



T.R. Harrington (left) admires JFK; Nuria Carcedo of Spain tells what she knows of Kennedy.

Today's youngsters try to understand Kennedy

By Suzanne Gordon
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To today's high school students, the late President John F. Kennedy is a subject for history books: founder of the Peace Corps, defuser of the Cuban Missile Crisis, victim of assassination.

But of all the nation's 39 former presidents, this young, tall, handsome, wealthy, Harvard-educated man is the one today's students want to know most about.

"People worshiped him because of the person and not his politics," said Charles Clark, a student at Radnor High School. "He was young and had a pretty wife. His record was not that great."

Another Radnor student said, no, it was Kennedy's politics that make him fascinating.

"There was the Cuban Missile Cri-

sis, the assassination and the effect he had on the country as a whole," said T.R. Harrington. "Those are the big reasons why we remember him. We heard reports about things he had done, like he started the Peace Corps."

Harrington conceded, however: "We also heard about his reputation for fooling around. . . . He was a lot like Gary Hart, a good person with bad ethics."

On the eve of the 25th anniversary of Kennedy's assassination on Nov. 22, 1963, students enrolled in contemporary American studies at Radnor are reflecting on the former president, who was 46 when he took office.

Guided by teacher Ken Sklar, who was in a high school history class himself when he heard the shocking news of Kennedy's death, the students will spend six weeks studying

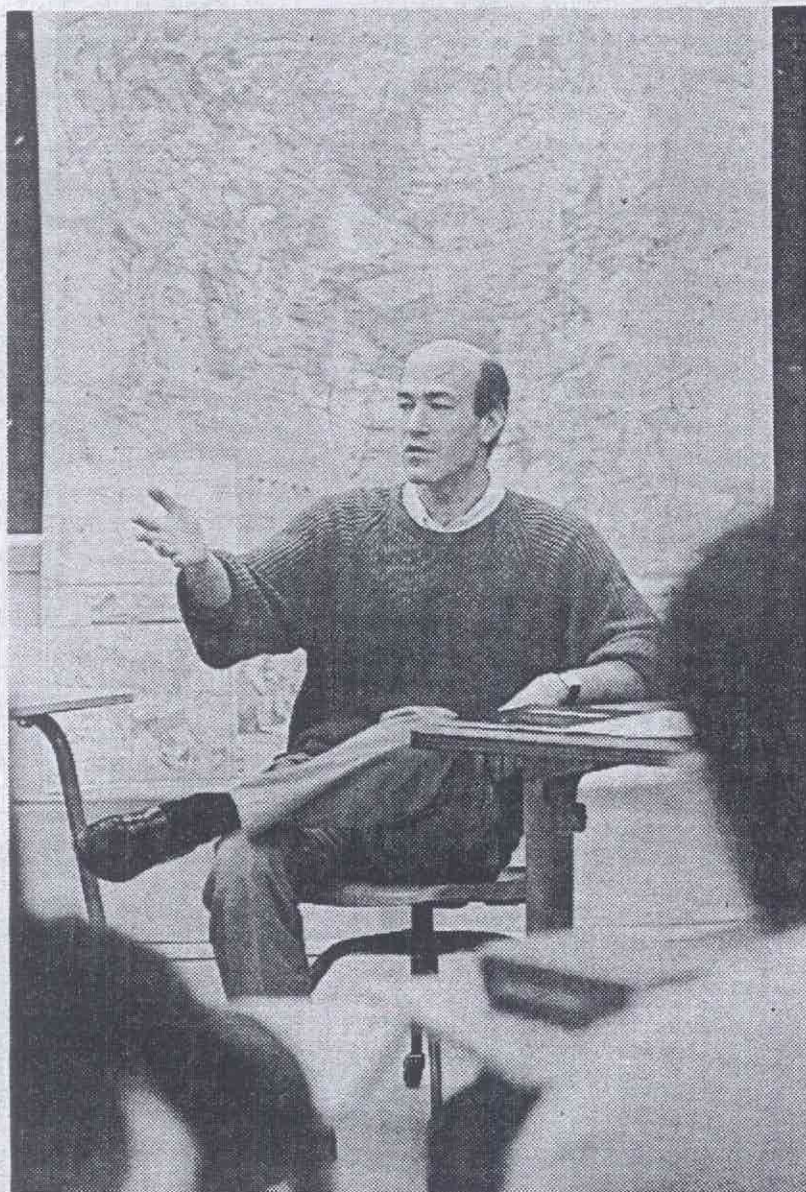
the Kennedy era later this year. That will include a month looking at the civil rights movement under Presidents Dwight D. Eisenhower, Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson.

About 100 juniors and seniors study contemporary history in four sections of Sklar's course, one of the most popular electives for upper-classmen at Radnor High. It has been offered since 1981.

To the students, Kennedy lived in a time long ago when their parents and other people idolized presidents in a way these youngsters have never experienced.

Sklar said his teaching would focus on Kennedy's record on civil rights, a part of his presidency that is often overlooked.

"Kennedy ultimately handled the civil rights issue well, and he had no inclination to handle it," Sklar said.



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Ken Sklar will lead class in study of Kennedy and civil rights era.

Because he was only president three years, Sklar said, "Kennedy ... was not really able to establish his own agenda."

The course also will study Kennedy's election, his life, his image, his foreign and domestic policies.

"The purpose is to analyze the pres-

idency to take out the myth," he said.

To teach Kennedy, Sklar uses several books, including *Eyes on the Prize* by Juan Williams and *The Glory and the Dream* by William Manchester.

He also provides students with (See JFK on Page 24)

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copies of newspaper articles analyzing the Kennedy years, and shows movies — from actual film footage of Kennedy to full-length feature films about his era.

Later this year, the classes will visit Washington and the Kennedy grave in Arlington National Cemetery.

The students have been preparing for the unit by watching the special TV programs aired recently about the late president.

The students' chief impression was that Kennedy's attraction was mostly his image, and that the homage paid to him by an older generation is superficial. But at least one student said that he did not know enough about the slain president's record.

"I want to know what happened before he was president," said Peter Niedland. "I have no clear idea of what he did."

"It's more of an idealistic image," said Jennifer Hopp. "To me, he's more of a mystery. My mom and people of her age group really looked up to him."

Only a few students had talked to their parents about what they were doing when Kennedy was shot.

Hopp said her mother was teaching elementary school and that she — and her students — began to cry. Another student said her mother, who was a college student at the time, made a trip to Washington, D.C., and stood in a long line to pay homage at Kennedy's catafalque.

The students also talked about the assassination of Robert Kennedy, who was gunned down on the presidential primary campaign trail on June 5, 1968, five years after the death of his brother.

The students said they didn't worship heroes quite the same way their parents did.

But Robert Bernard, a student from New York who is attending Radnor High this year, said he saw the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. as a hero because he had studied him extensively in his prior school.

Another student said she admired Mother Teresa.

Said Sklar: "The notion of heroes is a symbol of innocence. We lost our innocence with the [Kennedy] assassination, Vietnam and Watergate."

"I was not cynical about the presidency," Sklar said of his youth. "The Vietnam War was happening, and I started to get cynical."

The end of the Kennedy era was a turning point in the public's attitude, he said.

"Not only was Kennedy assassinated," Sklar said, "but the image of the future and the image of the '50s were also assassinated."