From left to right, Memphis 13 students Harry Williams, Menelik Fombi (formerly known as Michael Willis) and Dwania Kyles walk towards Bruce Elementary School while several adults follow behind.
Sheila Malone (left) and Sharon Malone (right), twin sisters who were part of the Memphis 13. Photograph is by Ernest Withers, a Memphis-based photographer known for the images he captured of the Civil Rights Movement.
From left to right, Memphis 13 students Clarence Williams, Joyce Bell, E.C. Freeman, and Leandrew Wiggins walk to Rozelle Elementary School while several adults watch over them from behind.
A newspaper clipping showing two Memphis 13 students departing for Springdale Elementary School with their mothers. From left to right: Beatrice Moore, Lillie Belt Holt, Deborah Ann Holt, and Jacqueline Elaine Moore.
A portrait of the Memphis 13 celebrating Christmas together towards the end of 1961, the year that they desegregated Memphis City Schools. Photograph by Ernest Withers.
“We thought we would do something different, and that is start with first grade. In all the other places they started with high school. Our contention was that no, those white high schoolers are already tainted. First graders, no. Let’s go with first grade.”


A contention is an idea or an argument in a debate.

Tainted means messed up, spoiled, or polluted.
“And my first grade teacher, she was so nice that you didn’t feel threatened. I didn’t feel scared or threatened or anything because she was so nice. It made you feel like you didn’t have nothing to worry about.”


“Brand new books. Buildings lit up. [I was] walking around looking around like a child in a department store at Christmas time. Because I had never seen anything like that.”

“I cried a lot. I just hated school. You know, I hated going to school.”


“I was scared. There was days I didn’t want to go, you know, but then, my mom was the backbone, you had to go. You need an education, so that’s one of the things she inspired us. You go get your education and you can be anything you want to be. So that’s what I did.”

“I’m glad my mom chose for us to go to Gordon. I’m glad she did that. In fact I'm glad all 13 of us parents they stood up for that because why, why should our kids not have the same?”