

Fifty Years Later

Russ Miller, 4/23/20

Fifty years ago, my brother, Jeff, was twenty and I was twenty-three. At times, fifty years seems like forever. At other times, it seems like yesterday.

With the 50th anniversary of the Kent shootings upon us, the university has given me the chance to say something, no rules, whatever I think may be relevant. That's not as easy as one might think; my mind is running in many directions.

First things first, my family will be eternally grateful to the University for all it has done over the years to preserve the legacy of Bill, Allison, Sandy, my brother and all those who were wounded that day.

Before addressing the issues of today, I think I'll take this opportunity to talk a bit about Jeff and who he was. As a kid, growing up on the streets of the Bronx, he was small and vulnerable. As the older brother, it was my job to pick him up when he was being picked on by the big kids. We were very close.

Jeff was very bright; he skipped a grade in elementary school. I often wonder who he would have become? What field would he have pursued? What kind of dad would he have been? What sort of uncle would he have become for my kids and grandkids? How different would our lives be today with a whole other side of the family?

When he was 16, he came out to stay with me for a week at my school, Michigan State University. At that time, he just wanted to follow in my footsteps. God only knows why; my footsteps were not that big. He stayed at my fraternity house and earned the title "Junior Jew". That persona of Jeff lasted for quite a while and he went on to attend Michigan State for two years though our tenures only overlapped for the Fall of 1968. He even joined my fraternity, but that was after I had graduated. He played the drums, I don't honestly know how well, and was a disc jockey on a campus radio station. He was "Short Mort". Jeff was a groupie of sorts, attending Sly and the Family Stone concerts around the country. And it is remarkable how, over the many years, we continue to learn new details about Jeff from the people he was close to at that time. In a very real way, those people have become extended members of our family.

By the Fall of 1969, the war was heating up and Jeff was finding himself; his life required change. He spent many weekends down at Kent before transferring there for the semester starting in January.

Jeff was very idealistic about the political issues of the day. Back then, the overriding issue was Vietnam. We would talk often. I had recently graduated from college, was living in New Jersey and was focused on my career. I was against the war but was not ready to jeopardize my future. I gave the government credit for knowing more than I about that war and our rationale for being involved. If drafted, I would go. Jeff, on the other hand, was passionately against it, promising me he would go to Canada if he were to be called.

By that time, our communication was mostly by phone. He would lovingly accuse me of being a capitalist (not a compliment). Three years was a huge difference back then. American involvement in Asia was in its infancy when I attended school; by 1970, the world was a different place. I was exempt from the draft while at MSU and remained a protected species in 1969 through early 1970 because I was working as an engineer for a medical device company. That exemption disappeared by the Spring of 1970 as demand for twenty-somethings exceeded supply. I sweated through the draft lottery that summer. Fortunately, my number didn't come up.

The last time I saw Jeff was during Spring Break. He came home to Long Island, I was living in Jersey and we double dated at a club in lower Manhattan. That was a really nice evening!

May 4 was too painful to discuss, so I'll skip that day.

Two nights later, word of my connection with Jeff got out and I found myself talking to a throng of hundreds on the Fairleigh Dickinson University campus (I was attending classes at night, working on my MBA). Then, a day later, Ted Kennedy's office invited me to fly down to a rally, that weekend, in DC. Very surrealistic meeting folks like Senator Kennedy, Oregon Senator, Mark Hatfield and Mrs. Martin Luther King.

Then, I fly back to my mom's in NYC, I get off the bus and see this stretch limo parked in front of her apartment. The entire neighborhood was outside, sitting on the steps. Something was going on. I knocked on the door, walked in and found my mom sitting in the living room with Nelson Rockefeller, the Governor of NY and Louis Lefkowitz, the Attorney General for NY State. For the next three hours, the four of us just chatted. The Governor was all ears about my experience in DC and he shared his own loss, his son had died of an overdose. That explained to me why the drug laws in NY were so punitive, even for marijuana possession.

That summer went by in a flash. I was not a natural activist. I was not even sure that the war was wrong; that came later for me. Looking back, I was so naïve.

My most embarrassing moment came a few weeks later. I was working for Beckton-Dickinson, attending school at Fairleigh Dickinson University and Fairleigh Dickinson, himself was a State Senator in New Jersey. He somehow heard of my existence and invited me up to "The Tower" to chat. By then, the anti-war movement saw me as a potential tool for the cause. So, against my better instincts, I used the moment to request a serious donation from Mr. Dickinson. What an awkward moment. He didn't comply with my request, but, fortunately, he was gracious enough to let me keep my job 😊

Over the next many years, my mom, Elaine Holstein, was the face of my family. I am so proud of her. She was smart, articulate and was willing to speak to a country which came to embrace the Kent State shootings as a moment which rightfully deserved its place in history, a turning point in the war. Thinking of all the hate mail she had to deal with, I remain amazed at her strength, especially during those early years.

I never set foot on the Kent campus until 1976. That year, I took a job in Los Angeles. My wife, Marlene and I drove across country with our son. Somewhere I have a picture of three-year old Jeff standing next to the monument for his uncle out by the parking lot.

For many years, I would attend the Kent anniversary events and sit on the lawn, semi-invisible, watching as my mom spoke. About ten years ago, we agreed that I would take over the role as family spokesman. More recently, my son became eager to contribute and we then had three generations involved.

In 2010, the National Register of Historic Places added the site to the list of places worthy of preservation. Then, in 2012, I remember the launch of the Visitor Center. What a powerful place that is! I think of the May 4th Task Force, each year replenished with fresh new faces, students eager to wrap their arms around this project. Without their amazing efforts, reinforced by the University, May 4 might have just faded away into history.

In 2018, mom decided to participate in the 48th memorial. She was going to be the guest of honor. Unfortunately, only weeks before the anniversary, she became too sick to travel. Consequently, my son Jeff represented the family for that traumatic anniversary while I stayed home with her. My mom passed later that month at age 96.

In 2019, KSU presented my family with a huge gift. They advised that they wanted to assemble tributes to Allison, Sandy, Bill and Jeff individually. What a labor of love to gather possessions of Jeff's for this exhibit! I will never forget the day I sifted through all of his 33 rpm albums, trying to whittle the list down to songs I knew he loved, then my trip to Ohio to attend the launch of Jeff's exhibit. This exhibit has offered a new vehicle to introduce people to Jeff. He was just a regular kid attending KSU, just like thousands who attend today. He had dreams, he was concerned about his country's future, and he felt compelled to stand up for what he knew was right.

Now we have the 50th anniversary of that awful day in 1970.

Stepping back, I see May 4 as an opportunity for us to apply lessons learned to the events of today. Between navigating through a pandemic crisis and a presidential campaign taking on daunting issues like healthcare, immigration, climate change and gun rights, reflection on that time, 50 years ago, illustrates the power that we have if we band together and use our collective voice.

Back in January, 2017, following the Inauguration, I drove down to Washington to attend the Women's March. For me, that was a very important moment. But, if the last three years have taught me anything, it is that it takes more than one march to make a difference. We have six months to figure out in which direction our country should head. For the sake of our kids and grandkids, we must not squander this opportunity.

Russ Miller (speaking for my brother, Jeff, my mom & my kids, Jeff and Jamie)