

Community Comment
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JFK plus fifty

Today, the 22nd of November, is the anniversary of the assassination of an American President. It has been fifty years which is hard to believe. Most of us who were at least out of childhood when it happened can remember exactly where ~~they~~^{we} were when ~~they~~^{we} heard the news.

I was a junior in high school in Whittier, California. I was in a math class and the intercom came to life. The Principal calmly told us that there was news from Dallas, Texas that President Kennedy had been shot. At that time, they didn't know the extent of his injuries and would have more news when it was available. A few minutes later, with a very somber and cracking voice, the Principal told us that the President had died. Our math teacher, a man who looked like a former football player, sat at his desk, put his head down on his arm and wept. We were told not to come back after lunch.

This was shocking, jarring news. We wondered who else was injured? Was Vice President Johnson alright? Would he become President? Was this the act of some group acting just against the President? Was this an assault on our country? What about Jackie and those two young children? Would we be OK? So many questions about so many things; but there was also real grief.

I've tried to explain the experience to my daughters and I find I have to put things into perspective. My family was not very political. My father was deaf and worked in a small machine shop. Talking with him was difficult. My Mother had just been through major surgery for cancer and wasn't expected to live much longer. My brother was away at college and very non political. But in our house, the three of us watched Kennedy speak any time he was on television. For some reason, this young, rich family man connected with us. He spoke eloquently of fairness and vision. He seemed vital and we all knew about his bravery during the war. We talked about his ideas and how he thought the country should go. This was a new experience for us. His death was felt deeply.

The country had just been through the Cuban Missile Crisis. For those of you who don't know about this, the perception was that the world barely escaped a nuclear war. President Kennedy had been firm and tough with the Soviet Union and had won. No shots were fired, no blood was shed and the sense of relief was great. He did this; this young President. And now we were going to the moon. He made us believe we could do this. In southern California, the Universities and defense contractors were working on this goal. We felt it was real and by 1969, it was. I was sorry he wasn't here to see it.

And then there was Television. Walter Cronkite was the news anchor at CBS. News was real in those days and in grainy black and white. Cronkite told us of the death of the President. We watched without commercials Oswald getting shot on TV. We watched the funeral and a little boy's salute to his Father's flag draped coffin.

It changed us and he inspired me to serve in government. Fifty years ago.

This has been Sam Pennisi for community comment.