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Guest writer

Historic decision

1957 still resonates at Central High

By Enimini Ekong Special to the Democrat-Gazette

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The new movie, *Selma*, and events in the aftermath of the controversial grand jury decision in Ferguson, Mo., late last year, remind us that the struggle for civil rights in America did not end with the 20th Century. The protests and unrest were a disturbing echo of the divisiveness and disruption caused by the court-ordered desegregation of Little Rock's Central High School in 1957.

But what of Central High School today?

Few Americans realize that the National Park Service has preserved an important chapter in the nation's advancement toward civil rights by establishing a historic site at Central High. In fact, of the 401 parks overseen by the National Park Service, the school is the only functioning site. Each year, an average of 150,000 visitors--nearly half of them students--tour the school that once was closed to African American students.

Five decades after the desegregation crisis at Central High in 1957, the school in many ways is a reflection of mainstream America. A visitor finds the halls abuzz with students who worry about their grades, have active social lives chronicled on Facebook and Twitter, and who root for the Central High Tigers.

But the years have brought significant progress and changes: Today, 57 percent of the student body is African American; over 20 languages are spoken within the school walls; 24 students were recognized as National Merit semifinalists, 238 AP scholar awards were presented all within the last year; and with a 91 percent graduation rate, 89 percent of the graduating class heads to college.

As chief of interpretation at the Little Rock Central High National Historic Site, overseen by the National Park Service, I'm privileged by the guidance and support of Superintendent Robin White to share this compelling narrative with the nation. In my role as chief, I ensure the accurate interpretation of the events leading up to, surrounding, and produced by the history of Central High--particularly the events

of the fall of 1957--and put it in context so that it comes alive for our visitors, becomes relevant to their understanding of our national journey, and gives them a heightened sense of responsibility to future generations. The site addresses a serious and challenging moment in America's history. A key message we try to impart is that the history of Central High is the story of real people who made decisions and took actions that helped to define the America we live in today.

President Dwight D. Eisenhower was the primary decision-maker in the events surrounding the desegregation of Central High School. As the crisis in Little Rock escalated, he boldly made the decision to send federal troops to the city and ensure that nine black students were able to enter Central High and take their place in the student body. The story of President Eisenhower's intervention in the Little Rock crisis is told in a new video, *Little Rock, 1957--The Civil Rights Battleground*, created by the Eisenhower Memorial Commission, the federal agency tasked with constructing a permanent memorial to our nation's 34th President. Through historic film footage and a compelling interview with President Bill Clinton, who lived near Little Rock when the crisis was unfolding, the video chronicles President Eisenhower's decision to intervene and bring the crisis to a peaceful conclusion.

Understanding the role the Internet plays in 21st Century education, the Eisenhower Commission has constructed an electronic "e-Memorial" that features videos such as *Little Rock, 1957* that chronicle pivotal moments in the life of President and General Eisenhower. The Little Rock video is the latest in this series.

Although most Americans will never have the opportunity to visit Central High School, they can learn about the history that was made there in 1957 by watching the Eisenhower e-Memorial's video that vividly brings a critical moment in American history to visitors from across America and around the globe.

The events commemorated at the Little Rock Central High National Historic Site still resonate today. And the actions of President Eisenhower during the Central High desegregation crisis, which are documented by the Eisenhower e-Memorial, provide guidance and inspiration as the nation continues its pursuit of civil rights for all its citizens.

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