

The Power of Children: Making a Difference

Script for Ruby Bridges: A Marshal's Perspective

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Context: This piece explores the perspective of one of the four federal agents assigned to walk Ruby Bridges to and from school in 1960. The scene takes place in a school classroom at William Frantz elementary following the year Ruby Bridges was escorted to and from school.

Character Description:

Federal Marshal Robert Smith plays the role of the figure depicted in Norman Rockwell's painting. He wears a comfortable suit and carries a briefcase—large enough to hold books and mounted pictures. He is a policeman, official in manner, and “military-like.” He follows the code to “serve and protect.”

MATERIALS/PROPS:

Sunglasses, briefcase, federal agent armband, teacher's desk in a school classroom, a reproduction of the Norman Rockwell painting depicting Ruby Bridges with federal marshals, photos of a black segregated school and a white segregated school, a U.S. map.

PROGRAM/ACTIVITY SCRIPT:

I'm sorry if I've kept you waiting; I was just walking the grounds (*indicate window*), making sure everything's ok the way I used to every morning. Studying my surroundings, sizing up the situation . . . that's my job.

(*sets briefcase on desk and opens it*)

You see, though many people didn't like it, in 1960, I was one of four federal marshals assigned to escort Miss Ruby Bridges to this classroom in William Frantz Elementary. This was a pretty big deal because Ruby was one of the first black students to attend an all-white school here in New Orleans.

(*goes to door*)

Outside, an angry crowd lined the city streets, shouting insults, hoping for a chance to do something violent . . .

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(Indicates arm band) See this armband? This armband told all those protesters that I was a federal marshal. Do you know what that is? It's a special kind of police officer who works directly for the federal government—specifically the courts. This band also told those protestors that if they messed with me, they messed with the whole U.S. Government.

(to another student)

Why do you think that was important?

(waits for answer or improvises)

Well, what's more intimidating: to go up against one man, or the entire government?

(wait for answer)

(Smith strikes a pose)

C'mon now, don't I look intimidating?

(puts on sunglasses)

How about now? Why did I sometimes wear sunglasses?

(waits for answer)

I didn't want all those angry people out there to realize I was scared. In tense situations, a federal marshal is trained to never show emotions, not even a smile. The wrong "angry person" might think I'm weak and do something really dumb. *(removes glasses)* But you know, that's not what we're here to talk about. There's something that I wanted to show you . . .

(He takes off glasses, moves to Mrs. Henry's desk and picks up Rockwell painting.)

This is a reproduction of a painting by the famous artist Norman Rockwell, and it hangs in the offices of most federal marshals to this very day. Here in the center, that's Ruby Bridges and this—right here—is me.

(He poses to replicate his stance in the painting.)

My wife always says this is the best picture of me ever, because you can't see my face.

(points to Ruby)

I like it because it shows the world the way Ruby must have seen it. Just look at how brave and determined she seems; she was something else.

(looks around the room)

You know, this classroom is something else, too. It's almost exactly like it was back in 1960, but something is different, and I'm not sure what it is . . . Ruby sat over there with her teacher, Mrs. Henry, right beside her . . .

(walks to door, realizes "what's missing")

I know what it is! We can't hear the noise outside. Ruby could always hear those protestors screaming and calling her bad names.

(to student close by)

Do you think you could concentrate on your schoolwork, hearing people shout nasty things about you?

(waits for answer)

It was hard on Ruby too.

(Smith pulls out pictures of a black segregated school and a white segregated school)

And the reason this all happened is because in 1954, the United States Supreme Court ordered the end of "separate but equal education." Does anyone know what "separate but equal" meant? It meant that it was legal to send black and white students to different schools, as long as the education they received was equal. But take a look at these photos of a black school and a white school from a similar time period. Do they look equal to you? What are some of the differences you see?

(to all, as he sets down pictures)

Well, they didn't look very equal to the Supreme Court either, and their decision meant that all students, black and white, had a right to attend the same school. But down here, in New Orleans . . .

(goes to U.S. map hanging in the classroom)

. . . it looked like the government in Washington D.C. (up there) was trying to impose its will all over the country, where it wasn't wanted . . . and I mean the *whole* country; segregation—separating people by the color of their skin—didn't just happen in the South, you know.

When things change like that, it really frightens people. Many white people believed that they were better than black people, simply *because* they were white. And they believed it because their parents had believed it, and *their* parents had believed it, and so on, going back for hundreds of years. To some, segregation was not only natural, it was the way *God* wanted things to be.

(Smith holds up a photo of mob in front of school).

How else do you explain something like this? This is one of the crowds that waited for Ruby out in front of William Frantz. And here, you can see a little girl proudly hold up a cross. Now, whatever your religious views happen to be, we can all mostly agree that the cross is usually a sign of peace, but in this case, that cross stands for hatred? The people in this crowd . . . are just regular people; people like you might meet anywhere you go, but look closely: that's a black baby doll inside a coffin. You know something is terribly wrong when adults try to frighten a little girl with an image of her own death.

(Smith returns to the teacher's desk.)

Can I be honest with you?

(waits for response)

Back then I had my doubts, too. As a federal marshal I would always follow orders, always do what I was told; but inside, I wondered: should the government be telling these people how to run their lives? If this is a free country, aren't we free to make mistakes too?

My attitude changed a few days into this assignment . . . For the first time, Mrs. Bridges, Ruby's mother, stayed home. It was just me, Ruby, and the other marshals marching to school through a whole army of sneering and jeering protestors.

(Smith puts back on his sunglasses and marches down the aisle between desks, seemingly surrounded on all sides by people.)

That was one of the scariest days of my life, but being a professional, I tried not to show it. I just told myself “Concentrate. Concentrate . . . just keep on walking through the crowd.” That’s when it hit me.

If I was frightened, Ruby must be scared to death. I looked over at her.

(returns to Rockwell painting—mimicking the moment)

As she walked, her hands were by her side and she was mumbling. “Poor thing,” I thought. “She’s cracking up.” Then I leaned in closer and . . . guess what she was doing?

(points to a student but answers before he/she can)

Praying! Yes, praying. And not for herself but for all those people filled with hatred of her. She was asking God to forgive them.

(turns to student and takes off glasses)

Do you remember me telling you how a federal marshal cannot show emotions? Well, this was the most emotional moment of my life and I had to walk on like nothing at all had happened.

(returns to desk and holds up picture of Ruby)

That crowd behaved like people at their worst, while Ruby walked with the dignity and courage of people at their best. And I realized then that the Bridges weren’t trying to ruin anybody’s life . . . they were just trying to make their own lives as good as anyone else’s. From that day on, I was 100% on her side.

And there weren’t a whole lot of people *on* Ruby’s side back then. Luckily, her teacher—Mrs. Henry —*was* on Ruby’s side. And let me tell you why I admire Mrs. Henry; she didn’t do all of her teaching from up there at the front of the room —most of the time she sat here with Ruby, helping her side by side. And the reason she did that was because they were the only ones here. You see, all of the white families pulled their kids out of school, rather than have them in class with Ruby, so for her entire first-grade year, she was the only student in class.

You can talk all you want about equal opportunity and quality education, but if Mrs. Henry had done all her teaching from up there . . .

(points to desk)

. . .then her work would have been a lot of pretty words, but it wouldn't have meant very much. Instead, Mrs. Henry's hugs and encouragement made a scared, isolated little girl feel a little less alone.

At the end of the school year, Ruby got her final report card, it was all A's. The principal said she didn't deserve them; that they were given unfairly since she got more help than any regular kid. "Unfair?" Who do you think was *really* being unfair here? But, because of the courage that Ruby and others like her showed, things started to get better. The next year, when Ruby came back for second grade, the angry crowds were gone, federal marshals weren't needed to get her into the building, and students had returned to William Frantz —and this time, some of them were black. Every year, things got a little bit better, thanks to Ruby and others like her who were willing to stand up for themselves.

It took the courage of that six-year-old girl to remind me that everyone is created equal, and equal opportunity refers to black, white, and all the wonderful shades in between. And you might say to yourself "Well, that's obvious!" But somehow, it didn't seem so obvious back then. And maybe we'll always need a courageous child—someone like you, or you, or any of you —to remind the rest of us how important it is to stand up for what you know is right, and instead of getting caught up in judging people who are different from you, let's try to celebrate those differences.

SUGGESTED FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

- **How many of you knew about Ruby Bridges before seeing the exhibitions or performance today? Where did you learn about her?**
- **Based on what you heard today, and what you already know, what did Ruby face that made her life different from our lives today? What did she have to go through that most kids today haven't lived through?**
- You heard Ruby's story through the eyes of an adult who shared a part of her story, someone who started off with uncertainties, but later, inspired by Ruby's courage, changed his mind and joined Ruby's cause for equal rights. **What do you think the Federal Marshal meant when he said, "It took the courage of a six year-old girl to remind me that everyone is created equal . . . ?"**