

---

# St. Petersburg Times

**A loaded topic in race relations Series: WEEKEND DIVERSIONS**

*PAMELA GRINER LEAVY.*

St. Petersburg, Fla.: Sep 3, 2004. pg. 6.

*Copyright Times Publishing Co.*

Remember. Realize. Reflect.

Racial taunts from white students, no chalk for the blackboards and tattered textbooks mar the memories of high school for Talmadge Rutledge of Clearwater.

Rutledge's story, along with many others, can be seen at the Heritage Village museum in Largo.

Visitors can experience the turbulent days of separate schools and desegregation at an interactive exhibit, "Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of Brown vs. Board of Education," which will guide them through the 1954 landmark Supreme Court ruling.

The forced march to desegregated schools was slow and often painful.

Pinellas County schools did not fully desegregate until 1971, 17 years after Brown.

In 1968, Rutledge, a self-described community activist, led an orderly demonstration by about 40 people. They protested against busing black students and white students past all-black Pinellas High School, Rutledge's alma mater, then in Clearwater's North Greenwood neighborhood. The demonstrators stopped a school bus, but no violence occurred.

To the music of Motown, gospel, soul, rock 'n' roll and rhythm and blues, Heritage Village's exhibit challenges visitors to examine how far school desegregation has come and to consider how far it still may need to go.

Brown vs. Board of Education's rocky history stands as an important legacy, said Rutledge.

"It was supposed to have been nationwide, and it goes to show you that it wasn't only a local problem but they didn't immediately desegregate," he said of America's public schools.

"There were problems throughout the country. Some people defied that law. I believe it was President Eisenhower who had to send out the National Guard in the case of Little Rock. U.S. marshals had to show those kids into school."

Heritage Village chronicles the 1957 desegregation of Central High School in Little Rock,

Ark., in a portion of the exhibit produced by the Black History Museum & Cultural Center of Virginia.

Photographs recall key events and phrases in desegregation history: separate but equal schools, the 1962 riots at the University of Mississippi when James Meredith enrolled at the school, and forced busing.



Panels depict some of the major figures in the story and bring the civil rights movement to a local level. Part of the exhibit produced by the Pinellas County African American History Museum in Clearwater tells the Pinellas County and Florida story.

Florida Gov. Reubin Askew championed busing as a way to correct inequalities in education, and in 1971 he compared segregation to apartheid.

Leon W. Bradley Sr., leading plaintiff in a 1964 Pinellas County class action lawsuit to integrate Pinellas County schools, is also featured. The lawsuit was resolved in 1971. Bradley was a Clearwater police officer and vice president of the Clearwater NAACP.

"Quality education is something worth fighting for," Bradley is quoted as saying. "It's important in getting a job and being respected. When you have the tools, you can demand what you want."

Also featured are Gus Sakkis, James Sanderlin and C. Bette Wimbish. Sakkis was

deputy Pinellas school superintendent in 1972. Despite phone threats from members of the local Nazi party, he defended busing and promoted black administrators. Sanderlin, a St. Petersburg lawyer, was assigned to the Bradley case in 1964 by the NAACP Legal Defense Fund. In 1960, C. Bette Wimbish became the first African-American to run for the Pinellas County School Board, losing by a narrow margin. In 1969, she won a seat on the St. Petersburg City Council.

The exhibit challenges visitors both intellectually and emotionally, said Ellen Babb, Heritage village historian and marketing coordinator. As they tour, they can record thoughts in journals, listen to stories recorded by WFLA Radio of men and women who experienced separate schools, and visit a train depot with separate "white" and "colored" waiting rooms.

At the end of the exhibit, a sign asks visitors if they think school desegregation has had an impact on society.

"Because this topic is so loaded for so many people, it tends to create a lot of dialogue," Babb said. "We think it's important for people to walk away and want to share their thoughts about what they saw and what they felt as they saw this exhibit, what memories and feelings it brought up.

"Everybody's experience was different. For some people, desegregation of their schools was a nonevent. For others, it was huge. For people who went to school before the Brown vs. Board of Education decision, the feelings run deep."

#### IF YOU GO

WHAT: "Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of Brown vs. Board of Education," through Oct. 10.

WHERE: Heritage Village at Pinewood Cultural Park, Pinellas County Historical Museum, 11909 125th St. N, Largo

HOURS: 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday, 1-4 p.m. Sunday

ADMISSION: Free, but donations accepted

CONTACT: 582-2123

#### SPECIAL EVENTS

Group tours for adults, teens, youths by appointment: Call (727) 582-2426

Debate: Students from Tarpon Springs and Pinellas Park high schools debate school desegregation and its impact on society at 10 a.m. Sept. 18.

"Reflections, Remedy and Resolve:" At 1 p.m. Oct. 2, Robert Bickel of Stetson College of Law facilitates a roundtable discussion by local historians, educators and individuals

who integrated Pinellas County schools.

Heritage Village chronicles the 1957 desegregation of Central High School in Little Rock, Ark. Elizabeth Eckford was one of nine black students to enter the all-white school on Sept. 23 after the governor was forced to withdraw the Arkansas National Guard and President Dwight D. Eisenhower sent federal troops to Little Rock to protect the nine students. Eckford, in a CNN interview, told of daily physical and mental assaults, and cried when telling of two white students who persisted in befriending her.

A photo in the 1971-1972 Dixie Hollins High School yearbook shows a group called Parents and Students for Dixie showing off rebel flags at a rally. The group was angry that a student biracial committee suggested that the school drop the Confederate flag as its unofficial symbol.

Mary Young was a member of the first graduating class of Pinellas High School in Clearwater in 1934. Pinellas High was originally known as the Clearwater Colored School.

Black students in Clearwater were given hand-me-down books like this one, published in 1917 and used until the 1950s.