

## *The Power of Children: Making a Difference*

### **Script for Ruby Bridges: A New Normal**

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**Context:** This piece explores the start of the 1961–62 school year at William Frantz Elementary in New Orleans, the year following Ruby's integration, through the eyes of a composite teacher character, Mrs. Newkirk.

#### **CHARACTER DESCRIPTION:**

Mrs. Newkirk is loosely based upon the forward thinking straight talking aspects of Mrs. Henry. She is a representative of the changing views of the 1960s. She is smart and sassy and not afraid to speak her mind. Her role as a teacher limits some of what she may express and ultimately the goal is not to debate the issues of integration but to move forward in peace and tolerance to the betterment of all of her students. She is firm yet candid with her students. She never talks down to them.

#### **MATERIALS/PROPS:**

Classroom setting with a schoolteacher desk, books, apples, chalkboard, chalk, etc. Venues can also simply stage a classroom space with a prop chalkboard on an easel.

#### **PROGRAM/ACTIVITY SCRIPT:**

*(A fifth-grade classroom. "September 1, 1961" is written on the board. It is the first day of school.)*

Good morning, boys and girls. *(She makes her way to the front of the classroom, speaking to students as she goes.)* Okay, everyone, let's settle in and find a seat. Eddie Miller, sit in that chair correctly. Dean, Sarah, put the comic books away, please.

Well, boys and girls, welcome back to William Frantz Public School. Some of you I know, and some of you are new to me. So, let me introduce myself. My name is Mrs. Newkirk. *(Writing her name on a real or imaginary chalkboard.)* That's N-E-W-K-I-R-K. And you will be finishing out your time at William Frantz with me. Now, since you are fifth graders, I'm not going to waste my time and yours with the usual tardiness rules and hallway behavior speech. If you're unsure of any of these policies, you may consult with me or any of your classmates during recess time. I do, however, want to say a few words

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about the events of last year and how they will affect the goings on in my classroom this school year.

Last fall at William Frantz was very different than it will be this year. When you walked into school this morning, was anything or anyone in your way? Were there people outside threatening you or wishing harm on you? No. But there were throngs of people on those sidewalks last year. And they were gathered for one reason. Ruby Bridges, who was a first grader last year. (*Growing serious.*) Now I realize that none of you, save one or two, were coming to school while she was here, but regardless of your absence, you are aware of the happenings surrounding the school. And I'm not going to name any names, but I recognized several faces and parents' faces outside of William Frantz. And I can only assume, since much of your time was spent outside the classroom instead of inside it, you have little knowledge about the activity within these walls during the 1960-61 school year.

I'm sorry, but I'm not about to sweep this under the rug. I owe it to Ruby to tell my students the facts. I know we've been instructed to return to normal—but what is normal? Last year certainly wasn't for Ruby.

Can you imagine coming to school and, while simply walking up to the door, a woman says to you, "I'm going to poison you." Another woman showed Ruby a little black doll in a coffin. But Ruby just marched into school, where she had earned her spot.

(*Getting off track, sitting on the desk's edge.*) Now let's see, if you're fifth graders, that means you were about four years old in 1954, so you may not remember this well. But *Brown v. Board of Education* said that black children and white children should go to school together. In other words, schools should be integrated and not segregated. Seems like yesterday and not six years ago. Can you believe here in New Orleans it took us until 1960 to get it done? Well anyway, Ruby was one of six black children to pass the test to get into the school system—and the only one to go to William Frantz. . . Where was I? Oh yes, well that first day of school, the crowds got so riled up that Ruby was escorted by Federal Marshals—you know what those are, right? Government police officers. See, whether she realized it at six years old or not, what Ruby was doing was so significant. From the first minute of the first day, everything about the way we went to school was different. And some people are so afraid of what's different, they forget how to behave. Parents—your parents—stopped sending you to school. No, Samuel, I'm not here to judge you or hear your reasons or your mama's reasons—I'm here to tell you what I know. I know I showed up to teach fifth grade every day but had so many days in a row with no students they told me to stay home. I must have wallpapered every surface of my house last year. I know that Ruby arrived at school, hoping to find classmates, new friends, someone to share a cubby with . . . and there was no one. Not one child in her class. But there was Mrs. Henry. If you didn't see her in the halls this

morning, it's because she's moved back to Boston now, but Mrs. Henry and I shared the same views about schooling. We both thought every child deserved a good education, and she taught Ruby every single day, from a little desk right next to her.

Oh, the two of us were in the teacher's lounge one morning and the custodian came in, telling Mrs. Henry he had found a mess in her classroom. Now Barbara Henry was nothing if not neat and tidy, so she went to investigate. She found a cabinet full of old, rotten sandwiches and a paste jar full of spoiled milk. Turns out, Ruby had been hiding her lunches in there. She thought if she got rid of her food, she would be allowed to go eat lunch with other children she thought she heard in the cafeteria. So then Mrs. Henry began eating with Ruby in the classroom.

I should mention that Ruby wasn't just hearing things. There were a few other students who continued to come to school despite the dangerous conditions outside. It's a shame that we give more attention to those who caused such turmoil than to those parents and students who ignored it and bravely crossed the protest lines. But unfortunately, none of those students were in Ruby's class, and so she remained isolated.

That became Ruby's normal school day. Walking to school with federal policemen, being threatened and screamed at, learning in a school room alone. (*beat*) That should be no one's "normal." But Ruby had no choice. She was different from the other children. Six years old. Shouldering a burden that no one, child or adult, should have to bear. I don't mean the burden of being different—we're all different and there's nothing wrong with that. I mean the burden of being lonely. How unfair to her. No one would learn in a classroom with her because she was black. Because of the color of her skin. Something she was born with. That would be like saying, Eddie, you can't be friends with Walt because he has blond hair and yours is brown. Or I'm no longer going to teach anyone who is left-handed, because I'm right-handed. These qualities make us who we are. They are natural. They are normal.

And now, Ruby is trying to adjust to a new normal, as are we all. Maybe you saw her in the hall before the bell rang. She is a second grader now, with friends instead of angry screaming mobs to greet her every day. (*Firmly.*) And while I'm not here to tell you what to think and whom to like, and what friends to choose in your life, I am here to tell you that you will treat her with the same respect you would show to any of your friends. You are not to stare at her. You are not to whisper behind your hands and point at her. Say hello to her in the hallways, or smile if you pass her when the bell rings. You do not have to be her best friend, but you do have to accept her. Some of your parents may not agree with our school system's integration policy, but there is no going back. Everything has changed. Some people do not adapt well to change, and maybe you are one of those people. But this is my classroom, and I want it bursting with students who face

obstacles, accept challenges, and above all, treat each other with kindness. And that will be our . . . new normal.

*(Back around to desk chair.)* And so we start the year with a clean slate. I look forward to a prosperous school year. Let's get to it. Susan, you collect the milk money. Dean, you will lead us in the Pledge of Allegiance. Then we tackle mathematics. If President Kennedy can put a man on the moon by the end of the decade, surely we can handle long division. *(Sit in chair to end scene. Then stand, bow.)*

#### **SUGGESTED FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:**

- Actor has enlarged pictures on-hand and uses them to spark discussion. *Protestors, unequal classrooms, Ruby on playground with friends, Mrs. Henry and Ruby and Normal Rockwell.*
- **Why is the idea of racism so hard to talk about?** *It is still an unresolved conflict in society. Still differing points of view. Emotionally heated subject. Ties to political and social points of view.*
- **In what ways did Mrs. Henry make Ruby comfortable in her classroom?** *Sat next to her, ate with her, played with her, encouraged her, etc.*
- **What does "segregation" mean?** *Separating people based on the color of their skin.*
- **In what ways was Ruby still segregated while being at an integrated school?** *All white children in another room—even ones in the same grade level.*