

Keep Your Eyes on the Prize

By Hosanna Kabakoro
Age: 15
Twin Falls, Idaho



Melba Patillo, Age: 15

The spittle landed, smack-dab on the front of her clean, starched dress. It was a new dress, made especially for the first day at her new school. She felt a sharp pain in her chest as she tried to breathe. She wondered if she'd gone deaf because she could see the mouths of the angry crowd pulled back in grimaces and snarls, but couldn't hear anything except the pounding of blood in her ears.

As she neared the door of the school, the voices in the crowd suddenly came through loud and clear and menacing.

“Nigger!” We gonna hang you, girlie!” “Ya’ll git yo’self back where you belong afore you git yo’self hurt real bad!”!

She'd never been so scared in her whole life. They meant it! They wanted to hang her, or worse. Ahead of her, loomed the door to Central High School. She saw the others with eyes big and round and terrified. Instinctively they drew near to each other and stood, panting with fear, expecting at any moment to be grabbed and handed over to the rabid crowd. She felt like crying, but heard Momma's voice admonishing her,

“Melba, they can scream and yell at you. They can jab you and kick you and trip you and curse you and throw stones at you. They can spit on you and punch you. They can knock your books out of your arms and paint foulness on your locker. Melba, they can do just about anything their ignorant minds can think of to hurt and discourage you but they can't take your dignity. They can't walk with you into your future. You go on now, walking tall and proud and sure. Keep your eyes on the prize, Melba, keep your eyes on the prize.”

15 year old Melba Patillo scrunched her eyes to discourage her eager tears. She took a long, slow breath and determined to do as her momma had told her. She was going to keep her eyes on the prize.

“We didn't go to Central to integrate,” Melba said years later. “We went to Central for opportunity.”

I selected Melba Patillo as my Courageous Youth in American History because I come from a racially integrated family. Were it not for people like Melba, I wouldn't be free to live and work and serve my community. Melba Patillo and the Little Rock Nine made America stop and think. They made us accountable. They required us as to replace our ignorance with decency and knowledge. Melba Patillo did keep her eyes on the prize and went on to graduate and write about her life in books like "White is a State of Mind" and "Warriors Don't Cry." She worked as a broad-cast journalist. She is a real life American Hero and someone whose actions and choices changed America for the better.

Note: To find out more about Melba Patillo Beals, visit the following website:

<http://content.scholastic.com/browse/article.jsp?id=4958>