

Civil rights icon Ruby Bridges, protector reunite

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Bridges and former U.S. Marshal Charles Burks talked about the day she integrated a New Orleans elementary school in 1960.



(Photo: Charlie Nye Charlie Nye / The Star)

INDIANAPOLIS -- Ruby Bridges wasn't really afraid on Nov. 14, 1960, as federal marshals [escorted her into William Frantz Elementary School in New Orleans](http://www.indystar.com/article/20130905/NEWS/309050091/Civil-rights-icon-Ruby-Bridges-meets-federal-marshal-who-protected-her) (<http://www.indystar.com/article/20130905/NEWS/309050091/Civil-rights-icon-Ruby-Bridges-meets-federal-marshal-who-protected-her>).

The 6-year-old thought that the angry crowds surrounding the school were part of a Mardi Gras parade. In reality, they were there to protest the racial integration of schools and the idea that children such as Bridges would be learning alongside white children.

In the days that followed, Bridges, now 58, would continue to be escorted by federal marshals.

She had nightmares about the black doll inside of a little casket that one of the protesters brought to the school, dreaming that the coffin had wings and was flying around her bed at night.

But Bridges said she still wasn't afraid — she didn't really know the significance of what was happening, that she would become an iconic figure of the civil rights movement and among the first black students to integrate all-white schools.

And Charles Burks — one of the marshals who protected her — wasn't afraid either. He was a deputy U.S. marshal working at the Hammond, Ind., office as a member of a special operations group trained to deal with the integration of schools. He was called to New Orleans and became one of four marshals who protected Bridges.

"I was thinking about making sure nothing happened to Ruby," he said. "That was the most important thing. We knew what to do. You just had to do it."

More than half a century later, Burks and Bridges had the chance to reconnect.

The two met in Indianapolis on Thursday — for the first time since 1995 and only the second time since the days when he made sure she entered school safely — at The Children's Museum of Indianapolis.

Bridges was in Indianapolis to speak at a school and took advantage of the opportunity to see Burks, 92, who lives in Logansport, Ind.

MORE HISTORY: [Civil Rights in America: Connections to a Movement](https://www.usatoday.com/topic/6bdfc1f8-cf8e-4589-baab-5c1b7c974f58/civil-rights/) (<https://www.usatoday.com/topic/6bdfc1f8-cf8e-4589-baab-5c1b7c974f58/civil-rights/>).

The meeting was recorded and will become a part of the museum's *The Power of Children* exhibit, which shares the stories of Bridges, Anne Frank and Ryan White.

Sitting in the exhibit's replica of the classroom that Bridges sat in alone except for her teacher — with rows of desks and a pink child's coat on a hanger — they recalled the days that helped change the course of the civil rights movement and discussed the work they think still needs to be done.

"It's important to me that young people today could hear what that was like," Bridges said. "It was truly a turbulent time, but we accomplished so much."

She still lives in New Orleans and shares her story with children on school tours throughout the country. For a long time, Bridges struggled with the idea that maybe what she went through wasn't that important. Nobody talked about it — not at school or at home. At her high school, no one knew who she was.

It wasn't until she saw Norman Rockwell's popular 1963 painting, *The Problem We All Live With*, an image of a young black girl being escorted to school by U.S. marshals, that she realized her story is one that touched America.

She went on to become a travel agent, living a normal life. She was 30 before she realized she needed to do something with her story and share it with others.

"You'd think after electing the first black president, we'd come together," she said, "but that's not true. We are more separated. We do have a lot of work to do, but it's going to take all of us coming together to do that work."

Part of the problem resides in the way history is taught, Bridges said. History books cannot resonate with children in the same way that hearing her story does, or in the way that the children's book *The Story of Ruby Bridges* might. They don't look at events through the eyes of children.

When Bridges visits schools, she is alarmed that children don't know the story behind Rockwell's painting. They often cannot wrap their minds around the fact that racism still exists.

"They cannot understand," she said, "why we as adults cannot come together."

In 1960, the 6-year-old learned not to judge people by the color of their skin. While the crowds outside the school shouted at and threatened her, she remembered this: The white marshals were not like the people outside. The white teacher who greeted her inside was not like them.

"If Charlie had not done his job, had not answered the call and wasn't there for me, if the teacher was a different person, I would have had a different life," she said. "I would have seen them in a different light."

The job Burks completed decades ago sticks with him.

In his Logansport home, two iconic Associated Press photos hang on a wall. They show a little girl — Bridges — being escorted inside the elementary school's doors by him and other marshals, and later being safely escorted away.

"Every time I walk down the hall and see the pictures, it reminds me of those days," Burks said. "I'm so glad I was able to do what I did."

And so is Bridges.

"Thank you, Charlie," she said, "for doing what's right at a time when it might have not been the easiest thing to do."

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