

Students of Little Rock Central High

For protecting the future by understanding the past. Essay by Charlayne Hunter-Gault



[Students of Little Rock Central High photographed on the front steps of Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas. Their work: The Memory Project](#)

[Photo: Bill Phelps](#)

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In 2005, two years before the 50th anniversary of the desegregation of Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, civics teachers George West, Keith Richardson, Cynthia Nunnley, and Mike Johnson gave their students an assignment. They wanted them to understand—in a personal way—what took place in their school decades before they were born. They asked the students to interview a relative who lived through the turbulent Civil Rights years, including the 1957 desegregation of Central High. That semester, history came to life in a way it never could in a history book. In living rooms, across kitchen tables, on front porches at sunset, this generation's students of Central High unlocked doors to powerful memories. The essays they wrote—500 in the first two years—were the start of an ongoing educational experiment: **The Memory Project.**

Now in its ninth year, the project has captured the imagination of more than 1,500 students and evolved in relevant ways. Initially published on a website—lrchmemory.org—the first oral histories were harvested and published in a book, *Beyond Central, Toward Acceptance*, in 2010. This book became an important tool for the National Park Service (NPS), which hosts 125,000 annual visitors who come to the Little Rock Central High School National Historic Site. *Beyond Central* answers the most frequent visitor questions: Do today's students know about the history of their school? What do they think about civil rights today?

“Although Park Rangers do lead guided tours into Central on school days, our agreement is that we will not disrupt classes,” says NPS ranger Jodi Morris. “Visitors have seldom been able to speak directly to students. The Memory Project’s website and publications provide that student/visitor connection.”

In 2012, a dozen Central High School volunteers, ages 14 to 18, began archiving a new round of oral histories from other students. They blind-reviewed 300 and chose 45 for a second book: *Mapping the Road to Change: Insight on Perceptions, Prejudice, and Acceptance*.

Published in January, this book looks at race and beyond for the roots of issues both local and global. Students wrote about anti-Semitism in Cleveland, conflicts between Muslims and Sikhs, and the human rights protests in Tiananmen Square. They contemplated WWII Japanese internment in U.S. camps as well as issues of discrimination around sexual orientation and physical disability.

The process presented startling revelations about “things you wouldn’t find in a textbook,” says student editor Abhilasha Gokulan. “The project starts a conversation among young kids that they would never have had.”

Among those interviewed was Thelma Mothershed Wair, a member of the Little Rock Nine. Now in her early 70s, Wair told her 14-year-old grandniece, Amaree Austin, about braving the violent mobs that hurled threats and racial slurs at her and eight other teenagers as they enrolled as the first black students at Central High.

Austin said many of today’s students feel far removed from the legacy of the Little Rock Nine. Their attitude, she said, is, “That happened a long time ago.”

But the more she listened to her great-aunt, the more she appreciated their courage and determination to be treated as equals—and the more she felt determined to claim it.

“I wanted to share [that history] with others so we can understand where we came from,” she said, “to keep us from going back.”

An Emmy-winning journalist, Hunter-Gault is the author of In My Place, a memoir about being the first African-American female student at The University of Georgia.