

## MEMORIES — SHARED

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**T**he depression, Pearl Harbor Bombing, holocaust refugees. . . these were my mother's memories. We organize our lives around major events both external and personal. For me, John F. Kennedy's campaign and election, the 60s Civil Rights Movement, the Vietnam War and 9-11 are mine. In this 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Year of Kennedy's assuming the Presidency, I remember.

His *presidential* campaign was the first political campaign for which I volunteered and one of the most compelling.<sup>1</sup> I was a high school student and along with my friends believed that we could make a difference to the world we knew. He captured our attention and our desire to be involved. He helped introduce an age of possible reforms, visions, and actions.

I am originally from Dallas, Texas and even then presidential campaigns were not the same type of "press the flesh" activities we experience in New Hampshire. Candidates would fly into town and frequently speak at the airport or another large venue – often a fund raiser. They would fly out the same or next day. Surrogates in this case, his siblings, his mother and local politicians attended teas and functions to speak on his behalf. It was an exciting time with exciting promises and hopes. We leafleted, folded letters, stuffed envelopes, and helped however we could.

The televised debates were spell-binding. The other debates and misinformation regarding the "independence of a Catholic President" were infuriating. The election result was thrilling. The televised inauguration added dazzle and visions of change.

The Peace Corps, plans for VISTA, equality legislation, and more were our hopes. The Peace Corps started quickly, VISTA after his death, and the equality legislation dragged for a few years but there was the belief that it would become reality. Foreign Affairs was a mixed entity with the continuing cold war, Kennedy's famous speech at the Berlin War, Bay of Pigs, and Vietnam quagmire. Yet, we felt safer than we had in the late 1950s.

I also remember his second campaign. I was a high school senior. Initially, students were told that if we missed school that day it would be an unexcused absence.<sup>2</sup> The school district relented and said that we had to attend our first period of the day. It was my senior English class which had a short spelling test before literature study on Fridays. The teacher added a bonus word "regicide". This is still a raw remembrance.

I went with 5 other friends to Love Field to see the Kennedys and the Johnsons. We were close to the fence and able to shake hands with some of the dignitaries. The airport was mobbed with cheering people. By the time we were back in the car and on the road heading out, it was bumper to bumper traffic with lots of honking and fun. Suddenly, the cheering and noises stopped and the quiet rolled back like a wave. Soon car engines off and radios announced that the President had been shot. People were out of their cars crying and it all seemed so surreal.

Later as I watched TV news and spoke with friends who had been near the knoll, I still had trouble comprehending the events.

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<sup>1</sup> Ann Ackerman and her husband Philip both were elected to local/state public office multiple times and were active in hosting numerous presidential candidates during the NH Presidential Primary in the 1980s and 1990s.

<sup>2</sup> At that time, the State of Texas contributed money to districts based on per student attendance (half-day, whole day). Also, the district did not want to appear to be supporting a specific candidate.

I do remember – some things trivial and some not so trivial about that day.

Now 50 years later, I wonder how would Kennedy have pushed the civil rights legislative agenda? What would have developed out of his meeting with Henry Cabot Lodge scheduled for a few days after his Dallas visit – would he have pulled us out of Vietnam? <sup>3</sup> What other proactive endeavors would the US create for a better world? So many other *whats* and *hows* are still with me.■

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<sup>3</sup> For more on this read David Halberstam's *The Best and the Brightest* or listen to an interview with Henry Cabot Lodge in the *Vietnam; A Television History*.