May 4, 1970: A Witness to Kent State

It was 10:30 PM on Sunday, May 3, 1970, when a knock came at my door. Dean Kahler, who lived two doors down from me on the fourth floor, in Wright Hall, stepped in and joined our lively discussion about the National Guard and their militant stance on campus. Earlier that evening, after breaking up a rally, the National Guard had ordered that no one was allowed outside any campus buildings. As a result, four displaced students who couldn't reach their dorm or apartment were using my room to sleep in.

Dean asked to speak with me privately, so we stepped into the student lounge. A freshman, he had a question about the anti-war rally planned for Monday, May 4th, "I want to go to the rally," he said, "but I don't want to get into any trouble. I'm a little confused, what should I do?" As a sophomore who had participated in several anti-war demonstrations at Kent State and at the University of Buffalo, I suggested that if he wanted to go, he should keep his eyes on me at all times. I had a sixth sense for knowing when to leave before things got too out of hand. After a few minutes discussing our plans to stay together, we returned to my room.

The weather on May 4th was sunny and clear as we walked through the Prentice Hall parking lot toward the Commons. Never in my wildest dreams did I imagine that in forty-five minutes I would be standing in that same lot with blood on my hands. Dean reached into his jacket and pulled out a plastic bag containing two blue bandannas soaking in water. He handed one to me, a smart precaution against the tear gas we both knew was coming. Laughing and mocking the establishment, though I felt quietly apprehensive, we descended Blanket Hill and joined the other students on the Commons already chanting: *"Pigs off campus! No more war!"*

Dean was smiling as he yelled and taunted the National Guard, showing none of the anxiety from the night before. It was as though this were a game of dare. Then the order to disperse came, when I looked around, I noticed that Dean was not with me. Years later, he told me that he felt more comfortable standing on higher grounds.

When the National Guard started shooting tear gas into the crowd, I pulled out the bandanna pressed it against my mouth and nose. It made a real difference; I was able to withstand the choking effects far longer than those around me. As the troops advanced to break up the rally, I ran back up Blanket Hill toward the Prentice Hall parking lot. Dean had told me that he ran up the right side of Taylor Hall on the side of the Pagoda.

The National Guard had moved onto the football practice field. I was among the students gathered along the fence bordering the parking lot and the practice field. Several of us threw rocks, though we fell well short of our targets. When the Guard fired tear gas canisters into the crowd, some students picked them up and hurled them back; the Guard responded in kind. Dean was also in the vicinity of where I was, but because of all the chaos, we didn't see each other. Meanwhile, as the Guard began retreating up to the Pagoda, by Taylor Hall, I moved through the parking lot in a parallel direction.

The shooting started just as I reached the lamppost where the access road meets the sidewalk leading up to Taylor Hall and past the pagoda. At first, I thought it was more tear gas, then I

turned and ten yards to my right and saw a student, Jeffrey Miller, laying on the ground, blood pouring from his body. Realizing they were firing live ammunition, I dove behind the nearest car, a Volkswagen. From there, I looked up and saw my hometown friend, Michael Brock carrying a wounded student out of the line of fire. That student was Tom Grace, the very first person I met during freshman orientation. To this day, Tom and I remain close friends. Michael passed away a number of years ago.

The shooting lasted thirteen seconds. Sixty-seven rounds were fired by the National Guard, though it felt like an eternity. My first reaction was pure shock; I had never witnessed violent death. The scene was grotesque, blood flowing from the wounded and the fallen. Hysteria and confusion erupted all around me. I stood motionless and dazed for a long moment while scanning the area for Dean.

As I began moving through the chaos, searching for anyone I could help, I came upon Sandy Scheuer. Her life and spirit were gone. I knelt beside her, touched her head, and cried out, "Why Sandy?" She was among the least political people I knew. All she had ever wanted was to smile, enjoy life, and get an education. Her innocence was radiant — always enlivening. I will never forget that last image of her.

I used my jacket to wipe her blood from my hands. Ambulances had arrived and were beginning to transport the wounded and the dead. I finally found Dean — already strapped to a stretcher, being wheeled toward an ambulance. A paramedic told me he had been shot in the back, and pointed to the location where he had fallen: approximately twenty yards from where Jeffrey Miller was killed and thirty yards in a direct line from where I had been standing when the shots rang out. That single bullet took away the use of Dean's legs and has confined him to a wheelchair ever since. But it never took away his spirit to live and keep the memory of Kent State, May 4, 1970 alive. Whenever I look back, I wonder how different things might have been had he stayed besides me in those final few moments.

After watching Dean's ambulance pull away, I returned to the Commons, where I drifted toward Steve Sharoff, one of the anti-war leaders and Professor Glenn W. Frank. Hundreds of students sat silently on the hill. You could feel the grief; you could see the disbelief on their faces Everyone was stunned. No one was threatening the Guard. No one knew what to do. The shock was simply too heavy a lift. Professor Frank and Steve approached a National Guardsman and pleaded with him to allow the students to remain peacefully on Blanket Hill while the Guard stood down. The Guardsman gripped his baton in both hands and replied with contempt: *"Move them out — or else!"* Recognizing we were dealing with someone beyond reason, that was the moment that Professor Frank gave his impassioned plea to leave the area. A group of us, both students and the Faculty Marshalls, began coaxing and guiding everybody off Blanket Hill and away from the Commons.

I was stupefied that the National Guard remained willing to take more innocent lives. It is a sad commentary when American soldiers are killing American citizens on American soil.

Dean has always maintained that he went to the rally alone and because of that, my connection to him was never historically established. None of the investigating agencies ever subpoenaed or sought to question me.

When the National Guard opened fire on us, they brought the war home for all of America to see. The back door to Vietnam was violently kicked open. It was no longer a war confined to the jungles of Southeast Asia or the flickering images on our television screens. What erupted was an intensified civil war — on the streets, on college campuses, across the entire country. Its soldiers were ordinary Americans: middle-class citizens, the lifeblood of any revolution. With the killing and wounding of thirteen students, Kent State became the rallying cry for a nation's fight to end the senseless slaughter in Vietnam. Student protests erupted nationwide with a single objective: force the government to stop the genocide in Vietnam. A mobilized American public, galvanized by the events at Kent State, directly undermined the government's war policy from that point forward. May 4, 1970 was the beginning of the end of the Vietnam War.

The following fall, I resigned my position as assistant manager of the school basketball team so that I could devote my full energy to making my voice heard on the issue of Vietnam. Among my commitments to the movement, I helped organize a fundraiser for the students and faculty members who had been indicted — the Kent 25 — and traveled to Washington, D.C. numerous times to confront the administration's war policy directly. In May 1971, after disrupting a ROTC Award Day ceremony, I was indicted and arrested. Whatever actions I took, I always believed that our civil disobedience was righteous and that the war in Vietnam was one of the worst policy decisions our government ever made.

All of us who witnessed that atrocity, emotionally and politically began to experience a change in our lives, that is still evident today. We made a difference; we made our country stand up and take notice, yet we are all still haunted by what happened at 12:23 PM on May 4, 1970.

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