

# UPHOLDING THE LEADERSHIP LESSONS OF THE LITTLE ROCK NINE

*Sarah McArthur*

**O**n my desk is a picture of a young man in his US Army paratrooper uniform. The young man is my father. Born in late October 1938, he was 17 years old when, with his father's sign off, he joined the 327<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment of the 101st Airborne Division of the United States Army.

About a year later, on September 23, 1957, President Dwight D. Eisenhower issued Executive Order 10730 sending my father's regiment to Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas to maintain order as the school was desegregated.

Executive Order 10730 placed the Arkansas National Guard under federal authority and sent 1000 US Army troops to Little Rock to enforce the US Supreme Court's 1954 ruling in *Brown v. the Board of Education* that US State laws establishing segregation in public schools are unconstitutional, even if the segregated schools are otherwise equal in quality.

On September 24, the day after Eisenhower enforced the executive order, he gave a televised address from the White House. "Our enemies are gloating over this incident and

using it everywhere to misrepresent our nation. Mob rule cannot be allowed to override the decisions of the courts,” he said. Powerful words that hold true today.

And so on September 25, 1957, as the result of this historic ruling and enforcement at the federal level, what later became known as the Little Rock Nine, a group of nine African American students enrolled in Little Rock Central High School, were escorted into the formerly segregated school by the 101<sup>st</sup>, who remained for weeks to protect the children and to serve and enforce the US Supreme Court’s ruling.

My father remembers Colonel William Kuhn—his commanding officer—to be a respectful and even-keeled man. He remembers the discipline of the troops and the fact that their M1s were not loaded save for the bayonets fitted to the tips of their rifles. He remembers sleeping for 40+ nights in the basement of the high school, and he remembers feeling the volatility of the situation that did not ignite, he believes, because of the discipline and presence of the 101<sup>st</sup>.

My deep pride in my father’s role in defending the Constitutional rights of all citizens, as today we are in a struggle to maintain and uphold the democracy, could not have been more strongly felt than on a recent visit to Fort Myer in Arlington, VA. Our visit’s purpose was to interview 33<sup>rd</sup> Chief of Staff (1995–1999) of the United States Army, Retired General Dennis J. Reimer, for our upcoming documentary film about the life, leadership and service of our journal’s founder, Presidential Medal of Freedom recipient Frances Hesselbein. Listening to this powerfully soft-spoken leader share his respect for Frances in stories of who she was, how she led, and the impact that she has had on all of us, including him, illuminated the challenge of our times. And that challenge is to find common ground and bring unity at this time in history when we are deeply divided and growing more so by the day.

The Sunday after our visit to Fort Myer to interview General Reimer, we attended the annual non-denominational Easter Sunrise Service at Arlington National Cemetery. The 65<sup>th</sup> of such services, this year it was simultaneously televised around the world

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## *We are in a struggle to maintain and uphold the democracy.*

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as hundreds of us gathered to attend in person at the Memorial Amphitheater.

Still dark when we arrived, we faced to the east, toward the amphitheater’s marble stage where the celebrants spoke, the choir sang, and the band played. And as the service proceeded from the darkness in front of us, the sun slowly rose, and it gradually grew light revealing these words from President Abraham Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address carved into the arch atop the sculptured stage:

“WE HERE HIGHLY RESOLVE THAT THESE DEAD SHALL NOT HAVE DIED IN VAIN.”

Reading these words, thoughts of Frances, my father, General Reimer, and of all those who are and who have served and sacrificed for the greater good of all humanity came flooding to the surface. And as we approach our next presidential election, I hope we will remember these words and the events behind them and do our utmost to come together as Frances would say, “beyond the walls” of difference and exclusion and into a world where respect for all people is paramount.

In the coming months, we will have completed *Defining Moments*, our documentary about the life and leadership of Frances Hesselbein. We look so forward to sharing her story and her lifelong mission to teach us that to serve is to live with the world, because as we enter the next phase of humanity’s evolution, we need her principles-based, how-to-be leadership as much now, if not more, than ever before.



**Watch the trailer for *Defining Moments* here.**

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Photo by Tom Shillea.

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