

SARAH LABRIE

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DIAMONDS FROM THE DUST

PROFESSIONAL CHAMBER CHOIR

WORCESTER, MASSACHUSETTS

[HTTPS://WWW.DIAMONDSFROMTHEDUST.ORG/](https://www.diamondsfromthedust.org/)

Hello fellow educators!

My name is Sarah Labrie, and I am the Director of Educational Outreach for Diamonds from the Dust - Professional Chamber Choir. As Martin Luther King Day quickly approaches, we are hoping to be a small part of the narrative, in discussing Dr. King, and the desegregation of American schools. A few months ago, Diamonds recorded a new work by composer Dominick DiOrio, titled "Down Deep." This beautiful, ten-minute piece of chamber choral music, sets text from "The Little Rock Nine," a group of nine black students who enrolled at formerly all-white Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, in September 1957. If you are willing and able, we would be honored to have you include this discussion-based lesson, and our music, in your music or history curriculum.

Lesson: "The Little Rock Nine, and Desegregation of the American School System"

Teaching time: 40-50 minutes

Read the following: "The Little Rock Nine were a group of nine black students who enrolled at formerly all-white Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, in September 1957. Their attendance at the school was a test of *Brown v. Board of Education*, a landmark 1954 Supreme Court ruling that declared segregation in public schools unconstitutional. On September 4, 1957, the first day of classes at Central High, Governor Orval Faubus called in the Arkansas National Guard to block the black students' entry into the high school. Later that month, President Dwight D. Eisenhower sent in federal troops to escort the Little Rock Nine into the school.

In its *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* decision, issued May 17, 1954, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that segregation of America's public schools was unconstitutional. Until the court's decision, many states across the nation had mandatory segregation laws, requiring African-American and white children to attend separate schools. Resistance to the ruling was so widespread that the court issued a second decision in 1955, known as *Brown II*, ordering school districts to integrate "with all deliberate speed."

Show Video (10 mins): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xERXusiEszs>

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Read the following: "This is a program note from composer Dominick DiOrio, regarding his composition 'Down Deep:' **Down Deep** is music that is meant to affirm the lives of these women so that we may never forget their story. In addition to including the powerful words of Minnijean Brown-Trickey, Carlotta Walls LaNier, Elizabeth Eckford, and Thelma Mothershed-Wair, I have also included a quotation from Henry Woods, the United States District Court Judge for the Eastern District of Arkansas. Judge Woods is most famous for his role in the Pulaski County Schools desegregation fight from the 1980's. In 1985, he told *The New York Times*:

"Down deep, many whites don't want their kids sitting next to blacks. That's what it comes to."
(from Reed, Roy. "Little Rock A Symbol Again: The Resegregation of Schools." *The New York Times*, March 23, 1985.) And that is the root of it. We must sit down together, and talk together, and share our struggles together. Even if our experiences are different, we are all part of a country that has long marched toward ever fuller equality. And we all have a role to play in securing that place in history for those who are excluded from the table. As President Barack Obama said back when he was campaigning for office: "we may have different stories, but we have common hopes."

I graciously offer this work of music in honor of those courageous *Little Rock Nine*, who stood on the forefront of a movement. May they continue to inspire all of us as we look into our future for the strength to endure the struggles to come. I have no business setting the words of African-American women rooted in the struggle for civil rights. I am not black, and I have known substantial privilege as a white male. But I have also seen the struggle for marriage equality as a gay man, and I know that it is important for people in a place of privilege to speak up for people who are disenfranchised and who lack power, influence, and the ability to change the system. This work is my attempt to do so. I set the words of these four remarkable women because I feel the need to examine my own privilege and to do everything I can to bring their amazing story to life through song. I had read about desegregation in the South in my history classes, but it was not until I encountered the words of *The Little Rock Nine* that I truly began to attempt to understand this history through the eyes of those who had lived it. When Andrew Morgan at Hendrix College in Conway, Arkansas commissioned me to write a new work in the Spring of 2016, I wanted to add my voice for positive change to the voices of people affected by violence and oppression. I wanted to ally myself with this cause and no longer stand by as an onlooker on the sidelines of history."

Listen to the following recording of Diamonds from the Dust singing Dominick DiOrio's "Down Deep" while displaying the text below:

<https://soundcloud.com/user-560212501/down-deep-dominick-diorio>

Text:

I. Judge Henry Woods, in 1985

*"Down Deep,
Many whites don't want their kids sitting next to blacks.
That's what it comes to."*

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II. Minnijean Brown-Trickey (b. 1941)

*"I was one of the kids approved by the school officials.
One girl ran up to me and said,
 'I'm so glad you're here.
 Won't you go to lunch with me today?'
I never saw her again."*

III. Carlotta Walls LaNier (b. 1942)

*"I had to have that sheet of paper.
It was an achievement.
I helped change the educational system."*

IV. Elizabeth Eckford (b. 1941)

*"They moved closer and closer...
Somebody started yelling...

I tried to see a friendly face somewhere in the crowd--
Someone who maybe could help.

I looked into the face of an old woman and it seemed a kind face,
But when I looked at her again,
She spat on me."*

V. Thelma Mothershed-Wair (b. 1940)

*"I was determined to treat my kids equally.
I taught white kids, helped them, graded them fairly."*

VI. Reprise, Judge Henry Woods (1918-2002)

*"Down deep,
Whites... sitting next to blacks.
That's what it comes to."*

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Use the following questions as a guideline for class discussion, or come up with original questions:

1. Why do you think the composer chose to set this text to music?
2. How does the music in each movement reflect the text?
3. How are this text and this piece relevant today?
4. If you were the composer of this piece, is there anything you would have done differently?