

my testimony

one little girl

At just 13, RHONDA JOY McLEAN was one of four Black students charged with integrating a North Carolina high school in 1965. Heckled and tormented, she was determined she would not fail. In celebration of Black History Month, she tells her story for the first time

AS TOLD TO KATTI GRAY PHOTO BY EMILY WILSON



McLean, the year she started at Smithfield High

In 1965 the sign posted at the entry to my Smithfield, North Carolina, hometown summed up that place: "Welcome to Johnston County. Help Fight Communism and Intergration." The misspelling of that word *integration* said a lot about the segregationists who created the sign and drove its message into the ground.

Most Black people in Smithfield lived on the proverbial other side of the railroad track, and we were encouraged to stay there. Fear was an undercurrent in almost every interaction between Blacks and Whites in that small town. But because my schoolteacher

parents were outsiders—from Chicago and Buffalo, New York—they did not drum into our heads the idea that we should be afraid. Of course, my younger brother and I were not stupid. In the South you could go from safety to danger in seconds, just by crossing the street—like Emmett Till did.

This was 11 years after *Brown v. Board of Education* had outlawed racially separate and unequal public education. Smithfield went kicking and screaming into that postsegregationist world only after a court order gave Black students the option of enrolling in the Whites-only local schools. Mrs. Cora Boyd—my surrogate grandmother, the woman who taught me to read when I was 3 and who was the superintendent-