

Vietnam Generation

Volume 2
Number 2 *Kent and Jackson State: 1970-1990*

Article 10

1-1995

Anniversary: May 4, 1988

Elaine Holstein

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.lasalle.edu/vietnamgeneration>



Part of the [American Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Holstein, Elaine (1995) "Anniversary: May 4, 1988," *Vietnam Generation*: Vol. 2 : No. 2 , Article 10.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.lasalle.edu/vietnamgeneration/vol2/iss2/10>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by La Salle University Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Vietnam Generation by an authorized editor of La Salle University Digital Commons. For more information, please contact careyc@lasalle.edu.

Anniversary: May 4, 1988

Elaine Holstein

At a few minutes past noon on May 4, I will once again observe an anniversary—an anniversary that marks not only the most tragic event of my life but also one of the most disgraceful episodes in American history. This May 4 will be the eighteenth anniversary of the shootings on the campus of Kent State University and the death of my son, Jeff Miller, by Ohio National Guard rifle fire.

Eighteen years! That's almost as long a time as Jeff's entire life. He had turned twenty just a month before he decided to attend the protest rally that ended in his death and the deaths of Allison Krause, Sandy Scheuer, and Bill Schroeder, and the wounding of nine of their fellow students. One of them, Dean Kahler, will spend the rest of his life in a wheelchair, paralyzed from the waist down.

That Jeff chose to attend that demonstration came as no surprise to me. Anyone who knew him in those days would have been shocked if he had decided to sit that one out. There were markers along the way that led him inexorably to that campus protest.

At the age of eight, Jeff wrote articles expressing his concern for the plight of black Americans, I learned of this only when I received a call from *Ebony* magazine, which assumed he was black and assured me he was bound to be "a future leader of the black community."

Shortly before his sixteenth birthday, Jeff composed a poem he called "Where Does It End?" in which he expressed the horror he felt about "the War Without a Purpose."

Was Jeff a radical? He told me, grinning, that though he might be taken for a "hippie radical" in the Middle West, back home on Long Island he'd probably be seen as a reactionary.

So when Jeff called me that morning and told me he planned to attend a rally to protest the "incursion" of U.S. military forces into Cambodia, I merely expressed my doubts as to the effectiveness of still another demonstration.

"Don't worry, Mom," he said. "I may get arrested, but I won't get my head busted." I laughed and assured him I wasn't worried.

The bullet that ended Jeff's life also destroyed the person I had been—a naive, politically unaware woman. Until that spring of 1970, I would have

stated with absolute assurance that Americans have the right to dissent, publicly, from the policies pursued by their Government. The Constitution says so. Isn't that what makes this country—this democracy—different from those totalitarian states whose methods we deplore?

And even if the dissent got noisy and disruptive, it was inconceivable that an arm of the Government would shoot at random into a crowd of unarmed students? With live ammunition? No way! Arrests? Perhaps. Tear gas? Probably. Antiwar protests had become a way of life, and on my television I had seen them dealt with routinely in various nonlethal ways.

The myth of a benign America where dissent was broadly tolerated was one casualty of the shootings at Kent State. Another was my assumption that *everyone* shared my belief that we were engaged in a no-win situation in Vietnam and had to get out. As the body counts mounted and the footage of napalmed babies became a nightly television staple, I was certain that no one could want the war to go on. The hate mail that began arriving at my home after Jeff died showed me how wrong I was.

We were enmeshed in legal battles for nine years. The families of the slain students, along with the wounded boys and their parents, believed that once the facts were heard in a court of law, it would become clear that the governor of Ohio and the troops he called in had used inappropriate and excessive force to quell what had begun as a peaceful protest. We couldn't undo what had been done, but we wanted to make sure it would never be done again.

Our 1975 trial ended in defeat after fifteen weeks in Federal Court. We won a retrial on appeal, and returned to Cleveland with high hopes of prevailing, but before the trial got under way we were urged by both the judge and our lawyers to accept an out-of-court settlement. The proposal angered us; the case wasn't about *money*. We wanted to clear our children's names and to win a judicial ruling that the governor and the National Guard were responsible for the deaths and injuries. The defendants offered to issue an apology. The wording was debated for days, and the final result was an innocuous document stating that "in retrospect, the tragedy... should not have occurred" and that "better ways must be found to deal with such confrontations."

Reluctantly, we accepted the settlement when we were told this might be the only way that Dean would get at least some of the funds to meet his lifelong medical expenses. He was awarded \$350,000, the parents of each of the dead students received \$15,000, and the remainder, in varying amounts, was divided among the wounded. Lawyer's fees amounted to \$50,000, and \$25,000 was allotted to expenses, for a total of \$675,000.

Since then we have lived through Watergate and Richard Nixon's resignation, crises in the Middle East and in Central America, and the Iran-Contra affair. To most people, Kent State is just one of those traumatic events that occurred during a tumultuous time.

Our Beloved Sandy

To me, it's the one experience I will never recover from. It's also the one gap in my communication with my older son, Russ: neither of us dares to talk about what happened at Kent State for fear that we'll open floodgates of emotion that we can't deal with.

Whenever there is another death in the family, we mourn not only the elderly parent or grandparent or aunt who has passed away; we also experience again the loss of Jeff.



March after the commemorative program at Kent State University, May 4, 1976.
Photo © by John P. Rowe.



Dean Kahler during the settlement news conference, 1979. Photo © John P. Rowe.