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By Paula Slimak, '68, MA '71

Almost anyone who has ever visited Kent Campus seems to have a love affair with our black squirrels. It's hard to imagine it all began in 1961 when just 10 squirrels were legally imported from Canada by the University's top groundskeeper. Seeing another new generation of squirrels when I attended the Candlelight Walk for the 40th anniversary of May 4 triggered a fond memory from the 25th observance.

Knowing we would have nearly as many reporters as squirrels on campus for the silver anniversary and there was risk of less-than-peaceful May 4 demonstrations, I had asked God for a sign that everything would be all right. I had done this before for major concerns unrelated to Kent, but this time God brought in a black squirrel to give me His answer.

At barely daybreak on May 4, 1995, as the University's spokesperson at the time, I had gone to the May 4 Memorial early to greet the television crews from morning news shows. When I arrived, I found that some students who objected to the size of the Memorial had outlined the entire perimeter of the larger, initial design footprint ...with toilet tissue. (Funds raised by the University did not allow construction of the original design. Importance of the site of the shootings was acknowledged earlier this year with approval in the National Register of Historic Places.)

I was still alone at the Memorial when my huge, '90s-model cell phone rang. It was a member of my staff, Margaret Garmon, who now teaches communications at the University. She had been to the site even earlier than I and called to ask if we should have the grounds staff remove the tissue. I explained I hated its being there but absolutely would not have it removed. I felt strongly that, like the May 4, 1970 anti-war protest, it was an expression of free speech. The May 4 Memorial always will remind us of that most precious freedom, silenced that day, as it calls us to *Inquire, Learn* and *Reflect*, the words inscribed in granite and in hearts.

The first reporter to arrive near Taylor Hall was Loree Vick, who today heads media relations for Cleveland's University Hospitals Health System, but was then with WJW (now Fox 8). While her cameraman, Chet Roberts, positioned his then-bulky camera gear, a single black squirrel started to make a nest. The squirrel took huge swaths of tissue and scampered up a tree. I watched him come back down empty-pawed, then take more tissue back up the tree. It happened again and again, so many times that I went into Taylor Hall to get a witness. Nona Bowes, who now lives in Georgia, was the assistant to Tim Smith, then interim director of the School of Journalism and Mass Communications. She came out to see this incredible sight, as the focused squirrel ignored observers and continued his mission.

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By news time, there was so little tissue left, it was a nonissue. I was and am sure that squirrel gave me my answer. The day was peaceful. Folk icons Peter, Paul and Mary sang on the Commons and in concert that night. Students and alumni listened to stories and songs about the day one of our most precious freedoms was trampled. Ever since, whenever I am at Taylor Hall, I toss out “thank you” peanuts at the Memorial.

To mark my retirement six years ago, I established a scholarship to honor the memory of those students killed and injured on May 4. It is earmarked for a non-traditional student in Journalism and Mass Communications. Each spring, when that scholarship is presented, I am reminded of the value of free speech and the day when Kent State University focused the conscience of the country, and I remember to restock the peanuts in my trunk.

Biographical Note:

Paula Slimak, BA '68, 'MA '71, served as Executive Director of University Communications from 1993-'97 and in that capacity was the spokesperson for the University at the 25th observance of May 4. In 1998 she received the JMC Alumni Council Special Achievement Award for initiatives at Kent's TV 2. Slimak is a site marker sponsor and acknowledged on the donor wall at the May 4 Center. At the 25th May 4 Commemoration, Peter, Paul and Mary headlined the May 4 weekend events. On Slimak's wall comment, she quotes lyrics from the then popular folk group: "Don't let the light go out, let it shine through our love and our tears."