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Illinois Wesleyan Professors Reflect on the Kennedy Assassination 40 Years Later

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Illinois Wesleyan Professors Reflect on the Kennedy Assassination 40 Years Later

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. — Before there was Sept. 11, 2001, there was Nov. 22, 1963, a date forever etched in the memory of a generation.

Like so many others who watched and listened as those events in Dallas unfolded, four Illinois Wesleyan professors remember where they were and what they were doing when it was announced that John Fitzgerald Kennedy, the 35th president of the United States, had been shot and killed. In their own words, those professors not only reflect on that day, but they also share their views of the impact that Kennedy's assassination had on them and the world.

- *Where were you when you heard that President Kennedy had been shot?*

Paul Bushnell, professor of history: "I was in my car driving to the campus of the university where I taught in Arkansas, and a student came running out into the street waving his arms to tell me that JFK had been assassinated. It was unbelievably shocking news."

Teodora Amoloza, professor of sociology/co-director of International Studies: "I was in the Philippines—it was already November 23 there. I was sweeping the yard (and) my father stuck his head out of the window and told me in an alarmed voice 'Teddy, President Kennedy was assassinated!' The fact that I do remember these details even after 40 years means something."

Thomas Griffiths, acting dean of the faculty/The Earl H. and Marion A. Beling Professor of Natural Science: "I was in a choir rehearsal at my junior high school in Monmouth, Maine. Bill Fairchild, who was late to the rehearsal, burst into the room and announced that the President had been shot. He was such a renowned practical joker, nobody believed him at first. I was rather astonished to find, after leaving the rehearsal, that the entire school was gathered around the television set in the eighth grade classroom, watching the events unfold."

Pamela Muirhead, associate professor of English: "A rumor that the President had been shot made its way around the lab tables in my high school advanced biology class. A classmate, who had been listening to a transistor radio in the hall between classes, started the talk. Our teacher didn't seem shocked when we asked if the rumor were true. Her response surprised me, even though it was in keeping with her no-nonsense demeanor — 'There's nothing we can do. Go back to work.' We didn't learn of his death for certain until later in the day."

- *What did the President's assassination mean to you?*

Bushnell: "It was just stunning that anyone would assassinate the President of the United States. It seemed so strange. There was just a totally empty feeling; it gave such a blow to the country. Just appalling."

MORE

FIRST ADD: THE KENNEDY ASSASSINATION 40 YEARS LATER

Amoloza: I was only 12 years old then and was not very sophisticated in my thinking, but I thought that if my father was alarmed by the event, it must be pretty important. From then on, we kept our ears glued to our one and only radio for any further news. I guess that's when I started paying more attention to national and international news."

Griffiths: "I was shocked and saddened. It affected my entire generation profoundly, I believe. We were a sadder, more cynical group as a result of that event."

Muirhead: "The fact of JFK's assassination was horrifying, unsettling; the televised coverage surreal. I don't know what was more disturbing, seeing the adults close to me cry or watching newscasters break down on the air. At that time, I also was becoming more attuned to the issues surrounding the Civil Rights Movement and to national politics in general, thanks to some excellent high school history teachers and activist Methodist Youth Fellowship leaders. These influences and JFK's and Bobby Kennedy's deaths accelerated my political and social education."

• *Over the years, has your perspective of the event and its impact on history changed?*

Bushnell: "Historical perspective does clarify some things, but it doesn't make things easier to accept. Usually, during the Civil Rights Movement people who were assassinated were black, and here it went right to the top of the white hierarchy. In the middle of the Civil Rights Movement we didn't need the chaos of a presidential assassination."

Amoloza: "I got very interested in the Kennedys since then and remember reading *Profiles in Courage*, I think, after that. From then on, I followed the Kennedys and felt very bad, too, when Robert Kennedy was assassinated. We had a very popular radio commentator in the Philippines at the time, Rafael Yabut. He began his daily morning program with a quote from Kennedy's inaugural address, 'Ask not what your country can do for you but ask what you can do for your country.' Of course later on, we learned more about Cuba and the Bay of Pigs, then Marilyn Monroe, etc., so my 'hero worship' of Jack Kennedy has diminished since then."

Griffiths: "I still feel the same way about the event itself. I understand now that it froze President Kennedy in time as a dynamic, heroic young visionary leader. That might not have happened had he lived out his possible two terms as President. I look back on the assassination as the first in a long string of events (Vietnam, Watergate, Bobby Kennedy's and Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassinations, etc.) that embittered our generation."

Muirhead: "I'm not a JFK conspiracy-theory junkie, but I continue to read analyses of the impact of the Kennedy years. The echo of 'Ask not what your country can do for you' was strong enough seven years after JFK's death to propel me into the Peace Corps Service in Sri Lanka. It resonates still."

• *Has any other world or national event since that time given you the same feelings?*

Bushnell: "The other assassinations—Martin Luther King, Jr., Bobby Kennedy, Malcolm X—piled on top of the JFK assassination had a tremendously disheartening effect. I suppose the closest thing in our generation is 9/11. For this generation, 9/11 will probably be the measure of all comparison regarding all other similar events."

MORE

SECOND ADD: THE KENNEDY ASSASSINATION 40 YEARS LATER

Amoloza: "Oh yes, September 11, 2001! I think this event changed the course of world history more than JFK's assassination."

Griffiths: "Not exactly the same, though the World Trade Center bombings, the Challenger disaster, the Bhopal tragedy in India, and other similar events have brought similar feelings, from time to time."

Muirhead: "Martin Luther King, Jr.'s death was more awful. I met him when he spoke at Illinois Wesleyan, and my husband and I marched with him in Chicago. Like many others, I'd spent years thinking that King would be killed, and yet, his death was a shock. The world fell apart. I didn't feel lost when JFK died."

To discuss these comments or interview any of the Illinois Wesleyan faculty members on Kennedy's assassination, contact Jeffery G. Hanna or Sherry Wallace at 309/556-3181.