

UW Oshkosh faculty, staff share memories of JFK assassination 50 years ago

by News Bureau - Friday, November 22, 2013

<http://www.uwosh.edu/today/30482/uw-oshkosh-faculty-staff-share-memories-of-jfk-assassination-50-years-ago/>

James Paulson, an 8th grade student at the time, was on his way to the orthodontist in Washington D.C. and witnessed the emotional fallout in the nation's Capital.

Mary Zwicke was anticipating her 9th birthday party that Saturday, but, as the nation mourned, she found her family in no mood to celebrate.

Al Hartman was in a college math class, and he remembers the growing hubbub interrupting his professor's teaching.

They are just a few reflections from University of Wisconsin Oshkosh community members who remember the day President John F. Kennedy was assassinated: November 22, 1963.

Fifty years to the day of the tragic and historic developments, we share a few of our faculty and staff memories of what would instantly become one of the United States most infamous and unforgettable events.

Cynthia Huebschen, Collection Evaluation Librarian

“My main recollection of November 22, 1963 is after the fact. I was five years old. What I remember is rocking on my rocking-horse in the living-room while the TV was on continually and feeling uncertain as to exactly why everyone was crying. Some terrible thing had happened in the world outside. I guess I realized that someone important had died, but I didn't get the concept of ‘President.’ Because I always noticed horses, my parents explained to me that the black horse in the procession was Blackjack, President Kennedy's horse, and the boots placed backwards in the stirrups meant that the horse's rider had died. This actually put the events more in context for me.”

Thomas G. Lammers, Ph.D., Department of Biology and Microbiology

“I was eight years old and in the third grade in a small Catholic school. Early in the afternoon, the nun who was the principal came to the classroom door. She looked very upset. In fact, she looked as though she'd been crying! That was inconceivable! Grown-ups didn't cry, especially nuns! She called our teacher, Mrs. Gibbs, out into the hall. A few moments later, Mrs. Gibbs came back in and she was crying! I couldn't imagine what was going on. She told us that the President had been shot, and they were sending us all home early. I didn't know anything about the President being in Dallas or motorcades or sniper-rifles. At that moment, I could only picture a gunman running up the Capitol steps with a pistol, firing at the President at close range.”

Al Hartman, Professor of Management & Human Resources

“I was a freshman at UW Stevens Point, then Wisconsin State College at Stevens Point. I do not think they had gotten to university yet. I was in a math class. One of my class mates came in late and told me that the President had been shot. At the time, we did not know he was dead. Obviously it caused some conversation while the professor was teaching.

He was clearly not happy with our conversation, so we stopped (this was an advanced math class, so those of us in the class were good math students; any distraction was unusual). As soon as class was over, we told him why we were distracted. At first, he thought we were joking with him, but we asked him to just check the radio. He saw we were distraught, so he believed us.

That whole weekend was a very sad time. We watched TV most of the weekend as they reviewed what happened and what the future was likely to be. We saw again and again videos from the day. It was not much different from 9/11.”

Gerry Grzyb, PhD, chair, Department of Sociology

“I was a senior at St. Catherine's High School in Racine, and the announcement of the assassination came over the PA when I was in Sr. Mary Theresa's English class (we were discussing Thomas Hardy's novel *The Mayor of Casterbridge*). I don't recall being shocked nearly as much as I would be a few years later when Dr. King and Bobby Kennedy were assassinated. I didn't have as much sense of what JFK meant to people as I did with those other men. Still, I can tell you where I was when it happened, and I can't do that with much else except Armstrong setting foot on the moon.”

James R. Paulson, PhD, Professor of Chemistry

At that time, I was in the 8th grade at Sligo Junior High School in Silver Spring, Maryland. On that day, I had permission to leave school early to go home and then go with my mother to an orthodontist appointment in downtown Washington D.C.

There was a kid in my school named Sol Eisen who always walked around with a transistor radio held up to his ear. As I was leaving the school, I passed him in the hallway. As I walked by, he smiled and said ‘Kennedy's shot,’ but I didn't understand what he was talking about until later. I think the smile was because he was proud that he got the news before anyone else and could report it to others.

When I got home, my mother had the TV on and told me that the President had been shot. Then Sol's comment made sense. There was continuous special news coverage on the TV. My Mom had prepared a snack for me, and just as I sat down in front of the TV to eat it, the announcer (I don't know who it was) came on and announced very solemnly ‘the President of the United States is dead.’

We took the bus into Washington and all the people sitting near us on the bus were talking about it. I remember vividly one small man with thick black hair who got on the bus and became distraught when he heard the news. In a strong foreign accent, he moaned, ‘He was a gonna help ...’ Apparently, this man was counting on Kennedy helping somebody, some group, or perhaps some other country, but I didn't understand who or what he was talking about.

At the orthodontist's office, too, everyone was talking about it. I don't remember any details except for one story told by Dr. Murray, the orthodontist. It was memorable because it was so out of character. He was a very gentle older man with a kindly face and white hair. He told about a woman he encountered in the elevator who, when told about Kennedy, said 'Good riddance!' Mild mannered Dr. Murray raised his voice and said, 'I felt like punching her in the face!'

I don't remember much more in the way of details. We watched the news a lot in the next few days, and I suppose we also watched the funeral on TV. I do remember that after Jack Ruby shot Oswald, and the film footage was replayed on television, my father said '[Look, it's the first nationally televised murder.]'

Mary Zwicke, Facilities Management

"The day that President Kennedy was shot is one of those that will forever stick in my memory. Since then, it has included the explosion of the Challenger upon takeoff, and of course, 9-11.

I was in class at my Catholic grade school in Milwaukee, and a nun came in and pulled the other nun out, and I remember they were both crying. Then our teacher came back in the room and tried to explain to us what had happen. Within the hour they rounded up a television on an AV cart and combined as many classrooms that could fit together so we could watch the live TV coverage.

But my most vivid memory came on that Saturday, what was to be my 9th birthday party for all our relatives. It was the worst birthday party a kid could have! All I remember is the women in the living room crying, the men sitting around the dining room table, drinking and talking, and us kids not really feeling it was appropriate to play, so we didn't.

I know that sounds selfish, but that is the viewpoint of a 9-year-old who lost her President just before her birthday."

Dawn Downs Arnold, Assistant Director, Undergraduate Advising Resource Center

"I was a small child of 4 when Kennedy died, but I vividly remember the funeral in its black and white starkness on the TV (which wasn't usually on during the day), the rider-less horse and the caisson, the beautiful widow and the little children left behind.

More powerful still to a 4-year-old was seeing my mother watching and weeping."

Tom Grogan, Special Assistant to the Chancellor

"I was in first grade at the time. I have this 'semi-vivid' recollection of first hearing the news when I was on my way to the restroom. There was a real 'buzz' in the air, and school was let out early, as I recall. For those much younger than me, it may seem strange, but the old days with black and white televisions and only three channels were a key, unifying time for all Americans. Even at that relatively young age, I was literally glued to the television watching the news reports unfold -- everything that transpired in the moments and weeks that followed.

The grainy black and white video images that are familiar to all were things that were literally 'lived in real time' by those who went through it.

This is somewhat similar to, but fundamentally different from, the 9-11 scenario. The proliferation of media, and the 24-hour media cycle, has provided more information, more images and more detail than was present during the early 1960s.

Many of us of similar age also experienced the development of the space program, the Vietnam war, the moon landing and even the Watergate fiasco with the same sense of shared perspective occasioned by the available media coverage at the time.”

Pat Wilkinson, Polk Library Director

“Around 12:40 p.m. on November 22, 1963, I lead my 8th grade class in praying the Rosary. I was a student at Visitation Catholic School in Des Moines, Iowa. Our teacher, Sister Mary Madeline, had just left the classroom after she announced that President Kennedy had been shot in Dallas. As she left, she said ‘Pat, lead the Rosary.’ We completed the Rosary once and started again. Half way through the second time, Sister came back to the classroom with tears in her eyes and announced ‘President Kennedy is dead.’”

Jeffrey Pickron, Associate Professor, Department of History

"I was born several years after 1963, but, over the years, I heard my mother's recollections of that day. She was 14 years old and living in Houston, Texas. Her family had moved there from Chicago in 1960. Both of my parents --although they didn't know each other yet -- had seen President Kennedy the day before (Nov. 22, 1963) as his motorcade drove down Broadway Blvd in Houston. In the early afternoon on November 22, my mother remembers her teacher being called into the hall and returning with the news that the president had been killed in Dallas. Although most of the class was shocked and sad, she clearly remembered two boys who erupted in cheers. She said these boys were 'idiots' and they 'got it from their parents,' but it was the first time she realized just how much some people hated Catholics, and she wondered if it was why the president had been killed."

Marguerite Helmers, PhD, Department of English

Prof. Helmer's had a contribution published Nov. 21 in *BagNewsNotes* about recently shared and never-before-seen photos of the day President Kennedy was assassinated. You can [read her piece here](#).