

By Ken Garfield

It's been 55 years since four students were shot to death and nine others wounded at Kent State University during a demonstration against the U.S. invasion of Cambodia and presence of National Guardsmen on campus.

On this milestone anniversary, I want to share its place in my story. The shooting on a college campus of unarmed kids who were about my age stirred me to think about the nature of loss. About what we do with our time on earth. About what our legacy might be, and if we accomplished anything worth remembering.

Those of a certain age remember May 4, 1970.

Way back when and for many years after, the shooting symbolized the nation's division. "Four dead in Ohio" became more than a line in a Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young song. It became a rallying cry, embraced by some, reviled by others.

Today?

Sadly, May 4, 1970, is a footnote in history. For many, it has become lost in the litany of calamity that leaves us numb. Four dead in Ohio? Cynics might think, "More people were shot to death last week at that school in what state was it? We've suffered equally (or more) horrifying examples of the national schism than Kent State, including the death of five police officers in the attack on the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021.

I turned 17 the day before the shootings. I'm 72 now. It's been a journey – one moment and experience leading to another, all adding up to who I am. I don't think about Kent State all the time, less so with the passing of time. But deep down I am aware of the thread that began to unspool on May 4, 1970, changing the way I look at life.

THIN RULE HERE

I grew up in Woodmere, N.Y., outside the city. I was already protesting the war in Vietnam when my father broke the news to me about Kent State as we sat side by side in the car that Monday afternoon. I was incredulous. The dead and wounded weren't much older than me. How could this be?

In the fall of 1971, I went off to Hampshire College in Amherst, Mass., and enrolled in a course entitled "Political Justice." We studied famous court cases tainted by politics. That's how I wound up in Ohio, witnessing the trial of 25 protesters facing charges relating to the campus disorders. I landed in Akron in a snowstorm, 18 years old, clueless, not knowing how to get from the airport to Kent a dozen miles away. I asked the first person I saw for a ride to campus. It was Tom Grace. He was one of the nine students shot that day. A bullet hit his left heel and exited the right side of the foot. It still gives him trouble.

What were the odds?

He gave me a ride to Kent and put me up in the apartment he shared with who knows how many other students. While I witnessed the trial, he joined protesters outraged that students and others who participated in the campus disorder were on trial rather than the National Guardsmen who opened fire. Charges against 20 of the Kent State 25 were dropped for lack of evidence. Two pleaded guilty to first-degree rioting, one was convicted of a misdemeanor (interfering with a fireman), one was acquitted and one had charges dropped when a witness couldn't ID him.

No National Guardsmen were legally held accountable in court.

More on Tom and me in a bit.

In 1973, I returned to Kent State to cover the May 4 observance for my college newspaper. I camped out in a building on campus, sprawled on the floor listening to Judy Collins sing for us. Whenever I hear Collins' "Someday Soon," I think of that night.

In 1975, I wrote my college thesis on Kent State. One chapter was devoted to Allison Krause, a freshman who was shot that day. She was studying art and special education. The Saturday before the shooting, she approached a National Guardsman and told him "Flowers are better than bullets." That phrase, and Allison, are embedded in the history of Kent State. Two days later, she was shot while trying to seek cover behind a car. She died in her boyfriend's arms. Five years later, I interviewed Allison's parents, Arthur and Dorothy Krause, in their home outside Pittsburgh. I was 22. That was the first time I had ever witnessed such rage, which they carried to their graves. They put me up that night in Allison's old bedroom. I remember looking at the photographs of her that lined the bookcase as I tried to get some sleep.

I was 22 years old, intimidated by the setting, not yet knowing how all these Kent State experiences would inform my life.

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I was a child of Woodward and Bernstein, drawn to the romance and impact of newspapers back when most everyone read them.

I started working for a small weekly in Millerton, N.Y., in 1975, a month before graduating from college. I finished my Kent State thesis – in longhand at the kitchen table at 5 in the morning – the night before it was due and raced up the Massachusetts Turnpike to turn it in on time.

I moved to the Carolinas and devoted the next 30 years to writing for newspapers. I arrived at The Charlotte (N.C.) Observer in 1985 and after several newsroom stops was handed the faith and values beat.

Exploring the spiritual side of life, I began wondering more deeply about cosmic things. I found myself drawn to telling people's life stories, whether it was writing about Billy Graham or crafting an obituary for someone whose life was marked by goodness if not glory.

I proposed a "death beat" to my editors. I'd write about the rise of cremation and the songs mourners play at their loved one's funeral. Among them was "Prop Me Up Beside the Jukebox (If I Die)." I'd explore what people believe about heaven and hell. Editors rejected the death beat idea. I might have imagined it, but I remember the funny looks they gave me.

In 2006, I left the paper to work at a church. I was hired to do "stellar marketing" as one pastor put it. But then someone would appear at my door, their eyes red, and I knew what they needed. I helped a mother write the obituary for her grown son who had fallen through a glass table and bled to death, alone at home. Another was for a mother and father who lost their first two adult children to the same disease. They needed help writing an obituary for their third and last child, who died at 22. No longer together, the parents were reunited only to complete this horrifying task, then attend the funeral together.

It was around this time that I heard the call.

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I remember sitting in the living room of a wonderful woman, a wife, mother, grandmother and alto in her church choir. She was 64 when cancer took her. Her four adult children and their spouses had gathered to discuss what needed to go in Mom's obituary. The discussion turned into a debate. One loved one insisted "Mom would want us to include that." Another responded "No she wouldn't." I remember thinking to

myself, “This is where I need to be, sorting through the memories and heartbreak, crafting a story that captures a life in its fullest.”

I’ve written hundreds of obituaries over the past dozen years.

I remember the retired judge who walked across a parking lot to Caribou Coffee, tethered to his oxygen tank, eager to talk about his devotion to keeping kids out of trouble. I remember a local business leader, facing a terminal illness, who made me promise I wouldn’t tell his wife we were working on his obit. I remember interviewing a client in his small apartment in a retirement community. I asked if he wanted to list any of his four ex-wives as a survivor. The third one he said, the mother of his children.

Each obituary is different. Yet each offers a chance to capture life’s complexities – joyful, sorrowful, rife with twists and turns, cut short by tragedy, graced by longevity, blessed by good fortune, cursed by misfortune.

As I write about the life of others, I think about my own. Their stories are my stories. And perhaps yours.

THN RULE HERE

I want to tell you more about Tom.

After giving me a ride to Kent and putting me up for a night in 1971, he arranged for me to crash in a friend’s high-rise dorm room. I missed my Thanksgiving morning flight home and spent the day alone in the Akron airport, feeding quarters into those old TVs, watching the Nebraska-Oklahoma football game. Amid a lifetime of family gatherings, that lonesome memory lingers.

Tom, 75, and I didn’t reconnect for decades. But then I interviewed him twice by phone for Kent State anniversary stories. In recent years,

we've exchanged Christmas cards. A few months ago, we reunited with another Charlotte friend of his over dinner at Beef 'N Bottle. It was our first time together in 54 years. The three of us talked for 3½ hours.

A sophomore history major and anti-war activist way back when, he's a retired social worker, union leader and community college history professor living outside Buffalo, N.Y. He's a Civil War buff. He remains tethered to the shootings, but not unhealthily. He has lived a good life, even as he does his best to keep May 4, 1970, alive among those who have forgotten. He wrote a book about it and returns to campus every May 4 for memorial events. He remembers the name of the Kent State football player who carried him to the ambulance. He remembers sharing the ambulance with Sandy Scheuer, a junior speech therapy major shot and killed as she walked between classes.

Over dinner, we talked about the loss of his wife, Peggy, to a lengthy illness. The love of his life, he called her. He told me about his two grown kids and one grandchild.

I told Tom about my wife two adult children and four young grandchildren. I talked about my career in newspapers and how Kent State marked the start of a passage that shaped my life. I was 17 then. I turn 72 on May 3. Innocent then, contemplative now about life, death and how we spend the time in between.

You should tell your story, he said.

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