

The First Friend

By Rachel

In 1960 it was my first day of first grade in New Orleans. There was some commotion going on around the school. Marshals were taking someone into the school building, at least, that's what it looked like they were doing. I still couldn't understand why the other students' parents were angry with the person.

Maybe it's only something someone's done to the school. Maybe they can fix it, I thought to myself.

Then I knew I was wrong because I heard words coming from the people in the crowd.

"Get out of here!"

"We don't allow black people!"

"Make her go back where she came from!"

"Mommy," I said, "why are those people being so mean to the person with the marshals?"

"Because, Rebekah," Mommy responded, "the little girl is black. I reckon all those parents are going to be pulling their kids out of the school left and right if they don't get what they want soon."

When we got home, I asked, "Daddy? Will you and Mommy not let me go to school this year? Because of the new girl, I mean."

"No. We will have you go to school with Ruby," Daddy replied.

"Who's Ruby?" I asked.

"Ruby Bridges was the little girl with the marshals. You see, most people don't want a black girl in a school with white students like you. Do you understand?" Daddy sounded as if he meant it, so I agreed with him.

After the first day of school I really did believe my dad. Hardly anyone was at school. It was just Ruby and me in my classroom. I didn't pay much attention to her at first, but I couldn't help it. She was so much different from anyone I had ever seen.

On the second day of school it really was just Ruby and me. On the playground on that lonesome day I thought to myself, “Maybe I should try to be her friend. I mean, what harm could it do? It looks like she has no friends. And after all that she went through two days ago...”

“Hi, Ruby! I’m Rebekah!” After I said it I felt so foolish. I guess it was the way she looked at me.

“Hi,” Ruby said rather shyly.

“Would you like to play with me?” I asked.

“Okay,” Ruby sounded more confident this time.

We had fun together for the rest of the day. I helped her a little in class. After school I walked with her until we got to the crosswalk where my mom usually picks me up.

When I got home I told my Mom that all the other teachers and parents were wrong about Ruby. I told her that she was nice.

“I’m so happy that you and Ruby Bridges are friends!” my mom complimented me. I thought she was proud of me for making friends with Ruby.

In a few days Ruby and I developed a great friendship with one another. We started having play dates with each other almost every day. Ruby helped me in spelling and I helped her with math.

After a few months of school some of the kids whose parents had criticized Ruby before started to come back.

By the time Ruby and I started second grade, every student was back in school. Ruby was able to come to school unescorted and we had more friends to play with.

Years passed, and Ruby founded the Ruby Bridges Foundation in New Orleans in 1999. I was also the first person to buy her new book that came out in 1999. It was about that year in first grade, and she even mentioned me in the book.

When I went in to buy the book, Ruby Bridges was there. She smiled at me as though she didn’t recognize me. When Ruby looked at the check I gave her she said, “Hi Rebekah! What a wonderful surprise!”

After Ruby and I had a nice long conversation, I settled down and read, “Through My Eyes.” I remember reading it about a thousand times.

I have never forgotten, and never will forget, that first day I introduced myself to Ruby Bridges.