

Lesson One Overview

“They Didn’t Want Me There” – An Interview with Melba Beals

Description:

The class will listen to (and concurrently read) excerpts from NPR’s Interview with Melba Pattillo Beals, one of the first African American students to integrate into an all-white school. Students will then work together to answer both comprehension and inference-based questions that underline the powerful sacrifices made by Beals. The reflection activity will consist of writing a letter to thank Melba Beals, where students will cite the bravery of what she did and any examples of inequality in today’s world they believe she would disapprove of. Throughout the lesson, students will be pushed to not only learn the powerful history of segregation through the lens of a student not dissimilar to them, but also recognize how they can combat racial and social injustices within their community.

The interview adheres primarily to a single expository text structure and focuses on the experiences of Melba Beals in a chronological Q&A narrative. Relationships among concepts, themes, and events within the interview are profound and should be discussed as a class. The style is simple and conversational with some vocabulary being subject-specific (to the Civil Rights Movement). However, almost all concepts are easy to follow and supported by context clues. The lesson does require an understanding of the Civil Rights Movement, but we have included a timeline and introduction activity to review the history.

Written below is the transcript of an abridged version of NPR’s Interview with Melba Beals, which students will be listening to and analyzing.

Link to the Interview: www.tinyurl.com/BealsInterview

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Interview transcript begins on the next page.

Excerpts of an Interview with Melba Pattillo Beals

DAVE DAVIES, HOST:

This is FRESH AIR. I'm Dave Davies, in for Terry Gross, who's off this week. In 1957, three years after the Supreme Court declared segregated schools unconstitutional, nine black students were chosen by the NAACP to try and integrate Central High School in Little Rock, Ark. Enrolling was one thing. Attending was something else.

The students were met by an angry white mob. And it took the presence of federal troops to get them into classes for more than one day. Our guest today is Melba Pattillo Beals, one of those students who came to be known as the Little Rock Nine. She wrote in her book "Warriors Don't Cry," that every day, she got up, polished her saddle shoes and went off to war. After that school year, Pattillo Beals went to California, where she got an education and pursued careers as a TV journalist, magazine writer, communications executive and university professor.

But as you'll hear, her year at Central High left emotional scars that were long-lasting. Melba Pattillo Beals has a doctorate in international multicultural education and was awarded a Congressional Gold Medal in 1999. She's written a new memoir called "I Will Not Fear" and a book about her childhood for younger readers - it's called "March Forward, Girl."

Well, Dr. Melba Pattillo Beals, welcome to FRESH AIR. It's good to have you. You say, in your new book, that you became aware of discrimination at the age of 3 growing up in Little Rock. Boy, that's...

MELBA PATTILLO BEALS: Absolutely.

DAVIES: That's young. How did you become aware?

BEALS: Essentially by watching my parents and by seeing them freeze up when we go places, by seeing the difference in their behavior in my presence in the home, in church and around each other, versus their behavior when we went to the grocery store, which was around the corner. That would be my first little glimpse of a world beyond my home - the grocery store.

It would also be when the insurance man visited my house, and I would see how my father went into the back room and armed himself. And this is what he'd choose - to take this brush and this cloth. And he cleaned off his shotgun because he was steamed at the way that the insurance man and the milkman and all these white delivery men treated my mother. My mother was very beautiful. She looked perhaps Hawaiian or - she's partially American-Indian, so she had sort of wavy hair to her waist and really beautiful skin and all of this. She did not look as though she were particularly black.

And they would come to the house. And as they were trying to collect or deliver whatever, they would, like, flirt with her. And I could watch my father's response, which was that he was helpless, powerless. But oh, was he (unintelligible) steamingly angry. I watched my mother's

response, which was to walk a very thin line - to push them away, to get rid of them but, at the same time, not to really annoy them. Do you know what I mean?

DAVIES: You write that you grew up with a lot of fear. What were you afraid of?

BEALS: Every single time day turned to night, I was frightened that the Klan would ride. From a very early age, again, I watched the parents around me pull the shades, quiet us all down to make our house look as though we were being very good Negroes, pull us in, pull anything from the outside that looked as though we were engaged in any activities they would object to. I watched this routine go on for all of my early life.

And I watched how it was when we went into stores - how my grandmother grabbed my hand and squeezed it so tight it hurt, how we were not allowed to touch things. When I was 5 and 4 and 3, if I went down town shopping, I couldn't touch anything - not the clothing, not the groceries, not anything. And in some of the grocery stores - we only had a couple that we could go to, first of all. And secondly, when you got there, Grandma couldn't, like, reach for things. She would tell a clerk what he wanted, and he would touch it because they didn't want black people touching all the merchandise, say, along a certain line, OK?

So he would give her what she needed, and then they would form a line to pay for it. And the line in which you stood to pay for it - at any moment, a white person can walk up and get in front of you in line...

DAVIES: Yeah.

BEALS: ...And you can't say a thing.

DAVIES: And they wouldn't want you to touch things because an item that you had touched would not be acceptable to a white customer.

BEALS: Would not be salable, would not be - yeah, right.

DAVIES: Right. Let's move to 1957, when the Supreme Court had ruled that the separate but equal doctrine for public education did not hold, that - and integration was called for. And there was this move to integrate Central High School in Little Rock. First of all, just describe what the differences were between that high school, which was all white, and the high school that you attended?

BEALS: The high school I attended was called Horace Mann. It had been built recently. The white populace decided, in order to appease black people so that we wouldn't even want integration, they would build a new high school called Horace Mann. Now, unfortunately for us, Horace Mann was built like a school - it was actually copied, I understand, off of a school in Florida, meaning for me to go from my classroom to the bathroom or from my classroom to the next classroom, I had to go outdoors in this hallway which was exposed to the weather. Do you know what I mean?

And so - but it got freezing cold in Arkansas. And so why would you build a school like this for Little Rock school kids? But anyway, and my school was one story, limited in its size, with a fairly OK library but very, very minimal kinds of equipment. What would happen would be every September, we would get a couple of truckloads of stuff that was used by the kids in the white high school. So that could be, you know, a three-legged table, slimy typewriter, used books. And the teacher would dig into these things with great gratitude, and we would move ahead. I wanted to wonder what the other high school was like.

Well, it was seven stories in height - Central High School was. It was four blocks - let's see, eight blocks in diameter, in terms of its measurements. It was, I think, ranked eighth in the nation in terms of its physical building. One of its top floors was completely contributed to music and bands. It had a floor which was nothing but apartments to teach you home economics. It's everything a girl could have. And to boot, many of its students went on to the top eight universities in the country, showing you, thus, the caliber of instructors it had. So it was highly ranked, Central High School.

DAVIES: So nine students - nine African-American students were selected for the - to try and integrate Central High School. How did you get to be one of them?

BEALS: Really, there were 116 students, and then it sort of whittled down to nine by people being frightened and people being threatened because by this time, the White Citizens' Council had nominated a committee of white people to go door to door, contact you through your doctor, contact you through whomever to get to you to tell you, oh, now, you know, you don't want to integrate. But eventually, to qualify - in the beginning, to qualify, you had to have good grades, and you had to have a record of not fighting, not talking back, a record of being a good student behavior-wise and academically.

DAVIES: And you had to volunteer. You stepped up to do this.

BEALS: Oh, amen.

DAVIES: So this was a rocky start to the integration of Central High School. You want to just tell us about the first day when you and your mom went, thinking you were going to get into the high school?

BEALS: When we walked up behind this big crowd, we realized ah, ha, ha, ha, we have really done something that we shouldn't have done. We anticipated that the people were all on tippy-toe, looking across the street - for what? - we didn't know. Let's us go look. So we walked up behind this crowd that was probably six people deep. There were thousands of people there. And we tried to go through because we were going to go across the street and go to the school.

And right away, these guys started - hey, you know, we got us a n— right here to hang, right here. No need looking across the street to get that one. We got one here. And it went downhill from there. They started chasing us. We started running. We had parked the car at the end of that block, and we had to make our way to this car. And I thought for sure we wouldn't make it.

They got close to my mother - close enough to my mother that they grabbed her jacket off of her. At one point, they made her drop her valise, and she picked it back up because she was dressed to go to school. She was a schoolteacher. And we get to the car just by - you know, my grandmother said, look, if you're ever in a really tight place, understand that at every moment of your life, God is as close to you as your skin. You have but to pray, and he will show you that he's there, and he will help you. So I'd never tested that. And so I'm 15, and I think to myself, aha, it appears to me that this is the time - you know what I'm saying? - because these guys have ropes, and they're directly behind me, and they're chasing, they're calling me all sorts of names. And they're saying what they're going to do with us before they hang us, right?

And so I - you know, I started to pray. And I prayed out loud, as loud as I possibly could, hoping that this would facilitate God's hearing me. And I thought, how is he going to, you know, fix this? Because we couldn't call the police - we knew that. What would the police do? They would help the other people. And so I thought, well, how will we get past this? And it was that - this was an unpaved sidewalk, and there were all sorts of bushes and branches and things across the walkway.

And whereas we saw these two things, I suppose the gentlemen behind us, who were so angry, with their ropes in the air and their - you know, they didn't. And so they fell. And just for an instant, that gave us one instant to get to the car.

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DAVIES: Your first two attempts - you and these fellow students to get into Little Rock - into Central High School at Little Rock - actually didn't - you didn't even complete full days. You barely escaped with your lives from the mob. And President Eisenhower sent federal troops, the 101st Airborne, to make sure that you were escorted into the classes and kept safe. They got you in, but they couldn't follow you into classrooms. And I want you to tell us what it was like when you actually got into a classroom, and the soldiers were outside. How were you treated by the students? How did the teachers respond?

BEALS: Some of the teachers were, shall we say, OK. Or they were cordial. They were civil. Others were not. They let you know right away what they thought. And here I had to begin thinking about, how can I save my life during this class? Do I need to sit in the back or the front? Shall I sit where I can look at the soldier? Although, I could look at my soldier sometimes. He couldn't come through. He might signal me to move over here, do this, do that. But the fact of the matter was that I was, you know, completely open to whatever happened. And many of the classrooms that teach - not many - but some of the classes - the teachers were strong and they said, sit down. Don't touch her. Don't hit her. Others - they didn't care what happened, you know?

DAVIES: What kinds of things would students do in class?

BEALS: Light paper and take a match, light a piece of paper and then throw it on you. Particularly in study hall, they loved that trick. Hit you, throw things at you. A favorite thing was to do something to your back, smear peanut butter.

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DAVIES: You know, this was decades ago, of course, and I have to believe that many of those students who perpetrated this stuff feel pretty bad about it. Did you ever hear from any of them or the adults who should've put a stop to it?

BEALS: You know, Oprah had a bunch of us on, and one guy said - who - I wanted to go out with him afterwards - and there was a guy called John Sandhay (ph). I can't remember (unintelligible). He walked on my heels and did horrifying things. And there were several people there. Some of them apologized. Some of them said that they would never teach their children to be that way. And, you know, others said that we had ruined their high school for them, and we had ruined their senior year. And I imagine for many of those kids, we did ruin their senior year.

So there were sort of mixed feelings. But yes, later on, some did - some went on the Internet and said, oh, you know, Melba Beals could never have written her book because she such an - you know, she's so stupid, like most black people are stupid. And some have done very detrimental things. But the best thing for me to do is to ignore that. And I've always known, thanks to grandma and mother and God, who I really am. So that's all I need.

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DAVIES: You know, we don't have time to cover the story that the book tells. But, I mean, you got an education. And you were a mom and then adopted two sons and were a journalist and eventually a communications specialist. And you describe, you know, the discrimination you experienced in employment and housing. And I just have to ask you - given that you were - you know, you were played a path-breaking role in civil rights in this country. How much progress have we made as a nation towards overcoming this terrible legacy of racism?

BEALS: I thought by this time, when I'm 76, which, if you look back, is how many years? Fifty-six. I thought that it would be over. I thought that equality would be here. But I was wrong. I was really wrong. But how is life different now? I have a voice. And so we have indeed, my dear, come a very, very long way. You may hit me now on the way out of the studio, but I have a voice. I can report that.

And of the policemen who come to take that report, one of them's going to be OK. He's going to say, no, this shouldn't have happened. And he's going to do something about it. And so I'll take that for now. People beyond where I am will have to keep struggling, as those who came before me struggled. That's cool. I see progress. It certainly is not happening at the speed I want it to happen.

But there is incredible progress that I sit here before this camera, this microphone, that I was a news reporter, that you're interested in interviewing me regarding books which are on that topic, that people with white faces welcomed me here. And so yeah, we've made some progress from where I was. Baby, don't you ever forget that I rode in the back of the bus near the fussy, gassy engine. I drank from a water fountain marked color. Uh-uh. Don't forget it. And I never, ever forget it. So I've come a long, long way.