

A Year Later: Lives of Sirhan Victims Change

Wounds Have Healed but
Tragic Event Leaves
Lasting Imprint on Five

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Sometimes when Elizabeth Evans brushes her hair she forgets, and the bristles saw roughly across the Z-shaped scar at her hairline. The pain is fierce, but brief.

Sometimes she pushes back her bangs and stares at it in her mirror. That way, the Z looks like an S, and then she thinks of the man who put it there.

Ira Goldstein has recurring pains in his left leg, and it goes numb if he walks far. Dancing is out, of course, and even the drive to work causes it to stiffen, so he limps a few minutes after getting out of his car. As he limps along, he thinks of the man who did this to him.

Irwin Stroll has a bum left leg, too. It freezes up on him sometimes when he's walking and he has to stamp it to restore feeling and movement. Once he nearly fell downstairs when it went numb.

Knows When It's Going to Rain

"I can tell you now when it's going to rain," he offers cheerfully. And whenever a rain is brewing, he thinks about the man who turned his leg into a barometer.

William Weisel has a scar a foot long across his stomach. Everytime he takes his clothes off, the scar reminds him of the stranger who inflicted it.

For Paul Schrade, labor union leader and a prime mover in the New Democratic Coalition, the reminders aren't physical ones. To a man urgently committed to social and political action, the months of convalescence are irretrievably gone, and all he needs is a clock to remind him of what must be done, and how little time there is, and how much time he lost—and inevitably, of the man who cost him that time.

All five are thinking of the same

man who, in one way or another, changed not only their lives but the lives of many, many more, in one way or another.

Shortly after midnight on June 5, 1968, Sirhan Bishara Sirhan shot these five. He also fatally wounded Sen. Robert F. Kennedy, moments after Kennedy claimed victory in the California Democratic primary race for the Presidency.

Change by Death Unknown

Probably it will never be known precisely to what degree American life was affected by Robert Kennedy's murder.

But for the five who were wounded with him that night in a crowded pantry of the Ambassador, life will never be quite the same again—perhaps physically, perhaps socially, or politically, or emotionally. Small changes, perhaps, and not necessarily for the worse.

None of their injuries had serious, long-lasting effects beyond the scars of bullets. But beneath the scars each has thought long, serious thoughts about how close they came to death last June, and what they want to do with their second chances.

Weisel, 31, Republican and single,

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a news director for ABC television in Washington, was just doing his job in that cramped pantry last June 5 when he was shot in the stomach, a split second after Kennedy fell to the floor.

The bullet plowed around through the fatty tissue of his left side and lodged near his spine, without hitting any vital organs. But Weisel's profuse bleeding caused one medical aide to remark, after a quick glance, "I don't think this one's going to make it."

Weisel, frightened at the words, almost immobilized by shock and unaware that his wound was relatively slight, told a co-worker in a frightened whisper, "Dave, I think I'm going to die."

But he didn't—recovered quickly in fact. And something was different.

"The assassination gave

me a new outlook," Weisel says. "At first I thought I was dying. Since then, I have had a different outlook on life—live now, enjoy now, sort of. I was very lucky in a lot of ways, and I've tried to hang onto a lucky outlook on life. Maybe the things I'm doing now are the result of some fate I was unaware of."

Aided Socially

Weisel doesn't recall seeing Sirhan that night, but his chance involvement in the tiny Palestinian Arab's moment of glory gave an ironic lift to his own social standing, Weisel finds.

"I'm always introduced now as the person shot with Kennedy—especially among news people," Weisel says. "It's a strange feeling. I have never been in the public eye before, I'm used to being behind the news. But socially, it's kind of improved things. People who wouldn't even glance my way before now speak, and all of a sudden I'm very popular."

Weisel also finds himself popular with legions of letter writers—some old high school and college friends, even a long lost relative in Germany, but mostly people who see religious significance in his narrow escape.

"I have a box full of letters," he says. "from, let's say, strongly religiously inclined people who explained why I was saved while Kennedy died. I have no particular religious inclinations, myself, but to a large number of people, it's the center of their life. A lot of the letters are personal, some of them quite nice. When you're sitting home alone quietly, it can sort of get to you."

Fear Develops

And something else got to Weisel that night he was shot: fear.

He didn't recognize it as a new companion until five months later. "It was the election weekend in November," he recalls. "I

do ABC's 'Issues and Answers' program, and I went to Atlanta to get Gov. George Wallace on the show. There was a big crowd and it kind of bothered me. And that night, I tried to keep away from Wallace—not get too close. But at one point, the crowd just opened up and he was walking toward me without any Secret Service men around him.

"In the middle of this crowd, we were alone, and he reached out for my hand and said, 'Hello, I'm George Wallace.' My heart just sank."

To Elizabeth Evans, the scalp wound she suffered last June 5 was her second brush with death since an auto accident nearly killed her in 1964.

Both events served not so much to change her as to make her more intensely herself, she believes.

Mrs. Evans is blonde, 43, pretty in a Vera Ellen sort of way, and will become a grandmother this summer.

Last summer she was an activist, outspoken McCarthy Democrat, who went to the Ambassador on election night "because

I've always liked to be where the action is."

Her past experience as a volunteer campaign worker had taught her how to get close to the center of activity, so after Kennedy claimed victory that night, "I got close to him and just hung in there to watch"—right into the pantry.

"At first I didn't even realize I'd been shot," she recalls. "I remember being annoyed at some woman who kept shrieking and shrieking and hadn't even been hit, and I remember losing one shoe in the scramble. Blood was running into my eyes and I could hardly see, but I kept grabbing for the shoe on the floor and everytime I'd get close, someone would kick it away again."

At the hospital later, bleeding heavily but not seriously hurt, she brushed aside medical treatment for a while, telling the orderlies pert-

ly: "Never mind me, I'm all right. Just look after the senator."

Her involvement has caused no particular shift in her political thinking, she explains, "because I've always been active in Democratic politics anyway."

Arguments Started

But socially, she says, "it's been sort of a pain in the neck, really. Not among my friends, because when they heard I'd been involved they just figured that was Elizabeth for you and they know me well enough not to keep bringing it up all the time."

"But with people I'd be meeting for the first time, someone might introduce me as the woman who got shot, and then I'd find myself in terrible arguments with these strangers. You know, they'd say things like, 'Why go through this long, drawn-out trial, everyone knows he's guilty,' or that Sirhan should be executed right away."

"Sometimes I'd try to hold my tongue for a while, but I can take just so much of that point of view and I'd have to sound off. I'd explain that everybody is entitled to a full, fair trial, and I have never believed in a death penalty. So I'd wind up defend-



Elizabeth Evans
Times photo

ing Sirhan and getting

into some really hair-raising arguments.

"The thing is, I hate what Sirhan did, but I don't hate him, and I always wind up defending his right to a fair trial, when strangers expect me to do just the opposite."

Emotional Reaction

The most serious effect of the shooting on Mrs. Evans was an emotional one, which accelerated a decision that began to take shape after her near-fatal accident in 1964.

Then, and more intensely after last June 5, she began to feel that her life, twice reprieved, had been going nowhere. She felt that if she could make the rest of her own life happier and more productive, another person's could be, too.

By mutual decision, the Evanses are being divorced.

For Ira Goldstein, 20, an electronics company employe of Encino, the killing of Kennedy has left him disillusioned with the American political process, although he thinks the disillusionment may be only temporary.

"It changed my thinking about politics," he says today, "from good to bad. If I was ever considering running for office to help people, now I probably wouldn't. I think there are enough sick people walking around to ruin it for the others. They can com-

pletely destroy your efforts for anything good.

"Right now I don't seem to care anymore. It's probably something that will pass but I'm sort of disgusted with the whole thing now."

But for Irwin Stroll, 18, of Los Angeles, it's had an opposite effect. Stroll, an art student at Valley Junior College and a Kennedy volunteer worker, says today, "I was kind of out of it after the assassination. People asked me to work later for Humphrey and Cranston and Bradley, and

I was for them, in my own mind, but I just couldn't bring myself to go back to work."

But now he's back in harness, he says, working for the Los Angeles County Democratic Central Committee and helping set up the first annual Kennedy Commemorative Dinner, "A Night in Camelot."

Stroll says that in the

last year "I've become more aware of the problems the senator was trying to explain. I'm waking up to the fact that you have to change the world because no one else is going to do it. He's gone, but we have to carry on what he was trying to do, which is what I'm going to do for the rest of my life."

"Being close to the sena-

tor and knowing him so well makes me want to fulfill his dreams of helping people."

In some ways it was Paul Schrade who lost the most in the shooting last year. He was the most seriously injured, suffering a depressed skull fracture and a lacerated vein.

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His recovery took nearly six months.

But for Schrade, 44, western regional director of the United Auto Workers, the worst injury was personal. Alone of the five, he was a close personal friend of Kennedy.

"The worst thing about the assassination was losing Bob," says Schrade. "The country was heading for disaster under President Johnson and we needed a sharp change."

But in losing Robert Kennedy, Schrade found others. "I've got to know Ted," he says. "I didn't before. My association with the family wasn't close, just with Bob, and

I'd never met Ethel before that night. I've seen her a couple times since, so that relationship is developing."

Something that is developing even more is Schrade's work in Democratic politics. "The assassination intensified my commitment," he says, adding that much of his time now is devoted to the more radical liberal causes of the Democratic Coalition.

One of his chief concerns is support for the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee of Cesar Chavez, leader of striking workers in California's vineyards and Texas' Rio Grande Valley.

Schrade says he has felt no physical effects of his

injury for at least six months, but an emotional effect that lingers is the concern people showed for him when he was recovering.

"People said things during that period that they wouldn't have said earlier," he says, "and this strengthened me and made the recovery easier. And it made me much surer of my friends as well as myself."

Although "it's painful for me to go over and over

it again," Schrade admits that his involvement "has made me better known around the whole country as a result. In a way, it's really established me in the radical liberal group in the Democratic Party."

Of the five, only Weisel approves the death penalty that was meted out last month to Sirhan, who is now on Death Row in San Quentin awaiting the gas chamber.

"I thought it was quite fair," he says. "I'm one of



Paul Schrade



Irwin Stroll

Times photos

the few people who agree with capital punishment, although I expect California to abolish it. But it's a symbol to all of us of cause and effect. If you do something like this, you should be ready for the punishment."

For varying reasons, the others disagree. All say they basically disapprove of the death penalty on principle. For Goldstein, life imprisonment would be "a far better punishment for him. He should have to think about what he's done."

For Schrade, execution of Sirhan would be "inhuman and unnecessary," and a violation of the beliefs of Sirhan's own victim—Kennedy.

Time passes and the headlines get smaller, except for an occasional legal development, or, like today, an anniversary.

But often throughout the year, each of the five pauses to think a moment, and the terror and tumult of that night is freshly recalled in different ways.

One of the most chilling moments occurred to Weisel. "I was in Honolulu then," he recalls, "doing a program on the recovery of Apollo 8 in the Pacific. I was out on the beach one day in a dune buggy, just riding up and down and enjoying myself. It was Jan. 1, and on the radio they played a recap of the year's biggest events. Somewhere along the way they played a tape made at the time of the shooting in the pantry. I'd never heard it before, and it stopped me cold. The biggest cold chill I ever had went up my back . . . I was there, and it could have been the end. Instead it was just the beginning."