

Kent State Massacre:

Twenty-five years later, a former student reflects on the May 4 tragedy and the legacy that remains

by Richard Warren

Jeff was the quintessential hippie radical, in headbands and tattered jeans; Bill was a ROTC student with a conscience, a high school jock; Allison, as the legend goes, put a flower in a guardsman's rifle and said "Flowers are better than bullets;" and Sandy was the quiet honors student who was hurrying to class on that warm May morning when her jaw was shattered by the impact of a National Guardsman's bullet.



National Guardsman with fixed bayonet, May 4, 1970

I came to Kent State University as a freshman two years after Allison Krause, Jeff Miller, Sandy Scheur, and Bill Schroeder were killed and nine others wounded during a 13-second fusillade that brought international attention to the university's previously placid campus. Twenty-five years later, the words Kent State can still evoke strong memories of violence, lost innocence, wasted lives, and misuse of police power. The events on the campus of Kent State on May 4, 1970 proved to be a watershed of sorts for a country and peace movement that seemed about to tear themselves asunder.

To this day, the four spectral figures from May 4, 1970 seem to accompany the thousands of students that have passed through Kent State in the last quarter cen-

tury. Their presence on campus is almost tangible, causing them to eventually become as familiar as the many other faces we learned to recognize rushing past us when we changed classes.

Say the words "May Fourth" to any Kent State student or alumni, and you are guaranteed to provoke a reaction. Even for those who would rather forget, May Fourth is still very much a part of a Kent State education. For many, its meaning has penetrated deeper and longer than any textbook or lecture ever could.

Kent students really get to know Allison and Sandy, Jeff and Bill. We see their faces in *The Daily Kent Stater* or in a special room in the library where their portraits hang frozen in time. We call them by their first names. We know their movements on the last day of their lives. For each of them, there is enough of a personality carrying through all the stories that many of us can "relate to" one or more of them on a personal basis.

For me, it's Sandy, and to a lesser extent Bill, with whom I identify most strongly. Sandy, a serious student majoring in deaf education and by all accounts a very compassionate person, would have been uncharacteristically late for class when the shooting broke out at 12:24. I can see her rushing through the Taylor Hall parking lot, but what is even more peculiar is that this wouldn't have been a normal pathway for her—she must have taken a diversion to see "what was going on," exactly what I'd have done, a decision that proved fatal as she walked into the line of fire.

Bill's curiosity more directly matches my own—he'd been there since the beginning of the protest, moving with it as the students retreated from the advancing guard. Among the many hundreds of photographs taken that day, he can occasionally be spotted in the background, just watching. Bill was a member of the despised ROTC, but he was beginning to question military involvement in Vietnam. As a result, his allegiances and emotions must have been at odds. If I'd been in Kent on May 4, 1970, I'd have been standing, just like Bill, lending silent support.

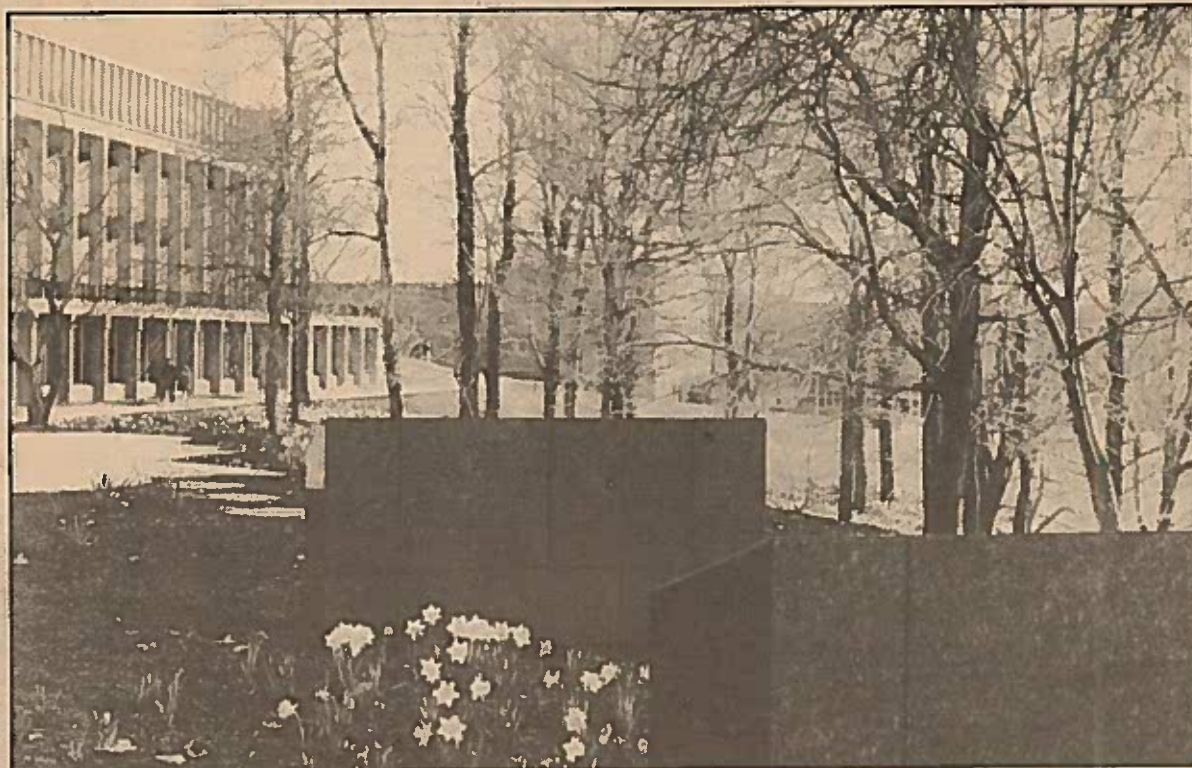
My long association with Kent started in 1972. I studied there first as an undergraduate, then a graduate student, and ended up landing a job at my alma mater and staying through 1988. My vantage point has been the quarter century of the aftermath to 1970—the bitter years of criminal and civil trials, the ongoing struggle for construction of a fitting memorial, an event which did not take place until five years

ago.

In 1977, I saw a turn of events that resembled what had happened in 1970. That year, the university announced its decision to construct a gymnasium annex that would cover not the actual site of the shooting, but ground on which some of the confrontation that day had occurred.

actually having been there at the time. The part of campus where the shootings took place is like a park; there is little to remind you of one of the rare moments in our country's history when civilians were mowed down by armed representatives of the state.

On the University Commons, students



"Inquire, Learn, Reflect" is the theme of the monument, dedicated on May 4, 1990

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Passions were ignited, and the protests began again. During that year's May Fourth observance, the construction site was occupied by protesters, and what became known as "Tent City" was erected on the spot. Most of the summer, while the protesters continued camping, the university vacillated on what course of action to take.

In August, on the day the university and law enforcement officials had designated to clear the site of protesters, I went along to watch the arrests. Scores of protesters sat together, their arms and legs entwined, making their removal more difficult for the police. I watched as they were forcibly separated and dragged off one by one. A few weeks later, I watched as the chain-link fence was torn down. Another time, I watched the protesters being tear-gassed. On all those occasions, I was one of the hundreds of people just watching, like Bill had done on a day that had ended more violently.

It can be a distinctly surreal experience for those who came to Kent State after 1970 to live in the aftermath of that day without

frolic on
b a l m y
days, the
f a m o u s
black squir-
rels chase
each other,
l i l a c s
bloom near
where the
burned
R O T C
building

once stood. You can still stand at the "pagoda," the small structure on a high point where the Guard fired on the mass of students in a parking lot, almost the distance of a football field away.

And in that parking lot, cars still park every day on the spots where four people died. For many years, until the new memorial was built, the only sign that anything momentous had happened was a small marker, like a gravestone, standing in a modestly landscaped traffic island. For those who knew where to look, however, there was the most eloquent evidence of all—the perfectly rounded bullet hole through a half inch of steel in a sculpture just outside Taylor Hall.

Standing at the pagoda, visitors will have trouble believing anything violent could have occurred in such a tranquil setting. To your left will be the Commons where the protest began that warm Monday. The weekend had been far from quiet.

Following Nixon's ordering of troops into Cambodia, which sparked riots all over the U.S., there had been an episode of window breaking and looting in down-

town Kent on Friday evening, followed by the torching of the ROTC building, a small wooden structure on campus, on Saturday evening. Because of these incidents, martial law was declared, and the National Guard was summoned.

On Monday, May 4, a group of students gathered at noon on the Commons to protest. It was an unseasonably hot day and thousands of people had gathered to enjoy the spectacular weather during the lunch hour. By all accounts, this gathering was peaceful, even low-key, until the Guard marched to disperse them, firing tear gas and forcing them up a small hill to the other side of Taylor Hall, where the mood turned ugly. Rocks and curses were hurled, but virtually all accounts concur that the danger to the Guard was not serious. The confrontation, a series of ineffectual movements by the Guard greeted by the jeering of the students, seemed about to end when the retreating Guard mysteriously did an about-face, wheeling suddenly and opening fire. No one had dreamed they were carrying live ammunition. To this day, none of the Guard members have offered satisfactory explanations, beyond the contradictory testimonies forced from them during the trials. Their statements that a sniper opened fire on them or that their lives were in danger have been refuted by scores of eyewitnesses.

I must know a hundred people who were there that day whose accounts seem legendary, filled with the epic sweep of revolution. Much is exaggerated, but even that which is true has an edge of the fantastic. After the initial shock of the killings, a wave of angry students nearly attacked the Guardsmen, who were ominously standing in formation, waiting for them. Only the passionate exhortations of Kent State Professor Glenn Frank averted what surely would have been an even greater bloodbath. Arms outstretched, Frank persuaded the advancing students to peaceably disperse rather than provoke the Guard further.

The university was abruptly closed; thousands of students were told to leave for home at once. The entire city of Kent was closed—anyone trying to get in was turned away. That night, police helicopters relentlessly hovered over the city, probing their search beams into the homes of the terrified townspeople, searching for God knows what.

For those of us who never took part in that day, hearing these stories and the recordings of the gunshots and of Professor Frank, seeing the photographs and the crude video taken at a distance of the actual moment of firing, it all seems eerily unreal. We recognize our campus; we are familiar with many of the faces in the photos. Like the rest of the world, we are both riveted and appalled by the famous image of the girl kneeling, arms extended, screaming over the bloody body of Jeff Miller. And yet, as horrifying as May Fourth must have been, I will always intensely regret that my experience is only vicariously, that I can only see it through the eyes of others.

What is a real part of the Kent experience is the tremendous quantity of raw emotion still associated with May Fourth. It is a subject that can still provoke screaming matches at a moment's notice.

Over the years, my own anger has lessened, but there are many others, especially those who were there that first May 4, whose emotional ties to that day remain fresh and vehement. For these people, their anger tends to carry over to other injustices in our society. They are people of the '60s, still suspicious of the "establishment." They are still with us—older perhaps—but over the years, I've observed how their philosophy and viewpoints are being picked up anew by each succeeding generation.

There is another kind of anger, though, that is downright frightening. At Kent, there has always been a substantial number of the student body and of the surrounding community who feel that the protesting students "got what they deserved." Even more bone-chilling, one will occasionally hear someone asserting that "they should have shot more." Every year

Often it can be the least dramatic incidents that prove most memorable. I remember seeing Sandy's mother furiously scolding a television reporter for an insensitive intrusion into a private moment. I remember how Dean Kahler, his spine shattered by a Guardsman's bullet, could adroitly handle his wheelchair on steep inclines. And I remember the candlelight



Above: The scene of the shootings, as it appears today
Below: A candlelight remembrance for the victims



the annual observance provokes mini-debates around the campus that has participants asking, "Why are we remembering this?" or "Why can't we just forget it, leave it behind?"

Frequently these people are furious about the whole subject, and there is an alarming edge to their fury. Last year at the commemorative observance, a large circle of people gathered hands in a circle and began singing "Give Peace a Chance." The response of a bystander, a young man currently attending the university, was extreme. He became livid and began jeering those who were singing, his voice positively dripping with hatred. Over the years, I've seen lots of people like him, and it's been part of my own "Kent experience" to struggle with understanding where that hatred comes from, to find out what makes people actually wish violence toward those who only want to "give peace a chance."

It is images like that one—the young man and his hatred, the circle of people singing—that are seared into my memory. In every Kent graduate lingers some mental image that is mindful of that day, some casual, some even accidental, but there nonetheless.

vigils that occur each year on the evening of May 3rd, a parade of silent mourners through campus that ends in the infamous parking lot. On that evening, the lot, emptied of vehicles, slowly fills with the candlebearers who then quietly place them on the marked spots where one of the victims lay. The mood is religiously somber, hushed, otherworldly.

One year not long ago, I approached the spot where Sandy was killed to place my candle there as I always do as a silent memorial to her. It was shortly after the procession had ended, and a large circle of people was around each of the four spots. My way was blocked by a short, gray-haired woman, and I remember feeling impatient, wanting her to move. With a start, I suddenly realized the woman was Sandy's mother. Over the years, the parents, many of whom return each year, have taken less and less of a role in the observances, and today I would guess that few current Kent State students would recognize them. As a result, Mrs. Scheur was standing at the place her daughter died, anonymously studying the faces of others, wondering where their grief came from but finding a measure of

satisfaction, I hope, that they shared some small part of her loss.

Almost at the instant I recognized her, she turned and saw me. She didn't know me, and no one was speaking, but I could tell immediately she'd guessed intuitively what I wished to do. She moved to one side, indicating with a small gesture that I had her blessing to step forward. To this day, I am deeply moved by this memory of a mother stepping aside so I could place a lighted candle at the spot she lost something more precious than I will ever fully understand.

Just like the rest of the country, Kent State has changed significantly in the last 25 years. In the early years, the university established a Center for Peaceful Change, but clearly the unstated attitude of the administration during the '70s was that the least said about May Fourth, the better. That feeling has softened as the new monument with its theme of "Inquire, Learn, Reflect" mirrors a university that doesn't wish to forget its past but to learn from it. In fact, another vivid memory I have is of seeing then-President Michael Schwartz coming to the monument on the rainy 20th anniversary of May Fourth, the day that monument was dedicated. It was well after all the ceremonies were completed, and several dozen passersby were sharing memories under their umbrellas. President Schwartz arrived alone, perhaps thinking his presence was undetected, and after a few moments of silence, he suddenly began to sob uncontrollably. I was stunned, not only because of his stoic nature, but also to discover that a man who'd been accused of insensitivity toward May Fourth was obviously profoundly moved by those long-ago events.

Then and now the placid life of a slow-paced Midwestern university does little to prod Kent students out of a seemingly all-encompassing apathy toward politics. This makes it all the more remarkable that the place where campus protests turned murderous was at Kent and not at other more turbulent universities like Berkeley or Columbia. Towards May Fourth, most students at Kent have always felt little need to remember. Perhaps the most telltale symbol of their indifference is that the May Fourth room in the library has for years been one of the most popular spots on campus for napping.

I remember Bill Schroeder's mother at one candlelight vigil standing at the spot her son had fallen. Her face, bathed in soft light, was contorted into such a profound expression of grief that it was physically painful to see.

I spotted her standing near my friend Mary, a native of the Schroeders' home city of Lorain. Mary didn't know the Schroeders, but her face reflected the mother's grief in all its intensity. To see the two of them, you couldn't help but understand the depth of feeling they shared extends beyond Kent, Lorain, or even Ohio. Apart from any political meanings, May Fourth is a lesson in the universality of sorrow and the pain of loss, of needless loss, of how it can occur at any moment, and how we all share the experience and are connected with one another when it happens. At Kent State, students walk each day over ground where our society lost something, where somehow we as a people were made less by the shame of what happened there.

But the memory won't fade as long as students come to Kent State for an education and are confronted everyday by a moment of living history, and see themselves at the same age, in an earlier time, as possible victims.

Photos courtesy of Kent State University News and Information