



Thurgood Marshall

Thurgood Marshall was a courageous civil rights lawyer during a period when racial segregation was the law of the land. At a time when a large portion of American society refused to extend equality to black people, Marshall astutely realized that one of the best ways to bring about change was through the legal system. Between 1938 and 1961, he presented more than 30 civil rights cases before the Supreme Court. He won 29 of them.

His most important case was *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (1954), which ended segregation in public schools. By law, black and white students had to attend separate public schools. As long as schools were "separate but equal"—providing equal education for all races—segregation was considered fair. In reality, segregated schools were shamefully unequal: white schools were far more privileged than black schools, which were largely poor and overcrowded. Marshall challenged the doctrine, pointing out that "separate but equal" was just a myth disguising racism. He argued that if all students were indeed equal, then why was it necessary to separate them? The Supreme Court agreed, ruling that "separate educational facilities are inherently unequal." Marshall went on to become the first African-American Supreme Court Justice in American history.

The Little Rock Nine



The Little Rock Nine pictured with Daisy Bates, the president of the Arkansas NAACP.

The Little Rock Nine, as they later came to be called, were the first black teenagers to attend all-white Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, in 1957. These remarkable young African-American students challenged segregation in the Deep South and won.

Although *Brown v. Board of Education* outlawed segregation in schools, many racist school systems defied the law by intimidating and threatening black students—Central High School was a notorious example. But the Little Rock Nine were determined to attend the school and receive the same education offered to white students, no matter what. Things grew ugly and frightening right away. On the first day of school, the governor of Arkansas ordered the state's National Guard to block the black students from entering the school. Imagine what it must have been like to be a student confronted by armed soldiers! President Eisenhower had to send in federal troops to protect the students.

But that was only the beginning of their ordeal. Every morning on their way to school angry crowds of whites taunted and insulted the Little Rock Nine—they even received death threats. One of the students, fifteen-year-old Elizabeth Eckford, said "I tried to see a friendly face somewhere in the mob. . . . I looked into the face of an old woman, and it seemed a kind face, but when I looked at her again, she spat at me." As scared as they were, the students wouldn't give up, and several went on to graduate from Central High. Nine black teenagers challenged a racist system and defeated it.