

Yvonne Elizabeth Mitchell-Bragg

Attended Kent State University Jan. 1968- Aug. 1971

Summary of experiences pertaining to May 4, 1970

As a point of clarification, I lived off campus and worked part-time during those years, so I had little time or interest in the political activities that were going on around campus or around the country as it pertained to the invasion of Cambodia at the time. Also I had a brother who was recently returned from Vietnam and my sympathies were with our soldiers and their families who had served and come home to a country that all but ignored their valor and bravery.

So with that in mind, here is my account of the events of May 4th, 1970 and the days that lead up to that time and my feelings before and after.

I was not a member of BUS (Black United Students) or SDS (Students for a Democratic Society), so I didn't have the information on the rally or other activities for the weekend of May 1st. or the May 4th march. In fact I left campus after my classes on Friday May 1st and went home to Akron , Ohio. Although I read about the demonstrations and burning of the R.O.T.C. building, I did not witness any of that. I returned to my apartment on Sunday May 3rd. and was shocked to see the National Guard troops standing on the sidewalk on my street.

At the time, I lived in a duplex on Depeyster St. and the National Guard had created a check-point there to discourage outsiders from coming on to the campus. Also I think they were keeping an eye on students going to the bars in town as well.

The National Guardsmen were very nice and my room-mates and I and others on the street brought food and water out to them and engaged them in conversation. In fact I remember feeling that the National Guard would protect us from any outside agitators that were rumored to be coming to Kent.

The next day, Monday May 4th, I went to my classes and to work in the Publications Office as usual. However the Publications office, which was like the Public Relations staff for the University, was bustling with activity. It seems that the state and locally elected officials were really concerned that the student activities of the past weekend would resume on Monday and clearly wanted to maintain control of the situation and not let things get out of hand with the destruction of property as had occurred the previous Friday and Saturday.

Although I saw the frenzy of activity at my job, I still believed that only people who were directly engaging in protest had anything to fear, so I continued to go about my daily routine of attending my classes.

A little before noon I completed my work-assignment and I left to grab a bite to eat before heading to my next class, which was in the Theater Arts building across campus.

After getting a sandwich, I went out the back door of the Student Union building which left me in the area we called the "Commons". The Commons was just a big open field where intramural games were played. But on that day the students, mainly SDS demonstrators and the National Guard were playing a dangerous game of "Cat and Mouse".

What I mean by that is the students would throw rocks and flowers at the National Guardsmen and then run, while the guardsmen would march towards them in formation. This went on several times as I watched until finally the National Guardsmen marched to the top of what we called "Blanket Hill" and stayed there. After that I decided it was time to continue on to class, so I went up the hill as well. Once I reached the top I heard a volley of shouts ring out and saw people running and screaming. I began to run also, until I heard someone call my name and I looked up to see a young man I knew from work and he was on what I thought was a balcony at Taylor Hall and he yelled at me to "go back, go back they are shooting people".

With that warning, I turned around and ran away from the crowds and noise and went back down the hill and across the Commons until I found myself in the Publications' Office.

I pushed open the door and I simply yelled "They are shooting people" and then someone grabbed me and I began to shake and cry, I think I was in shock.

I stayed there until I could compose myself and then I headed to my apartment on Depeyster. However on the way home there were soldiers in jeeps with rifles that had fixed bayonet's on the end pointed directly at us. And they were on bull-horns yelling at us to "get off the streets or they would shoot us and declaring that Kent was under Marshall Law and nobody would be allowed to enter or leave the city".

When I finally made it home I called my parents in Akron to let them know I was okay, but also to tell them that the governor had declared Marshall Law and nobody could get in or out of the city.

Well to this day I don't know how my brother did it, but my brother, who was a paratrooper in Vietnam and had just recently returned home, showed up on my door-step and told me to "get my stuff, you're going home". So I got out of there and returned to my family in Akron.

Later on I was contacted by a reporter from the New York Times and I was asked to do an interview to talk about the tragic events of that day. I was afraid to go by myself, so I asked my then boyfriend, Wayne Bragg to go with me. Wayne was not a witness to the event since he had graduated in June of 1969 and lived and worked in Akron. However he was still quite knowledgeable about campus life, so he also participated in the interview.

We completed the interview with several other people who were witnesses to the events on campus that day and the article was published in the New York Times the following week.

When I came back on campus the next week the Rev. Jesse Jackson came to speak about the tragic events at Jackson State University and how they compared to the tragedy at Kent State.

Hearing him speak was a life changing experience, which lead to my understanding of the need to be knowledgeable and engaged in our democracy.

Now after all of these traumatic events, my life changed forever, but the most important things I learned are as follows:

- 1) There are no innocent by-standers when your government unleashes its military might. **So. don't be there if this is truly not your cause.** Because when a soldier or policeman points a gun at you, you become "the enemy" whether you are there by accident or not.
- 2) Be a full throated participant in your democracy. You can't just leave the decisions to someone else and just hope for the best. You must know first- hand what is happening in your community and around the world and you must exercise the franchise **by voting!!!**

That is the only way you can have a real voice in how things are run. You see I believe the protesters in Ferguson and other places have the moral high ground, but you must focus that outrage and energy into being an **informed voter** in order to influence real change.

Lastly, I must say that I truly loved my years at Kent State University dearly, and even though I completed my B.A. and graduate work in California, I sincerely feel that Kent State is my true alma-mater. Kent Provided the nurturing support I needed to help me discover my strengths and prepare me for my life's journey and I will be eternally grateful.

In an effort to "pay it forward" our family created **The Bragg Family Endowment** in 2002 to provide scholarship assistance to minority students. And I am proud to say that it is still going strong over 13 years later.

We strongly believe that a robust education and exercising your right to vote are the cornerstones of our democracy. And I learned to cherish them both on that faithful day in May.