May 17, 2014 marked the 60th anniversary of the landmark Supreme Court decision that banned racial segregation in America’s public schools.

Reverdy Wells felt angry. For months the Senior Class at Scott’s Branch High School had butted heads with the new principal. The man required “rent” for school books that never arrived. He took money for “hot lunch,” then served ketchup in hot water as “tomato soup.” And the all-white school board would not listen to complaints from the black students. This was South Carolina in 1949. So Reverdy Wells called a meeting -- setting in motion events that changed America.

Reverdy Wells’s anger was just a small part of the frustration experienced by thousands of black teens all across the South. Those feelings helped spark the Supreme Court’s historic 1954 ruling Brown v Board of Education that declared segregation unconstitutional.

“An old building,” Joe De Laine, Jr remembers, as he looks at a photo of Clarendon County’s Spring Hill elementary school. The faded snapshot shows his sister Ophelia standing among classmates in front of an unpainted wooden structure with boards and windowpanes missing. “Walls were non-existent inside, except for paper chocked through the cracks” to keep the wind out.

Joe, Ophelia and brother BB were teenage neighbors of Reverdy Wells. Their father, country preacher Rev. J.A. De Laine, helped file the landmark lawsuit from Clarendon County that eventually led to Brown v Board. It was in that environment that Reverdy Wells called his meeting of Scott’s Branch students and parents.

For several months, Rev. De Laine and others had been working with NAACP lawyer Thurgood Marshall to draw up a petition demanding Clarendon County provide equal facilities. But who would risk signing such a petition? Reverdy’s meeting broke the ice.

“Reverdy got up and told them what was going on with the principal. It really made the crowd mad,” an eyewitness recalled years later. “Mr. Robert Georgia got up and said ‘I’d like to nominate Rev. J.A. De Laine as our spokesperson.’ Everyone agreed.

“Rev. De Laine got up and said, ‘I appreciate this compliment, but the only way that I will accept this is if you are willing to go all the way to the Supreme Court. And it ain’t gonna be easy…” That was when the petition really started.”

That 1949 petition launched the first of five lawsuits that became known collectively as Brown v Board of Education. Another came from Farmville, Virginia, where students at Moton High School marched to protest classes held in tarpaper shacks. Other cases originated in Washington, D.C., the state of Delaware, and the city of Topeka, Kansas.

Bundled together as Brown v Board, the cases were decided on May 17, 1954. “Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal,” the Court declared. Those simple words would transform the South and the nation.

Based on the traveling exhibition Courage: The Vision to End Segregation, the Guts to Fight for It, created by Levine Museum of the New South, Charlotte, N.C. www.museumofthenewsouth.org

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Draw conclusions: Read the printed or digitized newspaper looking for situations in which teens have exhibited positive leadership. Also look for volunteer opportunities and other ways teens can serve their communities.

Write a news story about someone your age whom you admire for his or her positive leadership. Interview that person for your story.