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Choosing to Participate: Exhibition Offers Powerful Lessons on Confronting Bigotry and Injustice

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Washington—There's an exhibition underway at the D.C. Historical Society at Mount Vernon Square that you might find interesting. And you might want to bring your children and or your grandchildren with you.

It's called Choosing to Participate, and it offers some powerful lessons in confronting bigotry and injustice.

Elizabeth Eckford was only 15, all dressed up for her first day of school at Arkansas' Little Rock Central High, when she confronted National Guardsmen who barred

her way, on the orders of the governor.

As she walked away, alone, defeated, knees shaking and in tears, a crowd of angry, shouting whites followed her to the bus stop.

It was Sept. 4, 1957. Desegregation had come to Little Rock.

"Every student who learns about this history puts themselves in her shoes and walks to the bench with her," said Margot Stern Strom, the Executive Director of Facing History and Ourselves.

Strom grew up in Memphis, Tenn., at a time of segregated schools, water fountains, and restaurants. She feels she was short changed by her teachers' sanitized version of history.

"As I got older, it was a betrayal," Strom said.

In 1976, as an eighth grade history teacher in Brookline, Mass., Strom decided to ask herself and her students some tough questions about racism and religious hatred.

"What I learned was that the students were the moral philosophers," she said. "They were the ones who taught me what needs to be asked."

That class evolved into Facing History and Ourselves, an organization that for 35 years has worked with thousands of educators throughout the world teaching young people the consequences of indifference in the face of bigotry.

"It is so important that we're not bystanders, that we're upstanders, as we've learned from this," said Kari Semel, a student from Cleveland, Ohio, who was touring the new multimedia exhibit.

Facing history is not the 'Victim Olympics', Strom says. Elizabeth Eckford's history is our history.

"This child is really making democracy happen for all of us in this country," Storm said. "It humanizes history and ultimately we walk in her shoes and make it better for the next generation."

Eckford's story is only one of a number of stories about individuals and communities that have confronted racism and injustice profiled at the interactive, multimedia exhibition at the Historical Society of Washington, D.C.

View this video at: <http://tbd.ly/ejehhW>
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