

Kent State – My Perspective

Three chimes echoed bing, bing, bong, as the announcement followed over the loud speaker box hanging on the wall above the teacher's desk. It was just after lunch when the familiar male voice of our principal calmly informed us that the school was being evacuated and parents were called to pick up their students at the entrance to the playground. Those of us who only lived a few blocks from school were instructed to walk quickly home. Further, the safety patrol was ready at the cross walks and teachers would be there to see that we were heading in the right direction. There was a quiet hush over the room as we each looked around to see our neighbors' faces showing mixed emotions, curiosity, confusion, and fear. Faces surrounded by walls covered with paper, maps, drawings, and lesson material under the florescent lighting that was typical for a sixth-grade elementary classroom. I had a feeling that what had been happening at the university over the last week had something to do with this sudden evacuation.

We all knew from our regular safety drills to gather our things, line up in single file at the doorway to the room and walk through the halls quietly and calmly while taking direction from teachers or any adult who stood ready to guide us to our destinations. The kids waiting for their rides were assembled by the chain-link fence at the playground entrance, each looking for a familiar car to drive up and come to a slow stop. With a tag and release motion from a faculty member, each child hurried to their car and shut the door so the next car in line could move ahead. The entire process seemed orderly and eerily quiet as I moved past the crowd in the direction of my home.

I had about four blocks to walk home. The streets were lined with large oaks and maple-tree canapes and the grass smelled of sweet green in mid Spring. The sidewalks in front of historic homes were cracked and buckled in places where normally our bikes would soar effortlessly as we sped along as fast as our feet could peddle. The final part of my routine journey home took me through a wooded park, a shortcut-blazed dirt path that had been perfectly worn over time from the multitude of steps taken and bike tires screaming over it by neighborhood kids.

When I arrived home, my parents were watching the television and a few of my siblings were starting to call and check in. The phone seemed be ringing off the hook from frantic parents looking for their children who hadn't arrived home yet... "Did we hear from Sallie? Had we seen so and so?", while the TV blasted horrific images that were difficult for me to comprehend. The three major news channels were reporting about my home town, specifically the University campus a few miles away where students had been protesting the US invasion of Cambodia. A barrage of

shots had been fired by the National Guard into the crowd of unarmed students alongside tear gas canisters that were leaving trails of smoke dissipating into foggy patches and masking a chaotic and frenzied scene. Students scattered, running away from the army of soldiers carrying their bayoneted rifles in readied position. This was really happening, and I shook with fear, the pit of my 11-year old stomach anticipating the doom of what might come next, was tearing at my soul. A few dead and several injured, the stories and pictures blasting on TV of the massacre that took place only a couple of hours earlier.

I had been aware of some of the incidents that had taken place prior to that day... The ROTC building had been burned to the ground and I recalled my father complaining that he had some hunting rifles in a locker there and now they were destroyed.

The students had started days earlier in peaceful protest, but it had escalated and became unmanageable with the presence of the National Guard and the burning of the ROTC building. I watched my parents as they darted around me in a most surreal way, nervously talking about the situation with concern and wondering where one or two of my siblings might be since they hadn't heard from them. All of this made me even more uneasy as the telephone rang incessantly with news about people we knew who were associated with the university, their families besieged with anonymous bomb threats. I was so frightened that I thought my entire world was crashing down around me and I worried we wouldn't survive the invasion of the soldiers while at the same time, my parents and other adults were concerned about the students rioting in retaliation. The US president at the time (Nixon) and our Governor (Rhodes) had decided to deploy the Guard in an effort to thwart the demonstrations, exclusive of any communication with the University president or administration.

I was keenly aware of all of this at the time, but I was invisible to my family – a mere child who couldn't possibly understand, for whom no explanation was given, a non-person incapable of emotions or cognitive reasoning. They talked freely around me as though I wasn't there, and yet I heard every word they spoke. I felt appalled and confused by the utterances of the people whom I trusted most for my safety and security. My world was shattering, and we were all in danger and I was hearing things like "Well, they got what they deserved, or What do they expect when they go up against rifles? They're just a bunch of hippies with no respect for authority!" The rants of my parents and their conservative contemporaries, friends at the door, talking over the phone as Dad paced the floor of the brilliantly colored, brightly lit, 70's décor kitchen. Oh, the kitchen with its laminate countertop in gold and white pin-dots housing the stove and hood while it curved in a half circle dividing the food preparation area from the dining area, a large metal-legged table

large enough for eight. And the built-in desk where Mother kept her bills and the rotary phone with the prefix (Orchard 3) which sat on the orange laminate desktop, the vinyl wall paper in repetitive flower print containing these colors plus the Kelly-green of the wall to wall low pile carpet in the kitchen -- all while mother stood silently with her arms crossed shaking her head in agreement.

As the days unfolded, and the news of the dead and wounded students were reported, I reacted incredulously to the 7:00pm curfew and imposed martial law that was now in place. The noise of helicopter rotor blades, the Guard patrolling the town in jeeps and military trucks shouting orders through bullhorns, threatening jail or imprisonment for anyone found outside after curfew. My older siblings complained about these orders, not wanting to be confined to our home, but I was more than happy to be there as my anxiety grew more intense as the events unfolded. I don't remember how long we were under martial law, perhaps a week, but it seemed like an eternity. Nothing was ever the same in my home town in the aftermath of the Kent State shootings and for me, this tragic event at such an impressionable age shaped the trajectory of my life from that point forward.