

We are men and women now, but we still do not fully understand the events that swept us up in emotions when we were students at Kent State University in 1970. Our lives were touched then by the last tragic chapter of domestic strife in the Vietnam era. The real tragedy, of course, is that the epilogue has still been left unresolved.

In the last five years, many of us involved in that epoch of American history have scattered to various parts of the country, and with the physical distance we have buried the shootings deep in the subconscious. Now the issue is being raised again.

Recently a friend sent clippings from an Ohio newspaper describing the \$46 million damage suit brought by the nine wounded students and the parents of the dead.

The trial in Cleveland has united some of my former acquaintances. They have come to tell their story again, in court. I can hear the exasperation and bitterness in their voices as once again they are asked to explain—because they are doubted—what they so firmly believe.

I still find it an impossible subject to discuss. When asked to describe that day, my speech runs fast and my voice sounds unnatural. The apparent nervousness is followed by wonder: What is it that so suddenly disrupts my usually placid manner?

The rest of the time I am reticent, and like many of my friends neither think about the event nor talk about it unless asked. It has become a collective dark secret, and no one is eager to volunteer new information.

As eyewitnesses, we all hold strong convictions about what actually happened at Kent. At first we stated our opinion as fact to curious relatives and friends. Usually, they were incredulous. Inevitably, sharp comments followed and often the discussion would degenerate into a bitter argument. The estrangement of parents and children, friends and

Kent Recalled

By Allen F. Richardson

lovers wearied us, and we grew sick of the tension in our homes.

To have been at Kent State that day — I was a sophomore — was to have received for life some sort of peculiar damnation. For six years we have carried the onus with us, while seeking an understanding ear. At last it may have come. The nature of this civil suit lends itself to more open, detailed testimony than did the previous grand juries.

One of those called back to Ohio for the trial is Joe Lewis.

I have not seen Lewis in several years. Although we were friends for well over a year, I have no desire to revive the contact. Ours was a strange camaraderie, much like uncommunicative friendships from World War II.

Perhaps someday Lewis and I will sit down and talk. But not now. The one subject that so unites us would color and depress our conversation.

It is a pity that we cannot talk like old school chums, but I think about Lewis often. I worry about him. He is a survivor of those bullets, but unlike me, he was struck by two of them. He has been a principal witness in all the investigations that followed. I have remained merely an observer.

I met Lewis in 1971. We lived in the same apartment house in Kent. In the first several months of our friendship I thought I knew him quite well. I never asked him about



the slight limp. The tee-shirt he wore concealed the scar from a two-inch wound in his back.

I was unaware of his role in the tragedy until I ran across an old magazine article that mentioned his name. My memory began to revive phrases from press accounts of the time, about a student who was still on the critical list the day the others were buried.

I did not bring up my discovery for days. Finally, as a reporter for the campus newspaper, I asked Lewis for an interview. He seemed reluctant, but accepted.

I thought it would be an awkward and frustrating session, something that would change our friendship.

But Lewis was determined to answer my questions. The unassuming, seemingly apolitical fellow I casually knew articulated his ideas about violence and death in a measured, facile manner that swept away my former perceptions in an instant.

He refused to be associated with the usual student groups. He stood in front of the National Guard rifles to protest their presence. He did not throw rocks, it was a useless and sophomoric expression. He did give a gesture of defiance with his middle finger. The guardsman who allegedly shot him remembered that statement. Lewis has met and talked with him several times.

Now, when I read the clippings and think back over the last five years, I think most of Joe Lewis and I wonder if he is well. Perhaps justice will reassert itself and the parents of the dead, and the wounded will win their case.

But for me and many of my old friends, it will be a paradoxical victory—much like Richard Nixon's resignation was welcomed but was anticlimactic for a nation wearied by the endless disclosures of corruption. We can stand just so many assaults. I hope this is the last one.

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