

# Somebody Had to Do It

## School Desegregation Stories, 1954–63

Millicent E. Brown

In 1954, many white Americans opposed the U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* (Topeka, Kansas), which called for the end of racially segregated schools—and in effect ended Jim Crow laws of any kind.<sup>1</sup> Racial discrimination, however, did not end. The term “massive resistance” describes the legal, political, and physical obstructions that bigoted whites erected as they tried to prevent the racial integration of businesses and public spaces.<sup>2</sup>

The conflict evolved differently in different states. In Charleston, South Carolina, African American parents started procedures right away to bring their public schools in line with the Supreme Court decision. The struggle escalated, and became a court case by the end of the decade. I was a plaintiff in the test case, *Millicent Brown, et al. v. Charleston School District 20* (1963). Originally, my older sister’s name appeared in the title of the lawsuit. Why did my name replace hers? By the time of the final ruling in 1963—nine years after *Brown v. Board*—she had already graduated from an all-black high school. Justice seemed slow in coming.

I’ve written down memories from those days, and I share them here with students (see the following Pullout). I also helped found “Somebody Had to Do It,” an effort to document the names of all the desegregation pioneers across the country and to collect narratives for use by students and scholars. “Somebody”

interviews are archived at the Avery Research Center, College of Charleston, South Carolina. You and your students may visit [somebody.claflin.edu](http://somebody.claflin.edu) to explore the collection.

Nine years passed (from 1954 to 1963) before the South Carolina finally followed the Supreme Court’s ruling in *Brown v. Board*. Edmund Burke was right: “All that is necessary for evil to triumph is for good men to do nothing.” But the reverse is also true. When ordinary people (like the youthful desegregation pioneers) stand up, change and justice can occur. 🌍

### Notes

1. James H. Landman. “An End and a Beginning: The 50th Anniversary of *Brown v. Board of Education*,” *Social Education* 68, no. 1 (January/February 2004): 17-25.
2. Helen Stiff-Williams and John P. Sturtz, “Interviewing the “Lost Generation” from Prince Edward County’s Closed School Era,” *Social Education* 76, no. 2 (March/April 2012): 77–81.

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**Independently or as a class, students can read the following Pullout, and then discuss these questions:**

1. Who is Millicent Brown? Why was her entry into Rivers High School “historic”?
2. Despite Millicent’s mother’s fears, she still sent her daughter to be one of two black students attending the all-white school. Why do you think she did so?
3. On the eve of her first day, why do you think Millicent was so worried about her hair?
4. How would characterize Millicent’s first day of school?
5. Describe Millicent’s relationships with other students at the school.
6. Describe Millicent’s interactions with other teachers.
7. What does it mean when Millicent refers to herself as a “race representative”? Why could that be a burden?
8. What different strategies does Millicent use to survive the experience?
9. What does she come to realize as a result of her experience at Rivers High?
10. What profession did Millicent Brown enter as an adult?