

THE BELL: Hearts & Minds

Episode 5 – The Movement

Laundry City (rapping): Ladies and gentlemen, we are gathered here today to discuss a serious topic happening every day. A problem first addressed way back in the 50s in a case *Brown vs. Board of E.* But the issue still stands, we have to stand together we have to join hands. With all the benefits that come with integration, why are we still dealing with school segregation?

Taylor McGraw: This is Laundry City, a student play written and performed by New York City high school students about school segregation. You get the metaphor? Separating kids the way we separate laundry? Yeah.

I'm your host, Taylor McGraw, and this is Episode 5 of The Bell's first podcast season, called Hearts & Minds, an investigation of school segregation through the voices of those most affected by it: students. This episode is called The Movement. You'll hear more from the Laundry City crew and meet the young activist at the center of a student-led effort to integrate the city's public school system.

But first, like always, some context:

July 24th, 1956. Front page, New York Times: "City's Schools Open A Major Campaign to Spur Integration." This is two years after the *Brown v. Board* ruling, which compelled the city to form a Commission on Integration, not out of a legal obligation – schools in the North weren't segregated by law – but city leaders felt they had a moral obligation to integrate schools. At that time, about 40% of students were either black or Puerto Rican. But most attended heavily segregated and plainly inferior schools.

Not surprisingly, Dr. Kenneth Clark, who we heard from in Episode 3, was one of the leaders on the city's Integration Commission. Clark and his colleagues had just released the first piece of a master plan to combat school segregation.

Fast forward nine months. March 1, 1957, the Board of Education unanimously adopts the commission's plan, which includes widespread rezoning of school districts, transferring experienced teachers into the most troubled schools, and undertaking a citywide PR effort to improve race relations. Radical ideas by today's standards. The plan would take effect in the fall of 1958 and be in "full swing" by 1959.

That's exactly what happened. Schools integrated peacefully and began to reflect the city's vibrant diversity. New York City became a national model for urban school systems. Over the next few decades, urban schools became thriving hubs of educational success and innovation – the prize jewel of our nation's grand experiment in democracy.

At least, that's what could have happened. Instead, outspoken white parents with outsized political influence squashed integration efforts before they began. As it turned out Jim Crow existed in Jackson, Mississippi *and* in Jackson Heights, Queens, in Little Rock and in Little Italy.

In the fall of 1957, the eyes of the nation focused on the standoff at Little Rock's Central High School between nine black teenagers and Arkansas segregationist Governor Orval Faubus. Here's Mike Wallace interviewing Faubus mid-crisis, September 15, 1957.

Mike Wallace: Governor, what's your opinion of the crowds of white adults who gather outside of Central High School each weekday morning. They curse at any Negro who happens to pass by. They call Negroes "animals." And almost to a man they say governor Faubus has done the right thing. What do you think of these people?

Faubus: Well, any hate is deplorable. In any place or in any circumstances. But as President Eisenhower has said himself, you can't change the hearts of people by law. Now in view of the progress we have made, all I ask for in this situation and all I've ever asked for, is some time for the situation to change, for it to become acceptable so there would not be disorder and violence.

Taylor: Translation: There's some nice people in those crowds. Just give 'em a little time.

Faubus: If it is right, it will come about, so why should we be so impatient as to force it?

Taylor: Meanwhile, in New York City representatives from white parents' groups were saying the same thing as Faubus, behind closed doors with city leaders. The New York Times quoted one of the white representatives as saying his group is opposed to forced integration, but would be okay with quote "normal, natural integration."

Over the next few years, as school leaders sat on their hands, Civil rights groups, including the NAACP, the Urban League and Congress of Racial Equality grew increasingly impatient. Under the leadership of a Brooklyn minister & grassroots organizer Milton Galamison, they began threatening a massive boycott. In late January of 1964, The Board of Education responded by releasing yet another comprehensive integration plan.

James Donovan: To improve ethnic distribution in our schools in addition to the steps the school system has been taking for a number of years...

Taylor: This is school board president James Donovan.

Donovan: We are proposing the following: elementary school community zoning, changes in theatre patterns in sets of junior high schools, elimination of heavy concentration of minority group pupils in high schools.

Taylor: But black and Puerto Rican communities were fed up with plans. Donovan gave these remarks January 29th. Five days later, nearly half a million Black and Puerto Rican students skipped school. The students, their parents, and hundreds of teachers marched peacefully through the streets chanting “Jim Crow Must Go.”

[Clip of students chanting]

The 1964 New York City school boycott was and remains the largest civil rights demonstration in U.S. History.

Reporter: “Malcolm X, what brings you here today?”

Malcom X: Well I’m out here to see the successful exposé of the New York City school system. It proves that you don’t have to go to Mississippi to find a segregated school system we have it right here in New York City.

Reporter: Are you supporting this boycott?

Malcom X: Yes I did support it. I came here as an observer and I did support it because it shows that the problem the white liberals have been pointing at the southern segregationists and condemning them for exist right here in New York City.

Taylor: The march was a singular success, but in the months after, the integration coalition, unhappy with Galamison’s leadership, splintered. Meanwhile, white parents groups grew increasingly entrenched. They even planned their own marches and boycotts.

White woman marcher: Well, we feel that we can prove as much as our opponents who use the same tactics. We feel that we have as much right as they. These are our civil rights and we’re taking advantage of them.

Taylor: They organized under coded names: The Special Committee for the Preservation of Neighborhood Schools, the Parents and Taxpayers Association. Their motives were the same as the southern segregationists – to keep black and brown kids out of their white schools. The main difference? The northerners were more successful.

We don't teach students the history of failed integration in the North. And because we've never confronted it, we now implicitly accept segregation as a fact of life.

Sixty years after the city's Commission on Integration completed its master plan, the schools in New York City are even *more* segregated than they were back then. Integration has become a political third rail. The current administration won't even use the term. Optimism among integration advocates is tempered by the realities of housing segregation and low white enrollment in the public schools. While many educators think integration is important. Few consider it practical. But don't tell that to this young woman.

Hebh Jamal: I just want to thank everyone that's here on an early Saturday morning. I know it's probably hard getting out of bed. I know last night was prom night for some of us. I know that was intense, but I admire everyone's ability to be here today for such an important cause.

Taylor: This is Hebh Jamal. She graduated from high school in June and just started her freshman year at City College. She's the lead student activist of a movement called Integrate NYC 4 Me. She's speaking right now at the IntegrateNYC4Me youth symposium at Columbia's Teachers College back in May.

Hebh: I wanted to start off with the story of how I joined Integrate. And I go to a very, let's say, affluent school, that is majority white.

Taylor: Hebh is from the South Bronx. She said one day she visited another high school that better reflected the city's demographics, and...

Hebh: The feeling of diversity and the feeling of inclusivity felt abnormal to me, and I didn't understand why, at first. I went back to school that same day, and I actually had a conversation with a teacher who's here in this room, and we researched a lot and tried to figure out why I felt the way I did. Fast forward a couple weeks, it was because I realized that New York has the most segregated schools in the country, and through that I began to question more and wanted to seek more answers, and through that I found IntegrateNYC4me. I found the Sarahs: Sarah Zappler and Sarah Camiscoli. We had a lot of

conversations about how I could join the movement, how I could really try to figure out how to integrate New York City schools.

Taylor: Before we get into the work that Hebh and other student leaders are doing, I want to back up so you can understand Hebh's journey. We met Hebh about a year ago at a meeting of a few dozen school integration advocates. She was one of a handful of teenagers in the room and didn't hesitate to speak up during the meeting. I talked to her afterwards about this podcast, and she invited me to interview her at her high school. This is October 2016.

Taylor (during interview): Great, so thanks for agreeing to sit down with me and talk.

Hebh: Thank you for having me.

Taylor: Why don't you tell me about your background in the school system in New York. What experiences have you had?

Hebh: I was in a diverse middle school, I saw all different types of people, and I did feel very comfortable. I had a very diverse group of friends. I had a friend from Vietnam, I had a Puerto Rican friend, a black friend, Arab, Muslim, Christian, Atheist. I lived in a very diverse environment. But then, you know, applying to high school was so just overbearing. A lot of 8th graders will tell you this as well, because as 12- and 13-year-olds figuring out where you want to spend four years of your life is a big deal. But all we were given is this maybe 500-page book, and you have to figure out hundreds of different high schools we want to apply to and you don't really get told much about it. How I found the school I go to it was just I looked at drop-out rates or graduation rates. That's all I looked at. You know, as an 8th grader that's the only indication of what it means to be a good school is you know how many kids go to college. I feel like that's a problem. And there's not many indicators of what's a good school, what's a bad school. Like, should we be looking at diversity or AP classes, like what are we getting? It was not communicated properly.

Taylor: Hebh has zeroed in on one of the policies that keeps high schools segregated: the open choice admissions process. As I described in Episode 2, this choice system favors certain types of students, because the best high schools are allowed to screen applicants. For example, these selective schools might require a B average in middle school or a portfolio or...

Hebh: Some of them you need an interview for, but you've never been prepped for an interview in your life or you need to have so many extracurriculars, but you have to take care of your brother and sister after school while your parents work 9 to 6. So how is that fair when you're expecting the same kinds of outcomes on all students when all students live

totally different lives? You know, some can go and be in a band and join soccer teams and have so many things going for them, but other students don't. So why is one type of student capable of going to a great prestigious school and another one is not?

Taylor: As a student from the Bronx, commuting to an affluent, selective school in midtown Manhattan, Hebh had a unique lens. Unlike most students from the Bronx, she got to see what was on the other side of the fence.

Hebh: It's sad because my cousin has to go through a metal detector every day and has to be patted down because she wears a head scarf like me, and there's sometimes pins, and her cell phone gets locked up in, like, a compartment. And there's a long line to class, and you're exhausted. You have to wake up at, like, 7 in the morning. And I don't have to go through that. And what's the difference, you know? We're five miles apart. The main difference is certain types of students go here and certain types go here.

Taylor: And that made her kind of obsessed with a simple question: How could public schools in New York City look so different?

Hebh: Eventually, I was speaking to Brad Lander about it. Councilman Brad Lander.

Taylor (during interview): How did you get in touch with Brad Lander?

Hebh So, actually, his son goes to my school, and he saw me talking a lot about it, and he was, like, I think you would like talking to my dad about this. So I actually emailed him, and he invited me to his office, and we had a conversation about it. It was around an hour-long conversation, just me and him looking at data, looking at charts.

Taylor: In case it wasn't already clear, Hebh is not your average teenager. She had no qualms about e-mailing a city council member to talk about school segregation, or bringing it up in her conversations with peers at her affluent high school. I was curious to know how those students reacted.

Hebh: Some really get it. Some are, like, yeah that's true. Why did I get accepted and this other student didn't? Am I just luckier? Is it the middle school I went to? And other students were, like, "No, I earned to be here. My parents worked hard, and I worked hard, and I deserve to be here and you don't." And it's the level of I guess, the mentality, a competitive, I guess, capitalist mentality? I know that's getting deep into it, but we care about where we go to school, and we care about how much money we make or where we end up, and the reality is we don't want to be told that the process isn't fair. We don't want to be told that

you got here for arbitrary superficial reasons or just by luck. People don't want to be told that, and it's hard to realize that you're privileged. It's definitely a mixture.

Taylor: I guess the same goes for adults. Some get it, some don't. And I understand that. Like Hebh pointed out, if you're someone who benefits from the system, you don't want to admit that it's an unfair system. Because that says something about you.

Hebh: My point is there needs to be a conversation about our commitment to integration. Because we know it's benefits. We know it's good for students, so right now the question shouldn't be whether it's good or bad, the question should be, "How can we do that?" It's good to have differences of opinion. It's good to debate about it because at least you're debating something that's reaffirmed. Something we all agree on. Like this is bad. Ok, great, we all think it's bad, so let's get to work. And that process isn't fully a thing yet. We're still only, like, 20% into this is a problem. And why are we only 20% into this is a problem if the whole idea of integrating schools debate was 50 years, however many years ago? So, we really need to start answering the question, and everyone hasn't answered it yet. That's bad.

Taylor (during interview): So whose job is it to lead the conversation?

Hebh: Oh, my god, okay, so, everyone. Students in particular, just really letting students know because *Brown vs. Board of Ed*, that was students and teachers and parents, you know, and this should be the same. This should be a movement that students are really outraged that this is a problem. That certain students are at a disadvantage. Once teachers and students and educators – and I feel like there's enough of these people in the city in particular that really care about the city as a whole. And if the city as a whole is doing well then you're doing well. So, I think the movement should primarily be from students, because we're being affected by it. But also it should be led by educators, by politicians, and teachers that see the effect in everyday life. Really everyone should be a part of this conversation because everyone is being affected by it.

Taylor: Okay, this is a good place to pause and take a breath. We'll be back with more from Hebh after a quick message.

[Message from Andrea and Alex, friends of The Bell]

Taylor: As you heard earlier, eventually Hebh connected with a student-led initiative called IntegrateNYC4me. It was founded in the Bronx a few years ago by six high school students and their teacher, Sarah Camiscoli. Ever since then, they've been advocating for integrated, equitable schools across New York City. They've done panels, roundtables, marches, you name it. When

Hebh linked up with them, she took the platform and ran with it. Last year, she testified at the U.S. Dept of Education. She's featured in a documentary called *Teach Us All* that's debuting soon on Netflix. In February, I saw Hebh on a panel at Columbia University sitting next to legendary civil rights activist Angela Davis. But don't let her public profile mask the grassroots organizing that she's leading behind the scenes.

Hebh : Okay so I actually came up with the idea in early February.

Taylor: This is February 2016.

Hebh I was, like, there should be more student voice in this and not just people in suits, you know, men and women in suits behind a desk deciding our fate. We should do it for ourselves and influence policy. So I told the idea to Sarah, and she was so excited about it, and was, like, alright let's do this. So we got a sponsorship, we got a budget, and we really can't wait to amplify the voice of the students. Our first meeting was a month ago and 30-40 students were involved, and that's amazing. It was our first meeting, and I just saw so much energy, so many educators, so many people that care. If everyone knew about this, the movement will be unstoppable. And I want it to be a force where the policymakers, the DOE, have to get our approval before doing anything else. That's how much I want us to have that power and that voice and you have to listen to us or you're not going to get something done.

We started with a media campaign, like hashtag Make America Inte-Great – it's a play on words. So, we created a social media campaign. And we, you know, tweeted it and actually had a lot of responses back to it and are getting the movement out there. So, once we do that and get more people on board, I really want there to be like a mobile force.

Taylor: They came up with a set of policy priorities that Hebh calls the 5Rs. Here she is describing them at the youth symposium at Teachers College this May.

Hebh: The first one is Race and Enrollment – the idea that something like admissions could segregate the schools themselves. Then you have Relationships – once you get students inside the school how do they treat each other. How do faculty treat the students? Then you have Resource Allocation – some schools across the city have more than others. We're trying to figure out why and how to tackle that. Then you have Restorative Justice – so students in the school, disciplinary suspensions, students of color are discriminated against, so how do you tackle how to get ethical disciplinary codes in schools? And the last one is actually Representation – so it's not only diversity across student lines but it's also diversity across faculty and teachers.

Taylor: Hebh, along with her classmate, Elijah took the lead on the first R – Race and Enrollment. They did extensive research into the city’s high school choice process. Here’s Elijah.

Elijah: The system was actually put into place to improve the education system and to make sure we could have schools that are most fitting for each individual kid. And what the school choice system has allowed for is parents with extra resources are able to game the system. They’re figuring out exactly what it takes to get their kids into these great schools. And the school choice system in effect is segregating our schools.

Taylor: Hebh and Elijah demonstrated exactly how this happens by running anonymous profiles of real students through a sample admissions algorithm.

Hebh: Student B is an average student who attends a focus middle school and they are a social person. They did really well on their interviews. Their GPA is a solid 75 across the board. For student C they struggle in school. Their middle school was about to get shut down. Their GPAs were below average.

Taylor: Not surprisingly, the students with attributes signaling middle or upper middle class status were more likely to get in, but Hebh and Elijah did a second trial where they tweaked the algorithm to give extra weight to factors such as:

Hebh: Mother’s education level, free or reduced price lunch, type of middle school and whether or not the student was an English language learner.

Taylor: Not surprisingly, when they adjusted these criteria, it created better racial and socioeconomic balance. This was a simple demonstration, but, if this type of mindset were applied across the system, it could make an enormous difference in integrating schools. The question on my mind is whether school leaders will have more courage than their predecessors 60 years ago to see that it actually happens this time around.

Hebh: These metrics are actually being done in places like California, Louisville, I know I’m missing some places, but this is basically done across the country in specific points and they’re proven to create a more integrated school.

Elijah: To be clear, to achieve school integration we’re not talking about setting aside spots for students of color who don’t meet the standards that the school is setting. We actually have to change the standards for the kind of kid that we’re trying to accept. We have to

broaden what we're looking for beyond the traits that are only or most commonly found among white or affluent students.

Taylor: The question I have is whether school leaders will have more courage than their predecessors 60 years ago to follow the lead of students and see that integration becomes a reality.

Hebh is a freshman at City College this year, and her activism isn't slowing anytime soon.

In fact, if you want to see it in real life, I've got the perfect opportunity. On Tuesday, September 19th, at the Schomburg Center in Harlem, Hebh and other members of Teens Take Charge – the student-led group I help facilitate – will be talking about segregation and other education issues with city and school officials, on stage. You don't want to miss it. The event is from 6 to 8 p.m. It's free and open to the public. The RSVP link is in the show notes or you can go directly to teenstakecharge.com and click on EVENTS. Hope to see y'all there.

[Laundry City audio]

We're going to end this episode where we started, with Laundry City, the youth theatre production about school segregation. They performed at IntegrateNYC4Me's youth symposium and have more performances coming up this fall. You can find that information in the show notes. For now, here is one of my favorite scenes. Enjoy:

[Laundry City scene: "Separate but Equal Bedroom"]

That's our show. Be sure to follow us on Facebook and Twitter @bellpodcast and don't forget to leave that iTunes review.

We'll be back soon with one final episode in the season. Thanks for listening.