



Impact Statement

Jackson Park, Grade 11

Let the World Know, 2026

Acrylic, gouache, marker, colored pencil on paper, 14.5 x 10.5 inches

North London Collegiate School Jeju, Jeju, South Korea

Unsung Hero: Will Counts

The story of the Little Rock Nine has swept the world once, but no one really knows the name of the man who let the world know. Will Counts was a 26-year-old photographer for the Arkansas Democrat in 1957 when he arrived at Central High School with a camera and his heroic instinct to document the truth behind the scene. He was not a civil rights activist, though. He was not a politician either. He was a man of nothing special from Little Rock who had attended Central High himself, and who understood, when he showed up that September morning, that something historic and deeply wrong was unfolding in front of him. I chose Will Counts because he did not exploit his heroism.

On September 4, 1957, Elizabeth Eckford, a 15-year-old girl, walked alone toward Central High School as usual, separated from the other eight students of the Little Rock Nine. Governor Orval Faubus had ordered the Arkansas National Guard to block their entry, defying a federal court desegregation order. Will Counts captured the image of that problematic moment of Elizabeth walking with dignity, books in hand, while a white crowd jeered at her. His photograph appeared on the front page of newspapers across the country and around the world.

As an immediate result, President Eisenhower, moved by Counts's images, federalized the Arkansas National Guard and sent 1000 soldiers from the 101st Airborne Division to Little Rock to enforce integration again. This single photograph by Counts helped force a president's hand. Counts also photographed journalist Alex Wilson being beaten by a mob in front of the school, an image that was later named by Encyclopedia Britannica as one of the fifty most memorable news photographs of the last fifty years. Despite the Pulitzer Prize jury unanimously recommending him for the award, the board denied it because three Pulitzers had already been awarded for Little Rock coverage that year. He was not able to get formal recognition, but his images out survived the prizes and fame, and left a real impact. In 1997, he returned to Little Rock and photographed Elizabeth Eckford and Hazel Bryan Massery, the white student from the original photo, standing together in reconciliation. His lens captured both the wound of the situation and the healing of it.

When I painted and drew "Let the World Know," I wanted the viewer to look at the images that Counts took from the perspective of the lens itself, alive. So, I built the composition as if looking through a camera's viewfinder, with actual camera settings, 1/25, F22, ISO 400. Through this framing, I intended to convey the split-second

decisions a photographer makes, the technical choices that determined whether history got recorded forever or lost forever.

I chose Will Counts to be at the center in portrait format, rendered in color against a black-and-white collage of his photographs. The black-and-white photographs radiating around him are recreations of his actual images: Elizabeth Eckford walking through the crowd, National Guard soldiers with bayonets, students and protestors in confrontation, and Central High School itself looming in the background. I layered the images like photographs scattered on a table, overlapping and somewhat urgent to suggest the large volume of documentation he produced. The background is deliberately painted in color because I wanted to underscore the fact that although the photographs, and our memory of such remains may remain monochrome, the event itself was real and live. I used gauche paint with a realistic style to honor the gravity of the subject, because this story deserves weight, not an abstract reimagination of it.

Will Counts taught me something I want to share with everyone. Becoming a witness is an act of courage and also an act of skill. It is not about being the loudest voice in the room to change history. Sometimes it is just showing up, staying steady, and making sure the truth gets recorded. In a world flooded with images, it is easy to scroll past injustice. His life is a reminder that choosing to document it to truly see what is in front of and share it.

I hope this painting reaches people who have never heard Will Counts before and make them want to know more. I plan to share it through my school, in community spaces. I believe even only one person walks away asking, "Why didn't I know about him?" then the painting has done its job. Let the world know.

References:

<https://www.lowellmilkencenter.org/programs/projects/view/will-counts/hero>