERVIEWER:
THE STUDENTS, MOST OF THEM SEEMED FRIENDLY?

ERNEST GREEN:
Well, at that time they were. Because what had happened, those who were the most devout

segregationists had either left, were not in classroom with us, so that those students who were there, either those who were neutral or were actively, wanted to be actively friendly. Now as time wore on, when the troops finally came and we started going to school full-time, the, the segregationists started to pressure those students who attempted to be friendly to us. So for the most part over that year, we were isolated. There were a couple of incidents along the way in which students attempted to be friendly, but most of them were fearful of either how their peers saw 'em, and bein' a nigger-lover in 1957 was enough to make white folks cringe so that those who empathized and show, out, outward sympathy towards black students were overtly ostra-, ostracized.

00:14:31:00 — 00:15:07:00

INTERVIEWER:
DO YOU REMEMBER ANY PARTICULAR INCIDENTS DURING THAT TIME? ANY THREATS?

ERNEST GREEN:
Well, yeah. I remember a number of 'em. We used to go, they used to ramshackle our lockers, periodically. I'm sure the school board must have spent thousands of dollars just replacing our books. [laughs] The other thing was that one night we used to, well, we used to get a lot of phone calls. And one night a voice said that—

[cut]

[wild sound]

ERNEST GREEN:
—one of the girls would be shot in the face with acid out of a water pistol. And—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER #1:
WE LOST THAT MAGAZINE. [inaudible]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER #2:
RUN OUT.

[cut]

[camera roll 5]

[sound roll 3]

[slate]

00:15:08:00 — 00:17:01:00

CAMERA CREW MEMBER #2:

SPEED.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER #1:
ROLLING.

ERNEST GREEN:
The, I guess the, the students were always, we were always getting calls in the middle of the night. And this one time there was a, a call that said one of the girls would be squirted in the face with acid in a water pistol, and that we'd better watch out. So that next morning, walking through the halls, and this was after the, our individual guards, before we had individual paratroopers that escorted us from class to class in the hallway. And halfway through the school year they withdrew those, outside of the school and only had the guards stationed outside. Anyway, sure enough, I was walking with Melba Pattillo and this kid walks up with a water pistol and squirts her in the face. It turns out it had water. But it was that level of harassment. One of the other things I remember always was in gym. You get into the locker room and the locker room gets steamed up. There was always incidents of these guys wetting up towels and throwing 'em over where, where we were. Well we got to be a little cagey about that. [laughs] We would start dressing in one place, move to another so they were always throwing towels over some other area. It was a low level of harassment, and I guess we sort of put away any idea that we were in immediate physical harm, that anybody was going to kill us. That didn't seem likely. Maybe it was just because we were too young and we believed in what we did, or what we were doin'. But never feared anything physically happening to us.

00:17:02:00 — 00:18:23:00

INTERVIEWER:
DID ANYONE BREAK THAT YEAR?

ERNEST GREEN:
Well the incident that, that helped us out was with Minni. Every time we went to lunch, we were always hassled and heckled by a number of, of white kids. And we were standing in the lunch line, Minni, myself, two others I think. And this, Minni is about five foot ten. And she was tall at that time, and in high school. And there was this white kid. He couldn't have been more than five foot four, five foot five and he was behind Minni, he was goin', "nigger" her to death. And she had just gotten a bowl of chili from the cafeteria and, and without even blinking an eye, Minni turned around and took that chili and dumped it on this dude's head. [laughs] He standing there, the last "nigger" coming out of his mouth with chili rolling off his face, [laughs] and with that, the school board suspended Minni. And part of it, you know, which was the attitude at that time that somehow we were supposed to be so stoic that we weren't to retaliate to any of this. And finally, after the suspension, they moved to remove her from school, and Minni went to school in New York, finished up the other semester outside of Little Rock.

00:18:24:00 — 00:19:05:00

INTERVIEWER:
JUST TELL ME AGAIN THAT, WHEN SHE TURNED AND TURNED, PUT THE CHILI ON HIS HEAD, WHAT, WHAT HAPPENED?

ERNEST GREEN:
Silence. I mean, at—The other thing was all the kitchen help in the cafeteria was black. And they were working along the line. And some of them we had known, because they either went to churches or lived in the same neighborhood that many of us did. And they broke into applause. [laughs] The rest of the, the white students, there was just absolute silence. Nobody knew what to do. I'm sure it's the first time a white kid had seen somebody black physically retaliate against somebody white, but Minni took this chili and just dumped it on this dude's head, and all he could do was just close his mouth as it dripped off his face.

00:19:06:00 — 00:21:01:00

INTERVIEWER:
NOW, I, I WONDER IF MAYBE WE SHOULD DO IT AGAIN. WHAT I'M NOT SURE WOULD BE CLEAR IS "NIGGER" AND "MURDER DEATH."

[cut]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER #1:
ROLLING.

ERNEST GREEN:
We were at lunch that day, and <hi rend="italic"><hi rend="bold">***for a couple of weeks there had been a number of white kids following us, a series of, of hassles, continuous calling us niggers, nigger nigger nigger, one right after the other. And Minni was, Minnijean Brown was in the lunch line with me. And there was this—I was in front of Minni, Minni was behind me, and there was this white kid fellow who was much shorter than Minni. Minni was about five foot ten. And this fellow couldn't have been more than five five, five four. And he reminded me of a small dog yelping at somebody's leg. And Minni had just picked up her chili—***
[cut]

[wild sound]

ERNEST GREEN:
—out of this line. The help in the whole cafeteria was black, all black.

[picture begins]

ERNEST GREEN:
And before I, I could even say, you know, Minni, why don't you tell 'em to shut up? Minni had taken this chili, dumped it on this dude's head. It was just absolute silence in the place. And then the help, all black, broke into applause. And the white kids, the other white

kids there didn't know what to do. I mean, it was the first time that anybody, I'm sure, had seen somebody black retaliate in that sense. And it was, again, [laughs] a good feeling to see that happen, and to be able to, to let them know that we were capable of taking care of ourselves.

00:21:02:00 — 00:22:43:00

INTERVIEWER:
GRADUATION.

ERNEST GREEN:
Yeah, I had been there nine months and had thought that all I needed to do was to graduate, just get out of there, and that it would be impossible for white people to say that nobody black had ever graduated from Central High School. So the graduation was in May. I was having difficulty with one course, it was a Physics course, and almost up to the last minute didn't know whether I was going to complete it successfully so that I would be able to, to get out of there, but as things were, I got a fairly decent grade out of it. And at the graduation ceremony, one of the guests was Martin Luther King. He was speaking in Pine Bluff, Arkansas, AM&N, at the black college there, [coughs] and came up to sit with my mother, and Mrs. Bates, and a couple of other friends in the audience. And all I could think of, there were six hundred and some odd students graduating that night, it was in the stadium, the place was packed, cameras, lights, to record this event, and I said, now, I can't walk across this stage and stumble. [laughs] And all I figured that I had to do was to get up to the principal, take that diploma, and walk off the other end and it would be over. I would have done, done my, my duty and been able to have a, a relaxing summer. Because it really wasn't, certainly wasn't the way to go to, to go to school under that, that kind of pressure.

00:22:44:00 — 00:23:36:00

INTERVIEWER:
WHEN YOU WERE WALKING ACROSS THE STAGE, WERE YOU, DID YOU FEEL LIKE YOU WERE WALKING FOR MORE THAN JUST YOU? OR WAS IT JUST...

ERNEST GREEN:
Well, I knew I was walking for the other eight students that were, the eight of us there, and I, I figured that I was making a statement and helping black people's existence in Little Rock. Now, beyond that, we'd never had much of a focus on what the nation, or what the world impact was of, of Little Rock. Only after we left, after I left high school and started to run into a lot of people. But I did know I was making a statement for more than just myself, that it was going to be more than just my own personal education, and...What I thought we were doing was removing a series of barriers for black people to be able to have free mobility in Little Rock and free access to, to other options.

00:22:37:00 — 00:23:55:00

INTERVIEWER:

WAS IT WORTH THE SACRIFICE?

ERNEST GREEN:
Oh sure. I think there is no question that the, the nine of us thought that the sacrifice we were doing was worth it, and if having to do it over again, I would do it the same way I did it the last time.

00:23:56:00 — 00:24:50:00

INTERVIEWER:
WHO WERE THE REAL HEROES AND HEROINES OF, OF LITTLE ROCK?

ERNEST GREEN:
Well, I think the biggest heroes and heroines are the parents, because they had more to give up than any of us, any, any of the kids. They had, for most of us, our parents owned the homes, or were near owning homes, had jobs, were teachers or were janitors, but they had full paying jobs. I mean, they went to work regularly. They were able to eat and feed a family. And I really think, given the way that middle-class blacks and a lot of other southern communities refused to really get involved in the movement, that the real heroes and heroines in Little Rock were the parents. They were the ones behind the scenes who had to deal with the pressures, who had to watch their children go off into an unknown and not know whether they would come back in one piece. And to me that's, that's one hell of a sacrifice.

00:24:51:00 — 00:25:29:00

INTERVIEWER:
HOW ABOUT WHITES WHO PLAYED A ROLE?

ERNEST GREEN:
I think in, in Little Rock, the whites who played a role, the, there was one person that stands out, he was a vice principal in the high school, and was one of the ones that kept information flowing between Mrs. Bates and ourselves. There were a number of ministers who were very active in trying to keep dialogue open, but there were not many white voices in, in Little Rock. There were a number of 'em who were, I'm sure, playing roles behind the scenes. But of anybody outspoken, out in front, I didn't know 'em.

00:25:30:00 — 00:26:47:00

INTERVIEWER:
EARL-, ORVAL FAUBUS.

ERNEST GREEN:
Well, Orval Faubus, I always said that we made Faubus famous. If it hadn't been for us, he'd just been another obscure Southern governor. I have, I guess, I, the difficulty I have with Faubus, that the time that he was elected, most black people thought he was the best of

choices of, of, of the, of the candidates, the Democratic candidates running. And he had always had a fair amount of black support. So that when he became the ardent segregationist, it was a surprise and a, and a shock. And I gather what Faubus knew he was doing—

[cut]

[wild sound]

ERNEST GREEN:
—was assuring his re-election by seizing this issue and lining up behind the, the, the segregationist forces. That assured him of some six terms. And, now, everything I see, Faubus has recanted all of his previous involvement with the segregationist thrust and said he was doing it only to protect us, but it was obvious he knew that he had hit a chord that would get him reelected continually.

INTERVIEWER:
LET'S DO A BIT MORE.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER #2:
RUN OUT.

[cut]

[camera roll 6]

[slate]

00:26:48:00 — 00:28:16:00

INTERVIEWER:
CENTRAL HIGH SCHOOL. DOES IT MEAN SOMETHING IN PARTICULAR?

ERNEST GREEN:
Well the symbolism of Central, when you see it, it's an imposive, an impressive structure. Very imposing. It takes up two city blocks. It was, in 1957, the top high school in that area; not just in Little Rock, but in that whole mid-South area. And to have successfully gone through there meant that you had cracked one more barrier that had been barred to black people in the city of Little Rock. And what I saw, and I think, speaking for the other eight students, that it was always important for our own education. We thought we were getting the very best that public funds had available in Little Rock, but halfway through the school year, we knew we were doing something for everybody in the town, everybody black in the town. And that the longer we stayed there and if we successfully completed there, it would be difficult, impossible, for anybody to say that black people couldn't compete in that environment and two, that one more all white institution broken down.

00:28:17:00 — 00:29:26:00

INTERVIEWER:
YOU TOLD ME AT ONE POINT THAT CHRISTMAS BREAK WAS A TIME IN WHICH YOU REALLY THOUGHT YOU WERE GOING TO MAKE IT.

ERNEST GREEN:
Well, Christmas, the December break, Christmas break, fell halfway between the two semesters, and my feeling was that, one, having put up with the problems of the harassment and the telephone calls and all of the, all of the hostility, as well as being able to handle the academic work—if we made it through those three months, then I figured we'd made it through the next four months. And that Christmas break was kind of like a, it was kind of like a race, and the Christmas was a way station, you know, an oasis where you could rest a little bit. One was you got a chance to see a lot of your friends. And the other thing that was helpful was you got a lot of support coming up from various people in the, in the community. I mean, people would stop you that you didn't know and tell you how proud they were of what, what we were doing. And that gave us a renewed impetus to, to carry on.

00:29:27:00 — 00:31:44:00

INTERVIEWER:
GRADUATION.

ERNEST GREEN:
Graduation was the end of May. Interesting thing about graduation, I was, being the only senior I'd given up all the graduation activity that had gone on in the black high school, you know, the, the school play, and the, the prom, and all of those kinds of things. And sometimes, because of not having that activity, thought that I would really feel isolated, you know, because I wasn't going to Central High School's prom [laughs] and I wasn't going to be invited to be in the school play at Central. I mean, I was already [laughs] in enough play form. But all of the black students at Horace Mann, which was the school that I would have graduated from, invited me to all the activities, included me in all of it, really made me feel a super part of it. So that I had the best of both worlds. I had cracked this white institution and still had all of my friends who were super-supportive of what I was trying to do so...That graduation, and going through the ceremony—and, and one the participants in the ceremony was Martin Luther King who was speaking at the black college a couple of days before—I figured all I had to do was walk across that big, huge stage which, which looked the length of that football field, I'm sure it was very small. But anyway, that night, before I had to walk up and receive my diploma, it looked very imposing. It looked long and I kept telling myself I just can't trip [laughs] with all these cameras watching me. But I knew it, once I got as far as that principal and received that diploma, that I had, I had cracked the wall. And, interesting thing, ***there were a lot of claps for the students, you know, they talked about who had received scholarships, who was an honor student, and all that as they called the names off. When they called my name there was nothing, just the name. And there was this eerie silence. Nobody clapped. [laughs] But I figured they didn't have to, 'cause after I got that diploma that was it. I had accomplished what I had come there for.***

00:31:45:00 — 00:33:48:00

INTERVIEWER:
JUST JUMPING BACK JUST FOR A SECOND, ERNIE, TO THE ARMY, AND WHEN YOU, WHEN THE ARMY DECIDED TO TAKE YOU IN WITH THE SOUTH CAROLINA COLONEL. WHAT DID THAT MEAN, GOING TO SCHOOL THAT WAY? INTO CENTRAL.

ERNEST GREEN:
OK. The, the day that we went to school with the army, we met at Mrs. Bates' house again, and that was the, the person in charge of the detail was a colonel from South Carolina, very thick southern accent. And I had never, I had never seen anybody with an accent that thick who was goin' be providing protection for us, a protection for me that just seemed sort of incongruous that a white southerner was going to be the person to oversee our protection. And I was a little dubious about it when we were in the house, going through my head, this, this dude really ain't goin' to be looking out for me too tough. But once we got into the station wagon and I saw all the other paraphernalia—we had a jeep in front of us with three or four troopers and a machine gun mount on it, we had another jeep behind us with a machine gun mount and soldiers with rifles, and as we sped up to the front of the school with helicopters flying around, and this whole school is ringed with soldiers with bayonets drawn, and we get out of the station wagon, and they encircle us with must have been at lease fifteen or sixteen soldiers, and walked us up to the front of the school—I thought that this colonel from South Carolina couldn't be all bad. I mean he, he knew what he was doing and he, he stuck with it, so...we went to school with about as much force as you could go to school with, with all the army. In fact, ***when we got in the school, they then assigned us an individual soldier to walk us from class to class. He waited outside the classroom, and every time the bell rang and classes changed, he would walk us, we'd have our own personal guard walking us to the next class.***

00:33:49:00 — 00:34:34:00

INTERVIEWER:
WHAT DO YOU THINK THAT SIGHT OF YOU GOING UP THE STEPS MEANT TO THE WHITE, TO THE WHITE SOUTH?

ERNEST GREEN:
Well, I was too busy just trying to get into school that day, and I don't think, it, it's only in a reflective process do I see how imposive—impressive—and imposing that, that picture of us being marched up the steps with the army must have meant to white Southerners, 'cause this was the first time that the Federal Government had used that much force to reinforce the '54 decision. And I think, for the first time, it must have dawned on them that this was a decision that they would just goin' have to get in tune with.

00:34:35:00 — 00:35:36:00

INTERVIEWER:

DID YOU EVER THINK THEN YOU WERE GOING TO BE WORKING FOR THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT AT SOME POINT?

ERNEST GREEN:
No, didn't think that nor being an assistant secretary. I did think though that, whatever that I was going to do, that going to Central High School was not gonna to be the apex of my life. I mean, I, I, if, if one, and I think this was true of all of us who went to school there, that we didn't regard Central High School as the key point in our lives or in our career, that we only saw it as a, as a stepping stone. So I expected, my expectations were to continue to play some sort of role in the movement that is, and trying to make life, improve life for black people in this country. And that Central was only a beginning, to be involved in that.

INTERVIEWER:
OK. CUT, JUST FOR A SECOND.

[cut]

00:35:37:00 — 00:37:28:00

CAMERA CREW MEMBER #1:
ROLLING.

INTERVIEWER:
I GUESS THE QUESTION, WHAT, WHAT LITTLE ROCK MEANT. I'VE ASKED IT BEFORE, BUT...

ERNEST GREEN:
Well, what it, what it meant, meant to me, I grew up there, was born there, third generation living there. Little Rock Central represented symbolically all that white segregation meant in that town, and, and, and my reinforcement or awareness of Little Rock being a segregated town goes back first time I was, can remember shopping with my mother, and this white kid and I were playing, and, and all of a sudden like a bit sky hook, his mother snatches him, and he just disappears. And I couldn't figure out why. And only after some years, it was just the fact that I was black and he was white and we couldn't play together in the store. And Little Rock Central High School represented all of that, all of the worst of the South, and its, and its lily white status. And going there, and successfully attending it, and graduating from Little Rock Central meant that we had eliminated one more lily white institution in Little Rock. I thought that symbolically it would mean something to other black people in the city. I didn't have any awareness what it meant to people outside of Little Rock, but that if we could do that, the nine of us teenagers, then there were a series of other things that older people, leadership could take on to complete the job. And that I saw this as a beginning of, of starting change in, in Little Rock.

00:37:29:00 — 00:38:43:00

INTERVIEWER:

DID YOU EVER, YOU EVER GET OTHER PEOPLE COMING UP TO YOU—I KNOW YOU SAID DURING THE TIME YOU GOT BLACK PEOPLE COMING UP TO YOU—DID YOU EVER GET WHITE PEOPLE COMING UP TO YOU?

ERNEST GREEN:
Yeah, now it's an interesting thing. I get people who have either lived in the South, particularly whites, middle-aged whites, and talk about what watching that on TV meant to them. And it's obvious it had a real impact in turning their attitudes, or some of 'em, towards the, the segregationist platform that most—

[cut]

[wild sound]

ERNEST GREEN:
—Southern politicians were putting forward that they started to reconsider. I also had, have had any number of incidences where soldiers, white soldiers, who were protecting us were there and the impact, the impression, that being there as part of the police force had on their, on their heads. And I think, in retrospect, it, it's obvious that the film footage and the TV coverage of Little Rock gave it a far wider impact than any of us who were the participants were, were aware of.

INTERVIEWER:
GREAT.

[cut]

[camera roll 9]

[slate]

[Date change: 9/15/79]

[Location change: Little Rock Central High School]

00:38:44:00 — 00:41:26:00

CAMERA CREW MEMBER #3:
OK, WE'RE ON PICTURE ROLL NUMBER NINE. HERE COMES THE HEAD SLATE...HAND SLATE. READY?

INTERVIEWER:
READY.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER #3:
SLATE.

INTERVIEWER:
I'VE GOT [UNINTELLIGIBLE], ERNIE. I'LL TELL YOU WHEN. GO BACK. I'LL TELL YOU WHEN, ERNIE, OK? [PAUSE] ALL RIGHT.

ERNEST GREEN:
[walks down Central High School steps] The Monday morning that we were to go to school—actually it was Tuesday, though. Day after Labor Day—we had met Daisy's house that Tuesday morning, and all of us had agreed, after being called by Daisy, to meet at Central High School. We were escorted by a group of ministers, some other people in the community, that were interested in seeing that desegregation in Little Rock went smoothly. We got to the school, right in front of, on 16th Street and Park Avenue. We went down to one end of the school, the eight of us, and decided, after seeing this whole street ringed with State National Guardsmen, that we couldn't enter. We made a couple of attempts to walk into the, up on the curb, enter the school, but were denied entrance. And we assumed that everything was fairly quiet that day. There were a few newspaper people, but there was no crowd at all at the end of the block that we were. And only when we got home did we discover why there was no crowd at the end of the block. They were all down with Elizabeth, because Elizabeth was at this end of the school. She hadn't gotten the message that we were to have met the morning and somehow misplaced her directions on where to meet us, and found herself alone facing this mob of at least a hundred and fifty, two hundred whites, threatening to do bodily harm, if not kill her. It was probably the most traumatic experience that Elizabeth will ever face, and I suppose if each of us had had to face that, we may have had a different attitude about going to school here.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER #4:
CUT.

[cut]

[sound roll 4]

[slate]

00:41:27:00 — 00:41:49:00

CAMERA CREW MEMBER #3:
FOUR.

ERNEST GREEN:
IT'S ON THERE.

[cut]

[wild sound]

INTERVIEWER:
WHEN I TELL YOU, YOU JUST CLAP YOUR HANDS LIKE THAT. [CLAPS]

ERNEST GREEN:
OK.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER #4:
FALSE SLATE.

ERNEST GREEN:
[claps]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER #4:
THAT'S FALSE.

[picture begins]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER #3:
ROLLING.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER #4:
SLATE IT.

ERNEST GREEN:
[claps]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER #4:
USE THE THIRD MARKER.

INTERVIEWER:
OK, HOLD UP, HOLD UP, HOLD UP. I'M SORRY. [PAUSE] ALL RIGHT.

ERNEST GREEN:
[walks down Central High School steps]

00:41:50:00 — 00:42:26:00

[missing audio]

00:42:27:00 — 00:44:27:00

ERNEST GREEN:
We got there to the school. Eight of us were at the, the 16th Street of, of Park Avenue, and Elizabeth was at the other end. And, what we found when we got there was peace, tranquility, calmness. There was, there was no mob, only a small group of reporters. We made some fairly cursory attempts to get up on the steps into the school, but were denied

entrance by the National Guardsmen and went back home. And it was that period of time being back home for the three weeks in which the litigation and the going back and forth between the Federal Government and Faubus that kept us out of school. Finally, that day when we got to school with the help of the, of the Army, the 101st Airborne, it was then that I knew, as we walked up these steps with a thousand paratroopers around us, beside us, as well as the round of paratroopers that were encircling us, that we had finally cracked the door of segregation in Little Rock. And not only had we just cracked it for Little Rock, but I think we found out later, all of us, that we had really sent a ripple effect throughout the entire South, and had helped the civil rights movement move one step further towards providing equality for black folks in this country. The other thing about Little Rock I think is important is, older people come up to me and they say, I watched that on TV, and I said to myself, if I could see nine black kids go up these steps, go through all of that turmoil and trial and tribulation, then I could do something to change conditions for myself and other black people in my community. So I think it had a tremendous, positive effect on how black people viewed themselves and their desire to see change occur for other blacks in this country.

00:44:38:00 — 00:45:14:00

CAMERA CREW MEMBER #3:
ROLLING.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER #4:
HAND SLATE. [CLAPS]

ERNEST GREEN:
The morning that we got to, to the school, we were at this end of Park Avenue, 14th Street [sic], and had come up with a group of ministers and were attempting to enter the sidewalk and come up on the campus. And, unbeknownst to us, Elizabeth was down at the, at the 16th Street [sic] side. And we were wondering why there were no crowds and no mobs concerned with our coming to school—

00:45:15:00 — 00:45:39:00

[missing audio]

00:45:40:00 — 00:47:37:00

ERNEST GREEN:
—and it was only after she walked back up to this corner, she was assisted by a white woman, who put her on the bus and saw to it that she got home. And only after we got back to Daisy's house, did we know the kind of trauma and fear that had been inflicted upon, upon Elizabeth. Now, we finally came here the day after the troops had been called into Little Rock and Eisenhower had sent the, the Airborne Division here. We came up, drove up in an Army jeep with two troops of soldiers in front and behind us with machine gun mounts, got out of the, out of the car, and were surrounded by—I don't know—twenty, twenty-five paratroopers with bayonets drawn. And they walked us [pointing] up these steps, up the side,

up into the entrance of the school. It was at that point that I figured we had finally broken through the barriers of Little Rock. We had, in addition to that, I think, demonstrated to black people in the city that segregated institutions and facilities were no more gonna exist. And what we found out later, as we each got older and ran into people who remember Little Rock, that it had had a tremendous, positive impact on black people, in general, since that they saw us go up these steps, nine black kids, and the impact it had on their lives, which was to say to them: If we could do it, they could make a change on conditions for themselves and for other black people in the communities that they lived.

[cut]

[end of interview]