

Ruby Bridges

Ruby Bridges was born in Tylertown, Mississippi in 1954 and, when she was six, she was the first African-American child to go to a school with white children in South America.

Separated Schools

Up until 1954, the same year that Ruby was born, black and white children had to go to separate schools – this was called ‘segregation’. Even though it became law to let children mix in schools, it took quite a while for African-American children to be able to go to white schools and even then, there was a lot of trouble.

When Ruby was in nursery school in New Orleans, she took a test to see if she could go to the school for white children, which has become open for African-Americans that passed the test. Ruby’s father worried what would happen if she went to the white school but her mother was sure that she would get a better education. Many people think that the test was made hard so that not many children would pass it and be able to go. However, in 1960, Ruby and her parents found out that she was only one of six African-American children to pass the test and able to go to the white schools in the area.

First Day of School

People expected there to be trouble for Ruby when she started at the white William Frantz School, so to keep her safe, she was driven and walked into school by four US Federal Marshals. At school, there were crowds of people protesting, shouting rude names and throwing things because they didn’t want African-American children to come to the white school. There was so much trouble that the white children had been kept at home, so there were no classes that day. A famous painting was done by Norman Rockwell of this iconic walk to school called ‘The Problem We All Live With’.

The First Year

Only one teacher, Mrs Henry, agreed to teach Ruby. Mrs Henry’s choices also made her unpopular with the other white parents but she did not care and saw Ruby as the most important. Other parents kept their white children away from Ruby, so, for a whole year, there was only Ruby and Mrs Henry together in one classroom for lessons, breaktimes and even for meals. Thankfully, after the first year, white children started to return to Ruby’s class and the Federal Marshals stopped taking her to school. She had found the first year very hard and knew that children did not want to play with her because of the colour of her skin.

Later Years

Ruby went on to be successful. She graduated from high school and had a good career. She had four sons and is now a civil rights activist focussing on making life fair for black



and white people living together.

In 2014, a statue of Ruby was placed outside William Frantz School. In 2001, she was awarded a medal from President Bill Clinton and in 2011, she looked at the Norman Rockwell painting with President Barack Obama and he said to her,

"I think it is fair to say that if it hadn't had been for you guys, I wouldn't be here."



1. What does the word 'segregation' mean?

2. Look at the end of paragraph two, why do you think that '...there was a lot of trouble'?

3. What type of punctuation mark joins the adjective 'African-American'?

4. What did Ruby have to do to be able to go to the white school?

5. Why did Ruby need to be taken to school by US Marshals?

6. People say that Ruby was very brave – do you agree and why?

7. In your own words, explain what sort of person Mrs Henry must have been.

8. Find a fronted adverbial in the fifth paragraph.

9. Ruby is now a civil rights activist. What does that mean?

10. Look at the final quote from Barack Obama. How have people like Ruby helped him?

Answers

1. What does the word 'segregation' mean?
Segregation means setting someone or something apart from others, such as when black and white children had to go to separate schools.
2. Look at the end of paragraph two, why do you think that '...there was a lot of trouble'?
There was a lot of trouble because people wanted to stop black children going to the white schools and they were angry about it so they might have caused trouble.
3. What type of punctuation mark joins the adjective 'African-American'?
The adjective 'African-American' is joined with a hyphen.
4. What did Ruby have to do to be able to go to the white school?
Ruby had to pass (not just take) a test.
5. Why did Ruby need to be taken to school by US Marshals?
Ruby needed to be taken to school by US Marshals to keep her safe from the people who were angry about her going to a white school. People were shouting unkind things and also throwing things at her.
6. People say that Ruby was very brave - do you agree and why?
(Open-ended and good for discussion) Ruby was brave to be the first black girl to go to a white school. She carried on, even though she was being shouted at or having things thrown at her. She must have also been brave to be on her own for the first year with no friends to play with at school.
7. In your own words, explain what sort of person Mrs Henry must have been.
(Open-ended) Answers may include: Brave because people were not nice to her for teaching a black girl; kind because she thought about Ruby's feelings and cared for her.
8. Find a fronted adverbial in the fifth paragraph.
The fronted adverbial in the fifth paragraph is 'thankfully'.
9. Ruby is now a civil rights activist. What does that mean?
A civil rights activist is someone who tries to make sure that people are treated equally and fairly no matter the colour of their skin.
10. Look at the final quote from Barack Obama. How have people like Ruby helped him?
He is the first black president of America and this would not have happened if lots of people like Ruby had not done something brave like this to change how black people are seen.