In 1956, Theresser Caswell and 11 other black students were the first to desegregate Clinton High School in Clinton, Tennessee.

Their enrollment signaled a shift toward racial equality in America, but, as many of

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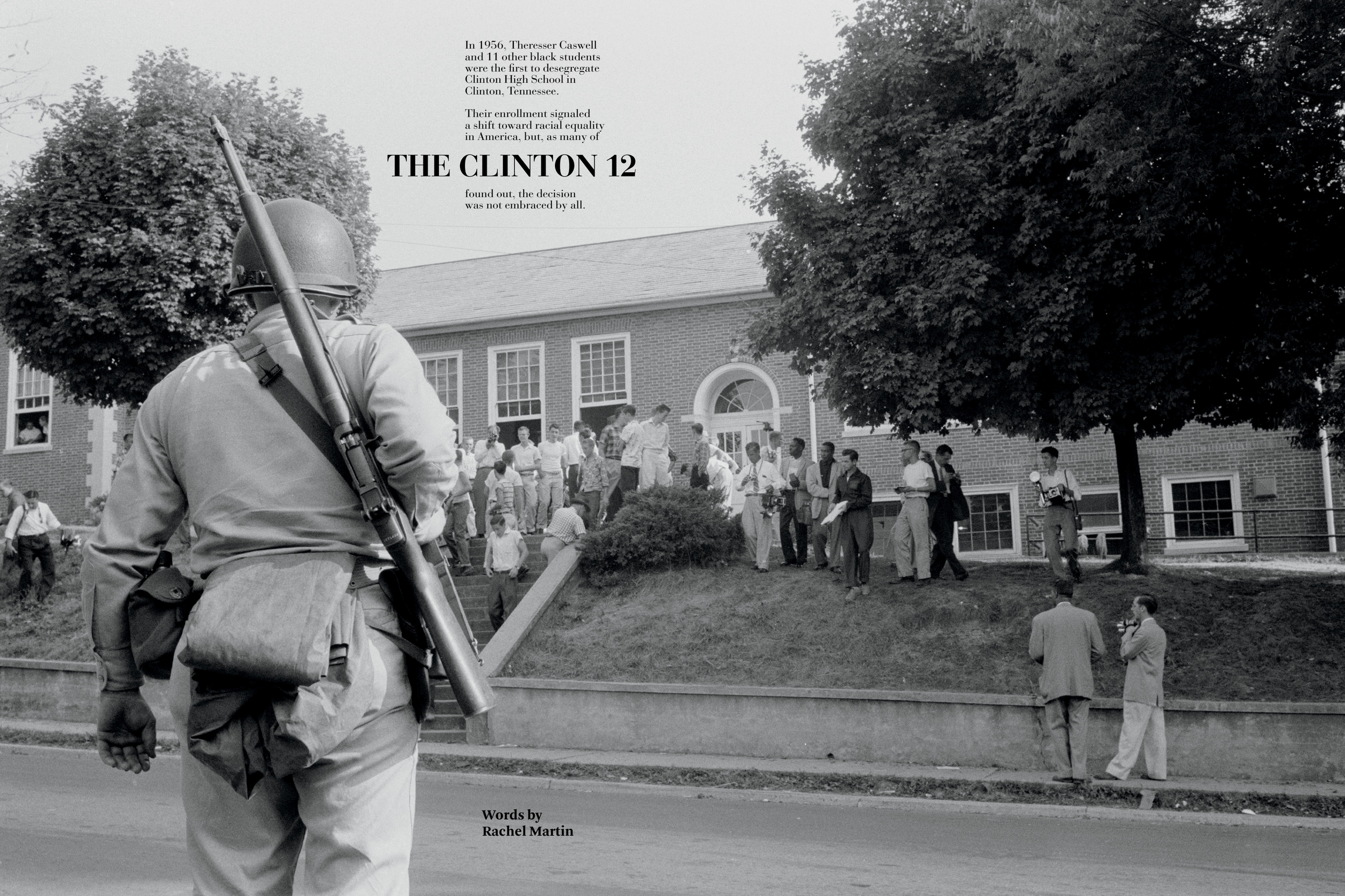
found out, the decision was not embraced by all.



Words by
Rachel Martin

I first met Theresser Caswell in 2005. The previous fifty years had bleached her dark hair white, and she had finally gotten the glasses she had needed but refused to wear back in 1956. She invited me into her living room, where a soap opera was playing on TV. One of her sons was working on her bathroom plumbing. She leaned her cane against a TV tray, and I placed my recorder on the coffee table between us. Caswell jumped straight into her past, tackling her story head-on. She hadn't been scared about going to Clinton High, she told me. "I guess I was young, and I didn't really know I should be afraid."

That summer, other 13-year-old American girls were falling in love with Elvis, who had shocked their parents with his waggling hips on the Milton Berle Show. They sighed when Grace Kelly married her prince and laughed at I Love Lucy, the most popular show on TV at the time. Soon it would be easier for them to sleep in, as the first snooze alarm had just hit the market. Anna Theresser Caswell did all of those things, too, but she was not like most other girls; 1956 was the year she became a part of history.

Her participation was an accident of timing. Six years earlier, black families in Clinton, a small town on the edge of coal country, had sued for the right to attend the all-white Clinton High School. The town had only a handful of black students—not enough to maintain a truly segregated secondary-school system. Instead, the county was busing them 45 minutes away to attend school in Knoxville. The students and their parents argued that such an arrangement did not qualify as "separate but equal," the rubric that supposedly justified segregated schools. The courts put the case on hold, pending the Supreme Court's decision in Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka [Kansas].

On May 17, 1954, the courts ruled in favor of the black students who had brought the Brown case. A year-and-a-half later, the court told school systems to desegregate "with all deliberate speed." Many districts used the nebulous timeline to justify delaying desegregation. Clinton, however, had a case before a federal judge, who ruled that "a reasonable date should be fixed as one not later than the beginning of the fall term of the present year of 1956." That would be Theresser Caswell's freshman year of high school.

A newcomer to Clinton, Caswell had spent most of her childhood in Middle Tennessee with her grandmother. Her mother had moved to East Tennessee for a job, and Caswell joined her in time for the spring semester of her eighth-grade year. Her mother enrolled her at Green McAdoo Colored Elementary School, a two-room school for K-8 students. She was shocked by how small Green McAdoo was—her other school had at least one separate room for each class. She was also surprised by how far ahead she was in her studies, compared to the other students. "I was never a smart student, but I had already learned a lot of the stuff they were doing," she said. She was even ahead of them in math, her worst subject. She knew she would be part of the desegregation of Clinton High, but did not expect it to be a big deal.

In retrospect, the violence that occurred in Clinton seems so ordinary. We've seen rioters take over Little Rock and Birmingham and New Orleans and Boston. In 1956, however, Caswell and her friends knew none of that. All they knew was that white municipal leaders had decided to abide by the court order, and they predicted desegregation would go smoothly. Why would the black students and their parents suspect otherwise?

The school year began promisingly: on August 20, 1956, 12 black students and 717 white students enrolled for classes at Clinton High, with no protesters or signs of conflict. Behind the scenes, however, trouble was fomenting. Branches of the Tennessee Federation for Constitutional Government sent donations to local segregationist organizers, who used the money to buy posters and other supplies. A petition circulated. White residents scrawled their names and addresses in pencil across the plain white pages. More than 400 local residents had signed the petition before it was filed with the federal courts. Five other schools were also desegregated by court order that fall. Mobs of protesters gathered outside each of their schools. Within a week, all of them had either resegregated or closed. It fell to Caswell and her peers to prove whether desegregation could happen in the American South, and whether it could happen immediately.

Classes began on August 27. Ten of the black students lived together in the same neighborhood, a place known as the Hill, because it overlooked downtown Clinton. Those ten teenagers met at a local church to march to school together. Caswell, however, lived outside town and rode to school on the bus she had taken the year before while attending Green McAdoo. This year, the driver paused in front of Clinton High and let her off before proceeding up the Hill to the elementary school. When she got off the bus that first day, she was met by a crowd of white students standing on the lawn, watching warily. About 50 protesters lined the streets, yelling slurs at the black students as they climbed the steps to the school. One picketing teenager told a local paper he was disappointed by the turnout, as he had been planning this with his friends all summer. "Nobody told us to do it," he said. "There was supposed to be a lot more of us, but they didn't show up. They just talked big."

Inside the school, classes went smoothly. One of the other black students was even elected vice president of her homeroom. Outside, however, the situation escalated. A group of white men threatened a black teenager and her mother. Others threw a bottle at a black woman walking down the street. That night, several hundred white residents gathered on the courthouse lawn, listening to white supremacist speakers who warned of the dangers posed by "Communists" and "race mongrelizers." Many of the speakers were professional race-baiters who traveled the South, going from conflict to conflict, seeking the publicity and the spotlight; they were joined by a New Jersey-born, Ivy-league-educated 26-year-old named John Kasper. More protesters gathered outside the school the next morning.

Caswell was especially vulnerable. Sometime after birth, she had an injury that damaged her feet. Her doctor and grandmother sent her to Nashville, where she underwent surgery, but she still struggled to walk. During her freshman year of high school, she went to a hospital in Knoxville for another series of surgeries. Those also failed to heal her, and she spent much of her first year of high school on crutches.

On Wednesday, Caswell and her best friend, Alva McSwain, decided to go to visit McSwain's mother during lunch. No one was out there, Caswell remembered, so she and her friend walked to and from lunch without any trouble for the first time all week. This peace happened merely because the mob had chased after two of the African-American boys as they were leaving campus for lunch. After attacking the boys, some of the white protestors went into a local barbershop, grabbed the shoeshine boy, and dragged him into the streets.

Meanwhile, the principal of Clinton High watched helplessly from his office window and decided to close the school. A policeman escorted Caswell from class and bundled her into his car. She wouldn't have to wait for the bus that day. As they drove away, he kept telling her not to look down the street. It was too frightening. Defiantly, she looked behind her and saw almost five hundred screaming white faces. "We had just come in that same door where those people were," she remembered.

The next morning, Caswell and the others came back to the school, in which violence was beginning as well. "Boys, like real tall boys, they'd come to your locker," Caswell remembered. "They would hit you on your head." White students put new locks on the black students' lockers, making them late to class. White boys would walk up behind the black female students and yank their ponytails, snapping the girls' chins toward the ceiling. Black students would find their books defaced with ink or eggs; they also found thumbtacks on their seats. One boy was threatened with an ice pick. Another girl was almost pushed out of a second-story window. "I did a lot of jumping," Caswell said.

At the beginning of the week, Caswell had ridden the bus with about 25 other students. By the end of the week, all but three of the black students were staying home; most of their parents were too frightened to send their chil-

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dren through the mob, even on a bus. Caswell understood their concerns. Yet every afternoon she bravely stood on the street corner and waited for her bus, surrounded by the mob.

Her mother never understood how frightened Caswell was of going to school, of how large the mob outside the school had grown. When Caswell begged to stay home, her mother thought she was trying to play hooky. Her grandmother, however, watched the nightly news and saw how bad it was. Caswell vividly remembered the people in her grandmother's church telling her, "Go up there and get that girl!" But she stayed in Clinton.

By that weekend, the violence was so intense that the governor sent reinforcements: first, the Tennessee Highway Patrol; then, the Tennessee National Guard. Unlike Arkansas' governor a year later, Tennessee's Frank Clement sent in the troops to defend the court order and help keep the school open. They also helped to protect Caswell as she waited for the bus. "There I was, just one little female standing on the corner," she said. The Adjutant General sent a tank full of men to guard her. The National Guard stopped the street riots, at least for a while, but the conflict inside the school continued. The first black student dropped out after about three weeks.

White-supremacist mobs reappeared in the streets in November. By the end of the month, the black students couldn't even get to the school. They boycotted, demanding that the city and the school board provide them with protection. The Rev. Paul Turner, the pastor of the largest white church in town, worried that the segregationists were going to win, so he offered to escort the students to class. On Tuesday, December 4, Turner and two of his friends walked eight of the black students back to Clinton High. Theresser Caswell was not among them; she was in a Knoxville hospital, having yet another surgery her doctors hoped would heal her legs. When Turner turned to go to his church office, some of the protesters followed him, trapped him against the side of a car, and beat him. Others ran through the school's main hall. The principal closed Clinton High for a second time. It reopened the following Monday, and the black students returned and took their seats among their white peers.

The mobs in the streets disappeared after Turner's beating, but the violence in the school intensified during the spring semester. One of the black girls moved with her family to California. One of the young men was suspended after defending his younger brother from a gang of white boys. Theressser Caswell and a handful of other black students stuck it out, however. On May 17, 1957—three years to the day after the Supreme Court had outlawed segregated schooling—Bobby Cain became the first black student to graduate from Clinton High School.

The problems at the school continued. In October 1958, white supremacists set off close to 100 sticks of dynamite in the school, razing everything except the gymnasium and the library. The next Monday, classes met on the front lawn. "We got off the bus, and somebody said, 'Well, here come those damn niggers again,' " Caswell remembered. Teachers and parents worked that week to refit Linden Elementary, an abandoned African-American school, for the teenagers to use temporarily. When it was ready, busses picked the high school students up and shuttled them to their interim campus. The busses were not supposed to be segregated, but the black students rode alone; none of the white students would ride with them.

Caswell dropped out of Clinton High that year and moved to Knoxville, where she birthed a son and got a job. She tried to go to night school, but between work and family she did not have the energy to do so, and she never graduated. She did, however, return to the Clinton area, where she worked at a plant in Oak Ridge and retired from there after almost 30 years. Her children went to Clinton High, but she never told them that their right to attend that school was thanks to her. "I didn't want them to have any chips on their shoulder," she told me. "Just like we're very protective of our children, they're very protective of their parents."

The black children who took to the schools, the streets, and the lunch counters across America seem mythical in their strength today. They faced down the ugliest parts of our society, weathering the violence unleashed upon them, demanding equality. For 13-year-old Anna Theresser Caswell, equality meant the right to get up every day and go to school.

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