

Ruby Bridges was 6 years old when she became the first African-American child to integrate a white Southern elementary school. She remembers the day she walked into an all-white school, escorted to class by her mother and U.S. marshals due to violent mobs.

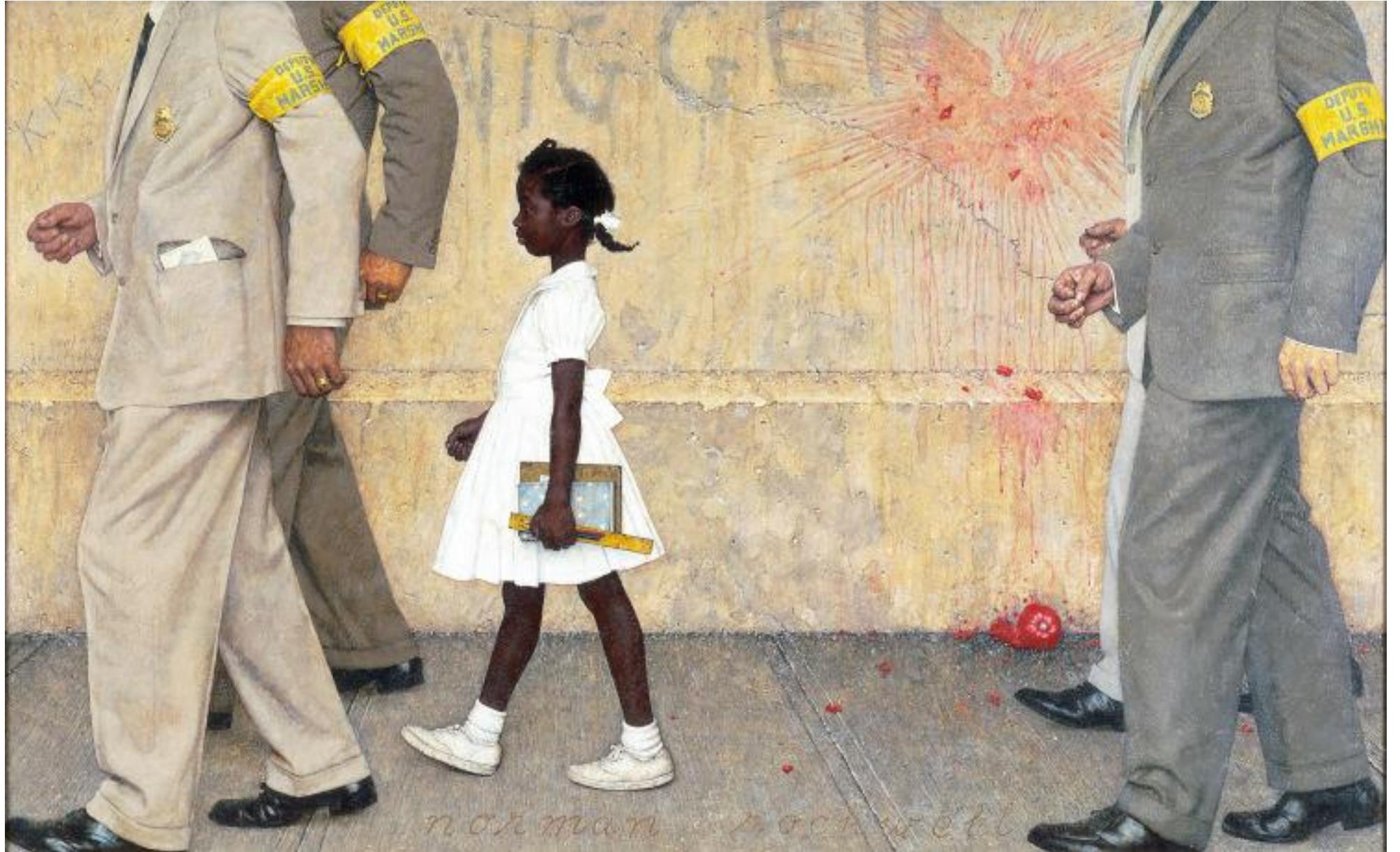
"The morning of November 14, federal marshals drove my mother and me the five blocks to William Frantz [Public School]. One of the men explained that when we arrived at the school two marshals would walk in front of us and two behind... It reminded me of what Mama had taught us about God, that he is always there to protect us. 'Ruby Nell,' she said as we pulled up to my new school, 'don't be afraid. There might be some people upset outside, but I'll be with you.'

Sure enough, people shouted and shook their fists when we got out of the car... I held my mother's hand and followed the marshals through the crowd, up the steps into the school... We spent that whole day sitting in the principal's office. Through the window, I saw white parents pointing at us and yelling, then rushing their children out of the school. In the uproar I never got to my classroom. The marshals drove my mother and me to school again the next day. I tried not to pay attention to the mob. Someone had a black doll in a coffin, and that scared me more than the nasty things people screamed at us.

The next morning my mother told me she couldn't go to school with me. She had to work and look after my brother and sister. 'The marshals will take good care of you, Ruby Nell,' Mama assured me. 'Remember, if you get afraid, say your prayers. You can pray to God anytime, anywhere. He will always hear you.'

That was how I started praying on the way to school. The things people yelled at me didn't seem to touch me. Prayer was my protection."

Ruby's faith and courage paved the way for continued Civil Rights action, and her story would inspire future generations. In 1999, now a parent herself and an activist for racial justice, Ruby formed the Ruby Bridges Foundation, headquartered in New Orleans. As its motto goes, "Racism is a grown-up disease and we must stop using our children to spread it."



The Problem We All Live With, by Norman Rockwell for the cover of *Look* magazine in 1964.