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Dedication, slide show open RFK Archives

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DARTMOUTH — Alyson Wihry was a year old and Deanna Perry was 2 when Robert F. Kennedy was killed by Sirhan B. Sirhan at Los Angeles' Ambassador Hotel.

The SMU seniors can't remember how, on June 5, 1968, Mr. Kennedy, stood at the podium and flashed a "V" for victory. They can't remember how Mr. Kennedy, fighting to be heard over a cheering throng, proclaimed "On to Chicago. Let's win there!"

They can't remember how the joyous celebration that followed Mr. Kennedy's win in the California presidential primary dissolved into a scene of horror — shots ringing out "like a stream of Chinese firecrackers."

They can't remember the awful image of a mortally wounded Kennedy lying on the hotel kitchen floor as anguished cries exploded around him.

On Wednesday, as Southeastern Massachusetts University formally dedicated the RFK Assassination Archives — the only collection of its kind — political science majors Ms. Wihry and Ms. Perry helped others relive what they themselves are too young to recall.

As a prelude to the dedication, they presented a slide show on the assassination. To compile it, they used photographs, audiotapes and documents from the archives' vast holdings.

Their program visibly moved an older audience still healing from a memory now 20 years old.

"I was living in California at the time and this brought back the anger, the disappointment, the frustration and the confusion," said SMU President John R. Brazil, 42, among those who watched the slide show. "But it also reminded me of part of the Kennedy tradition: opening the world of knowledge to everyone."

Dr. Brazil said that, on many levels, is what the archives can accomplish, and much of the credit for their existence goes to "the man behind them," SMU political science professor Philip H. Melanson.

Since 1984, Dr. Melanson, an expert on assassinations, has waged an unrelenting battle to gain the release of all information pertaining to the assassination. "Four years ago, 95 percent of the files were

sealed. The resistance to disclosure was intense," he said. "Today, 85 percent of the records on this case are publicly available. The rest is sure to follow."

Dr. Melanson could speak those words with confidence. On Tuesday, the California Secretary of State's office had released the 50,000-page Los Angeles Police Department report on the RFK assassination, the case's primary investigative files. Dr. Melanson has been among those in the forefront of the longtime fight to gain their release.

"For the archives to open and the (police) documents to be released a day apart is a little bit mind-boggling," he said. "But it feels fantastic."

Indeed, for Dr. Melanson and others who champion the public's right to know, the archives, on the fourth floor of the SMU library, stand as a symbol of the cause.

Ms. Wihry of Haverhill and Ms. Perry of Martha's Vineyard, who became research assistants to Dr. Melanson after taking his courses, said they have been stunned by how the case was handled and how long information has been withheld. Access to primary sources has been an eye-opening experience, they said.

Dr. Brazil said the existence of the archives means that more and more students can benefit from "discovering things for themselves" instead of relying on what they are told or what they read in texts.

Even as the archive doors swung officially open for the first time, archivist Helen Koss was encouraging visitors to return and take a closer look at what is there.

Robert J. Gay, an assistant principal at Whitman-Hanson Regional High School, predicted that the interest is there and the archives will see plenty of use. Nine years ago, Mr. Gay, then a teacher, now an assistant principal, began offering a course on assassinations to juniors and seniors. The course has since become one of the school's most popular, with two sections each semester, he said.

Brian Wright, a senior from Whitman, is among those enrolled. And, Wednesday, in the middle of April school vacation, Brian, with Mr. Gay, was at SMU to learn more about an assassination that occurred before he was born.