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EDITORIAL

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What Would You Do?

Elizabeth Eckford's starched white dress had a full skirt bordered in gingham. No teenager today would be caught dead in it, but in 1957 it might have been all the talisman a 15-year-old needed to banish jitters on the first day at a new school -- if the 15-year-old wasn't African American and the new school wasn't the all-white Central High in Little Rock, Ark.

Today that dress in all its heartbreaking optimism is on display at downtown Los Angeles' Central Library, part of a powerful multimedia exhibit called "Choosing to Participate: Facing History and Ourselves."

A curtained portion of the second-floor Getty Gallery re-creates that morning in Little Rock. The dress hangs beside a wooden ironing board. A recording of a now-adult Eckford recalls her mother fussing over the iron, her father pacing.

Flash to a poster of the yellow-brick high school, then to the now-famous photo of a crowd of white students, their faces twisted in fury, trailing and taunting a desperately composed young woman in a perfectly pressed dress. The voice-over gives way to their shouts, which grow louder and louder until the viewer can almost imagine how frightening that day must have been.

Imagine is exactly what the exhibit challenges viewers to do -- and then to ask themselves, "What would I have done?"

Geared to schoolchildren, "Choosing to Participate" equally tests cynical adults. One section recounts

how in 1993 someone hurled a cinder block through the window of a Billings, Mont., house, smashing a 6-year-old's Hanukkah decorations and littering his bedroom with glass. The incident, one of a string of hate crimes, spurred the Billings Gazette to print a full-page menorah and urge newspaper readers to cut it out and display it. Six households and a Methodist church that did so were also vandalized.

What would I have done? Pasting paper candlesticks on windows seemed like a simple thing -- or so Billings residents thought until they stood, tape in hand, imagining cinder blocks or worse crashing in on their families. Still, by the end of the month, 10,000 homes displayed the symbol. A photograph in the exhibit captures a panorama of Billings residents -- Indians in feather headdresses, cowboys on horseback, priests, preachers, cops, firefighters, moms with toddlers clutched to their sides -- all bearing menorahs.



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TAKING A STAND:
Elizabeth Eckford in 1957.

A series of photos called "L.A. Stories: The Power of One," recognizes local folks who have chosen to participate, from "Seed Lady" Anna Marie Carter, who spreads the gospel of gardening in Watts, to Ellen de Franco, whose comedy improvisation classes give many seniors a reason to get out of bed. These local stories push viewers beyond wondering what they would have done then to imagining what they can do -- now.

To Take Action: "Choosing to Participate: Facing History and Ourselves" runs through May 4 at the Central Library, 630 W. 5th St. (213) 228-7000, www.lapl.org.