

# A Hero Among Us:

## The Civil Rights Movement Through the Eyes of a Child

Tessie Prevost Williams, administrative assistant in the Department of Pediatric Dentistry, has worked at the LSU School of Dentistry for 20 years. She's quiet and unassuming. You'd never know that, as a six-year-old child, she played a key role in the history of the civil rights movement. You'd never know she was one of the little girls carefully chosen by the federal government to implement Brown versus Board of Education, one of the most important rulings of the U.S. Supreme Court. You'd never guess that her unshakable dignity was shaped by hatred from people who didn't know her and love from the people who did. This is her story.



*Tessie Prevost Williams at the site of the elementary school where she made history in 1960.*

### The Test

In 1960, the Orleans Parish School Board was under a court order to end school desegregation. To do so, 137 black kindergarten children were tested to find out who would be sent to two white schools. Tessie was one of those who took the test. She isn't sure if the test was meant to measure intelligence, psychological resiliency or something else. What she does remember is taking a bus with her mother from their home in the Lower Ninth Ward to the school board headquarters in Gentilly. The test took most of the day.

Weeks later, a Western Union telegram arrived, saying she was selected to attend McDonogh 19 Elementary School, a school she could see from her backyard. Her parents hugged her and told her she was special. They said she would meet new people and that would be good.

### First Day

The U.S. marshals who came to her home to escort her to the new school were big, strong men who made her feel safe. Her father would come with her, too. With her hand in his, her trust was complete.

As they neared the school, she heard the roar of the crowd. "I thought it was a Mardi Gras parade" she remembers. "I thought I'd find people having a good time." She didn't expect to be surrounded by hate.

As she, her father, and the marshals walked up the school steps, she saw the police trying to control the angry crowd. A few white schoolchildren were inside the building, but by the next day, they were all gone. The children who stayed

were three little black girls: Tessie Prevost, Leona Tate, and Gail Etienne.

"So, there we were, the only three children in this empty school building," Tessie recalls. The school windows were taped over with brown paper to keep out the world. The schoolyard was unsafe so the girls jumped rope and played hopscotch up and down the hallways. Tessie remembers the building as a haven.

Central to her school life was Mrs. Meyers, her first-grade teacher. "She was sweet, with a wonderful spirit," says Tessie. "She made us feel safe and comfortable. She taught us our school work and she taught us about love. I can't imagine how difficult that time was for her, a white woman raised in New Orleans, teaching black children. At the end of each day, I went back to my family and community where everyone supported me. What about Mrs. Meyers? What

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kind of support did she have?" Tessie considers Mrs. Meyers one of the unsung heroes of the civil rights movement in New Orleans.

Tessie didn't understand what was happening and was especially startled to see herself on the television news at night. She asked her grandmother why there were all those people out by the school each day. "Some people are not ready for change," her grandmother said. "Don't you worry; just go to school and do what you need to do." Despite the extraordinary circumstances, Tessie received a good education. "All that attention from Mrs. Meyers—what a blessing."

Two years later she was transferred, along with Leona and Gail, to T.J. Semmes School near the Industrial Canal. It was an integrated school and her life quickly deteriorated. "The white teachers and students did not want us there. Every day there were beatings and cursing. They spat on us and ripped off our clothes."

When it was time for senior high, she had had enough fighting. She chose to attend the all-black Joseph S. Clark Senior High School.

### We Know What You Did

Johnny Jones, her eleventh-grade history teacher, was a teacher like no other. "He made history come alive," she remembers. He assigned each student a topic and supervised their research. Tessie was assigned Brown versus Board of Education. She was stunned to see herself in the history books.

Her parents gave her boxes of letters from people around the world, praising her courage and embracing the little girl who didn't yet appreciate her place in history. There was a heartfelt

letter from Eleanor Roosevelt, widow of President Franklin Roosevelt. There was a photo of Tessie with Thurgood Marshall, the legendary civil rights lawyer who played a key role in Brown versus Board of Education and became a Supreme Court justice. (See Editor's Note at End.)

When Tessie talked to Johnny Jones about her growing awareness, he said, "I know who you are. Every teacher in this school knows who you are and we know what you did."

Quickly, she saw the significance of what happened to her and the domino effect of her childhood...that school integration led to the integration of public



*Tessie hopes her story helps others see the beauty of diversity.*

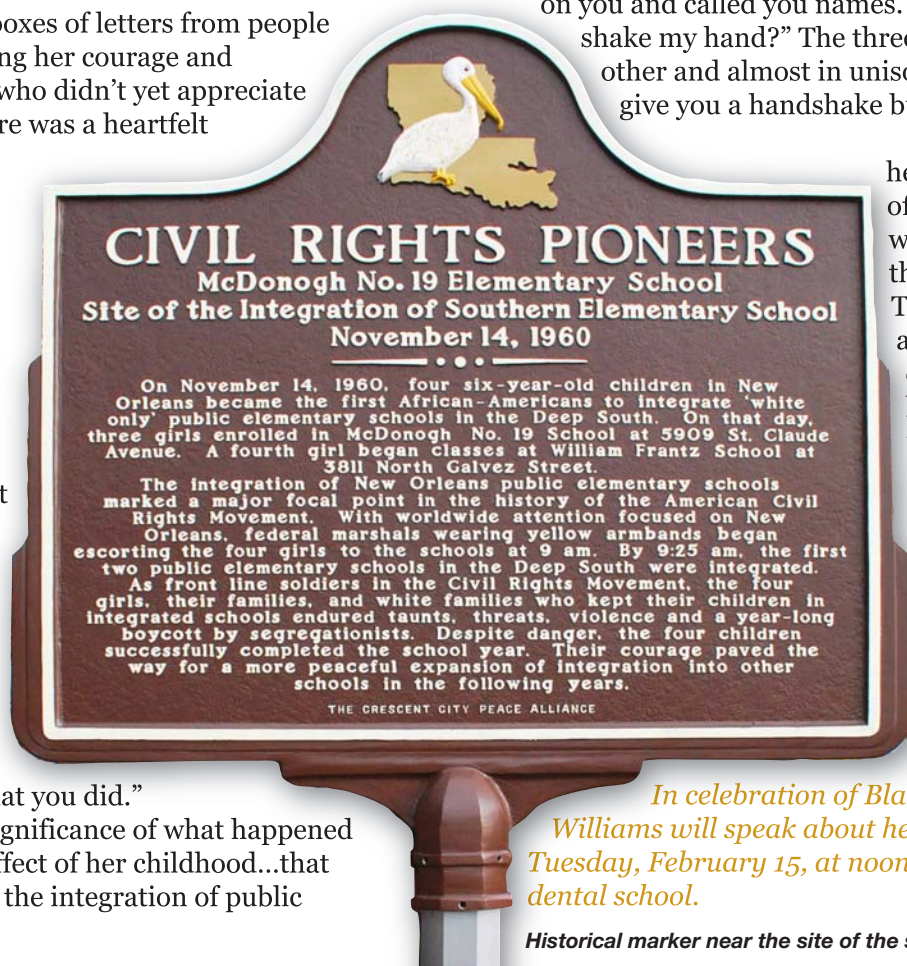
facilities, restaurants, hotels, all the places where people naturally gather. Sports historians know that it was only after New Orleans implemented the laws for open accommodations that the city was given the franchise for the New Orleans Saints.

### Today, Tomorrow

Recently, Tessie, Gail and Leona made a presentation about their experiences to a group in Baton Rouge. Afterwards, a white man came up to them. He said he had driven in from Covington. His persona was raw and honest. "I was one of the students who taunted you," he said. "I spat on you and called you names. Can you forgive me and shake my hand?" The three women looked at each other and almost in unison said, "No. We won't give you a handshake but we will give you a hug."

Tessie hopes her story helps others see the beauty of diversity. "The ways that we are different are things that we should celebrate. There is so much power and freedom when we see differences in a positive light." It's a simple truth with a profound message: the unique story of America comes from the diversity of its people.

*Note: Tessie's priceless letters and photos were lost in the flooding of Hurricane Katrina.*



*In celebration of Black History Month, Tessie Williams will speak about her experiences on Tuesday, February 15, at noon in Auditorium A at the dental school.*

*Historical marker near the site of the school.*