



# Millicent's Story: School Desegregation in South Carolina, 1963

*In 1963, Millicent E. Brown was one of the first eleven African American students in South Carolina to attend formerly all white public schools. Millicent's narrative begins the night before her entry into the tenth grade in September of 1963. Here is her story:*

I never kept a diary, but now I wish I had. Today, I am asked to remember things I long ago tried to forget, or just forgot without even trying. It is rather strange to be asked, "And how did that make you feel?" 50 years after the fact, but here is what I remember from 1963, the year I entered Rivers High School in Charleston, which, up until that point, had been all white.

We were in the backyard of my mother's best friend's house, having a "before school opens" cookout. The brick building I could see over the fence was the one I would enter in the morning; I had no idea of what to expect. I was fifteen, going into the tenth grade, and would be one of two black students attending the all white school. The fact that newspaper reporters from around the state (South Carolina) and country would be waiting to watch this "historic" event didn't cross my mind. I just knew that my mother seemed awfully nervous and my father pretty dedicated to calming her down.

I remember having had only one big concern...my hair. I didn't know for sure that the blue ointment my older sister had used to control my thick somewhat unruly hair would make me presentable enough to represent an entire race of people. Before people were able to accept their natural hair with pride, it was nothing but embarrassing to have hair that was not "straight." It was not a good night for sleeping. (See how my hair turned out on page 1 of Charleston's *The Post and Courier* on September 4, 1963. Type "Student helped desegregate" in the search box at [www.postandcourier.com](http://www.postandcourier.com) and then scroll through the photo gallery.)

## The Big Day

On the appointed day my father, then state NAACP president and acknowledged spokesperson for the integration effort, escorted me to Rivers High School. Dressed in

the dress my mother and I had picked out weeks before, I drove in silence with my father to my new school only to find the front of the school filled with people I did not know. The man at the front door said he was the principal, and he talked with my father.

I was one of two black students entering that day. Jacquelyn Ford going into the eighth grade and I, the tenth, had no mutual classes, schedules, even lunch periods, so we were both there...alone. Why couldn't anyone look at me and Jackie? But, since I didn't know Jackie that well, I was not sure what to say to her either. I was a tenth grader and no tenth grader is supposed to be friendly with a "sub-freshman."

Being the first two to cross the color line after years and years of going before judges, panels, commissions, school board members made us special...but, right then, it didn't feel so good. It was not comforting that my homeroom class was directly opposite the school's main entrance (did they know something that I did not?). Nor did it help that my homeroom teacher was so nervous I feared she would have a heart attack. A round of bomb threats throughout the morning resulted in glares and jeers from students and teachers aimed at me for having "caused" the disruption.

## **Bathroom Trauma**

I had never seen school bathrooms this large or bright. There were so many stalls! I wondered why the girls stayed in so long, knowing the bell would ring and we would be marked late for class if we weren't there. They would run to class, and I was just getting to use the facilities. "Yes, ma'am," I would say, as I got to class as soon as I could.

The next day was more of the same... but, this time, the girls were singing, "two, four six eight, we don't want to integrate," instead of just blocking the stall. I learned not to use the bathroom during the day unless I just had to. (To this day, I have the best daytime bladder control of anyone I know.)

## **Friends?**

The few students who ventured to speak with me, almost all of whom were Jewish, demonstrated that my idea of "white people" being "all alike" needed reassessment. Barbara (who spelled her name "Barbra," like the singer Streisand) was one of the most dynamic girls I have ever known. She was Jewish, which I didn't really know that much about, and she spoke kindly to me—in front of all the reporters and on the days after. She sat next to me in class and introduced me to a couple of other girls. Barbra didn't like school very much because she learned things about life on her own and thought most of us were pretty dull. She didn't do her homework (I was never that brave), her parents were not in town on the first day of school (I couldn't imagine that happening in my house), and she seemed to like saying anything that would shock the teachers (we called that rude).

Sometimes the other girls talked to me, and sometimes they didn't. Barbra may have been

using me for shock value to show how different she was, but at least she was dependable. It was pretty clear by the end of my first year who would leave me alone, who would talk and eat with me, and who seemed to hate my guts. I learned to walk and look straight ahead, expecting nothing.

## **Teachers**

The gym teacher said nothing when classmates taunted me. When they announced over the intercom that President Kennedy was dead, she said, “Good!” I cried all the way to my friend Susan’s house where I often went after school. We realized that it had taken 100 years to get from Lincoln to Kennedy and now we wondered if we might have to wait maybe 100 more. I was pretty tired of ugly-acting white people, and Daddy wouldn’t even consider letting me go back to my old school. It took me years to understand how important it was for me to stick it out as the “race representative” along with Jackie and the others. More black students transferred, but we were so scattered among schools, grades, and homerooms, everyone just felt like an outsider.

We felt that we had to prove that we were as smart as the white children, although admittedly we were not sure, since we had had so little direct contact with white students before. One day, not long after school began, I saw a white student fail to answer a seemingly very easy question and, I realized that they weren’t all smart. Surviving the next three years became somewhat easier as a result of that epiphany. But, I worried endlessly in my math classes, where I was never strong, that I would let everyone down and reinforce the belief in black inferiority.

## **Changing Minds Slowly**

One day, my French teacher was trying to make a point and couldn’t think of the word “penchant.” I hadn’t studied those Latin words back at my old school for nothing! Nobody loved Latin more than my old teacher, Mrs. Oglesby; she had always taught us to use it as a way to build our vocabularies. I called out the word, and my French teacher was shocked that I knew it. The entire class looked at me, and I’d like to believe they started to see a little past their prejudice. I started to think that if I showed that I was “smart,” I would be accepted.

The strength of my earlier all-black, highly challenging education (especially in English) and a family deeply committed to educational excellence helped me trust my ability to hold my own among these supposed superior people. I felt great sympathy for any less well prepared black student, not realizing back then how utterly ridiculous it was to assume that to deserve to be in “their” schools, one had to be well-tooled first. After three years, I was still looked at as “an exception;” however, I knew that I was only one example of many capable students from my community.

## Surviving

When I walked down the halls, there seemed to be a silent signal that I could not figure out. Was someone walking behind me telling everyone to step to the walls and cringe as if I had some disease? Had they planned this before school started? I called it the “Red Sea parting” and learned to just ignore it. And it did stop, eventually.

I began to find my own voice when one teacher waited until all the Jewish kids were out for high holy days to take a poll about whether there was a “superior race.” I realized that I couldn’t wait for the Calvary to save me anymore.

By my senior year I learned not to care that, even with good grades, I was not “invited” into the honor society. Getting mud splashed on me while waiting for my ride meant I just wouldn’t stand near the corner. Just because students wouldn’t partner with me as we walked out of assembly didn’t mean that I had to stand still. It wasn’t until the last week before I graduated that I got stubborn enough to hold up the line behind me. I learned that being brave didn’t mean that I always had to cooperate with the meanness.

## Perseverance

It took too long. I spent the next three years dodging between really nasty racist attitudes, friendly but inconsistent gestures of tolerance, and the majority opinion expressed as, “we’ll ignore you if you just ignore us.” (This was quite different from my earlier experiences with my parents in progressive, mixed race settings.)

I did not understand what passive resistance really meant. I thought that you just had to let people be ignorant without standing up for yourself. Three years of “being bigger” landed me in the hospital, diagnosed with a nervous condition brought on by holding in all my fears, hurts, emotions, pains, frustrations, and sadness for so long.

According to my mother, every day was supposed to get better, and I could not admit that it really wasn’t. I learned how to take one day at a time; not expect too much; pray to pass math, of course; and look forward to school being over, so that I could return to my safe zone. ●

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*Today, Dr. Millicent E. Brown is an associate professor of history at Claflin University in Orangeburg, South Carolina. She is also project director of “Somebody Had to Do It,” an effort to document the experiences of the desegregation pioneers across the country. Visit [somebody.claflin.edu](http://somebody.claflin.edu).*