

## **Memphis State Eight: 'It seemed like a golden opportunity,' recalls Bertha Rogers Looney**

By Linda Moore ([Contact](#)), Memphis Commercial Appeal  
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*Editor's note: One in a series.*

A week before classes started for the 1959 fall semester at Memphis State University, Dean R.M. Robison met with the eight African-American students who would be the first to integrate the school.

"I want you to know right now that I am opposed to integration, and it is hardly necessary for me to remind you that we have done everything possible to prevent Negroes from entering this university," Robison told them, according to The Commercial Appeal archives.

Matthew Craig/The Commercial Appeal

Bertha Rogers Looney teaches at Southwest Tennessee Community College. "... I'm pleased I was able to be part of that process of change."

With those words, 18-year-old Bertha Rogers, now Bertha Rogers Looney, began to doubt what would later be known as a historic role as one of the Memphis State Eight.

"It made me wonder if I'd made the wrong decision," she said.

They knew they weren't welcomed, but hadn't expected school officials to say it.

"You would have thought an administrator to be a little more considerate in his statements," she said.

As an honors graduate from Hamilton High School, Looney had been offered a scholarship to Fisk University in Nashville. But a brother in college and a sister two years younger made the added costs of school away from home difficult for her parents to swing.

"I was only curious to see if I could pass the test, because my heart was set on going to LeMoyne (College)," said Looney, 67.

She made a perfect score. And with a state school so much cheaper than the private LeMoyne, Looney picked MSU.

"It seemed like a golden opportunity for me, so I decided to do it," Looney said.

Golden, that is, until she heard Robison's words.

Looney stuck it out for a few years, but eventually married and moved to Baltimore. She returned to Memphis State and completed her English degree in 1979.

Back in Baltimore, she earned a master's degree in English from Coppin State University.

In 2006, she added a degree from the University of Memphis in English as a second language.

Looney is now a full-time instructor at Southwest Tennessee Community College.

Despite her early doubts, she doesn't regret her role in history.

