1

My mother took me to the May 4 Museum, on Kent State's campus, before I was a student here. She wanted me to see the history of the place, to feel connected to it. I can't remember exactly what she said, but it was probably something like this: "It was an important moment in history! You'll be part of it." After all, soon, I would be a student. Me, in a Kent State T-shirt. A Golden Flash.

I think it must have been because she went here, too, back in the nineties. When I got in, totally unsure of my place and decision to keep myself at Kent, she seemed the opposite — certain that I would find something around the campus that I hadn't been able to find in the confines of my hometown, with its quiet, hot summers and low-glow winters.

When she had gone to Kent, she told me, the entire downtown area had been different. Broken, in a way, dilapidated. The bars and restaurants had names like "something-mushroom." (So my mother says. It's The Stuffed Mushroom, her partner corrects.) and The Robin Hood. Some of them were the same, like The Loft and Ray's, but the campus didn't branch into the city in the same way that it does now. And May 4 — it was present, but different. The vigils, held every year, were mostly student-led. Flowers on the hill, a smaller group of people.

And so, we went to the museum, and stood looking at the timeline on the wall. Photos of people with long hair standing next to their parents, with their military crew cuts. Walls taken up completely with full-color prints of busses painted tie-dye, covered in loving kids. When I thought about Kent State, it wasn't what I pictured.

Cameron Gorman

All my life, I had known Kent as a sort of next step — the place where most of the kids from my high school would end up going for college, even as they professed a deep desire to escape to a major city. I had been there as a teenager, walked around the thick restaurant district with my friends for my 16th birthday, eating chips at Fresco and wandering around boutiques with only dollar bills in our pockets. In here, the dark, mood-lit museum, everything seemed different.

By the time we got to the last part of the tour — a video narration about the tragedy, overlaid by a map and photos from the day — I felt as though something in my stomach was welling up. The impact, something I might have been able to ignore previously in favor of that old schoolyard chant — "Kent Read, Kent Write, Kent State!" was seeping into me, past my shoes. I felt a little bit sick — outside, on the same hill we could see from the center, it was green as summer. In this video, the grass was gray.

“When you do go there, yeah, you get a good feel for what really happened,” said Alan Canfora. Among other things, Canfora is the director of the Kent May 4 Center and an expert on the May 4 tragedy. He was also shot that day, in the wrist.

“I think people who go to Kent State University should become aware of, you know, what happened to their fellow students. And I think that’s why some students really do make a connection to the event, and to the tragedy because they understand that these were four young students just like themselves, age … 19 and 20, and they understand that these students had the same hopes and dreams, and they were just gunned down one day out of the blue, based on governmental abuse of power,” Canfora said.

The summer passed, and I did go to school at Kent State, becoming almost immediately enmeshed in the paper, writing all the time. Mornings passed — in the spring, the ground muddy, daffodils pushing their waving yellow heads from the ground — in the winter, a hawk tearing at what might have been a squirrel on the barren hill. I cannot know how many times I, walking to class, to a party, to meet up with a friend, passed the spots in the parking lots outlined with light posts, to mark where the four students died on May 4. How many times I have hiked up the hill to get to meetings, all the while stepping on the same distant outlines as the footprints of all those people before me.

“I think everybody has to pause, especially like you, when you go past that area,” Canfora said to me, “pause and think about those four students. I think that’s very appropriate.”

Though I was able to put it to the side of my mind for so many years, there has always been a part of me that cannot let go of the ghost of that spring day in 1970, twenty-seven years before I would be born. And so, I have walked carefully — my eyes lingering over the spaces between cars, the cement steps leading to Taylor Hall’s terrace.

It has been four years since my mother took me to the museum, and just this year, I found something. Online, in Kent State’s May 4 archives, is an extensive record of voices.

“I made a suggestion — my suggestion was that we would try to capture oral histories with people — anyone who wanted to come back,” said Sandra Perlman Halem, one of the originators of the project, “Anyone who wanted to give them … it wasn’t simply going to be about people who were there, or people who were protesting. It was going to be anyone in the community, anyone anywhere in the world who were affected and wanted to talk about what happened at that point in time to them.”

The project was started, Halem says, at least a full year before the commemoration in 1990. It’s an audio history of first-person accounts and memories of the events of May 4 — hours and hours of footage recorded in places like the Student Center, according to Halem.

But those histories, Cara Gilgenbach, the head of Special Collections and Archives told me, were few in number — and some are restricted. That was when Halem stepped in, starting a new wave of histories archived at the library's special collections.

"The oral histories — they're very affecting because they're very unique compared to other primary or archival resources that we offer that tend to be document-based or photograph-based. I mean, they're much more dynamic, because you can listen to a person telling their story, and you can also at the same time read this transcript," Gilgenbach said.

Halem remembers recording some of them.

"As the day went on, people came, and left stories … of how they were young, and they always said it as if they were there," Halem said. "… And most of the oral histories and most of PTSD is about being — you're in the present tense when you're telling them. And they were there. And I always knew that I felt that way. And that's what I think your talking about being on campus is. In that place, you are in the present tense."

I scrolled through the transcripts, sorted by name. Lists upon lists, tiny spatterings of memory in my web browser. Something felt bigger here. That same rushing feeling as I had as a high school almost-graduate, standing and staring at the hat that had belonged to one of the women killed that day. Only a bit older than me then — only a bit younger than I am now. Outside was the place. Here were the tapes. I did a funny thing, and I took them with me. And I listened.

The Victory Bell

I walk to the Victory Bell from Oscar Ritchie Hall. On the half-dead March grass, my feet look far too informal in their winter duck boots, and the ground seems softer than it has yet this year. On my right, two kids are walking past the shell of the old art building to the new one, with its fancy bathrooms and light-vaulted white hallways.

I've always gotten shivers when coming across old places — chills up my back and down through my shoulders. Here is no different. The field is moving under me, disappearing, moving me closer to the bell, a green-yellow-hay conveyor belt. The thing itself is squat — I always thought the name sounded much more grandiose than the structure — a giant bell, built into the dwarven section of a brick wall. The plaque built into it dedicates it in 1955. I wonder if the gold metal was here that day — what it saw, glinting in the spring light.

I reach for my pen, trying to think of how I might want to record this, and realize, with a sinking feeling, that I've forgotten my pen. Already, the cold is biting at my fingers, and I

turn with a start back to my car. I am about halfway across the field from the bell when I stop — a flash of blue plastic embedded in the ground, maybe left there from the melting snow. Maybe there since fall. I dig it out of the Muddy March ground, and take off the cap. Scribble it into the paper. It still works. My earbuds go in, and somehow, the barely-moving day is drowned out. The sound of a voice fills my ears.

Catherine Delattre: So that was it. We went and we were in, we were pretty much behind the [Victory] Bell. We were observers at that point, when the rally started. We were definitely observers.

I imagine standing here, watching. Observing, Catherine says, as things escalated. The familiar din of the campus behind me morphing somehow, insidiously. The bell looks so solid there, so ready to remain unfazed in the wake of anything. And it has, I remind myself. It is still here. The kids are not.

Catherine Delattre: Never did we feel that there was an immediate threat to the Guard. These guys had guns. Now, we didn't think there were bullets in them, but still they had a very threatening look with the guns and the masks and the uniforms. Scary.

Scary, I think. I put my hand on the handle of the bell, and feel the icy metal. Above me, on the path, people are still passing, on their way to classes as if, for a moment, the hill has not been transported back on the whim of Catherine's memory. Someone makes eye contact with me, I think, but I can't be sure. I pull the bell back, and, at first, no sound comes. I pull harder. There. It rings, so loud that it thrums in my ears — reverberates after, thrumming in my ears.

Behind the bell, I walk up the beaten path to Taylor Hall — the muddy track where so many students over the years have trampled the grass down to giving up. I am following Catherine as best I can.

Catherine Delattre: So we were moving, people were throwing the tear gas back but the crowd was – there were some people close, but there was a majority of the students were really pushing away, as they threw tear gas and as they moved up the hill, the crowd was moving up over the hill and down toward the practice field.

My legs ache as I hike up, almost a straight line to the top of the hill. Catherine is saying something now, about her boyfriend grabbing her — throwing her to the ground to save her, about how she got up and started to run, to run, to run. That nothing could have stopped her. I am facing the memorial pole in the parking lot now — stones piled on its top, as if in tribute or remembrance. I turn back to Taylor.

Cameron Gorman

Taylor Hall

It is so cold now, to me, who is easily chilled, that I step inside the lobby of Taylor Hall, and close the door behind me. The warmth of the heating envelopes me, and I fumble with my phone, finding the next recording. When it comes on, I push on the doors, and the cold air hits me in the face.

Ellis Berns: It was thick with tear gas. I was kind of at the top where Taylor Hall was, looking down. The great picture where it shows the students looking down. The National Guard was basically, if there was a time for them that they were in danger it was probably that time, because they truly were surrounded.

I look down from Taylor — down to the bottom of the hill, where I imagine the guard advancing. Here, it is true. The hill forms a green bowl, it cradles a cup of what is green in May. From here, students are moving around and around the rim of the valley, ants on wooden beams. I picture standing shoulder to shoulder to someone here — how it might dispel the cold, push it to the ends of my feet instead of letting it pool in my chest, and turn.

There is only one place to go from here — as there was only one place to go then, too, as the National Guardsmen advanced, lobbing tear gas, and suddenly, as I turn, my stomach clenches.

Cameron Gorman
My feet are moving, slowly, and I get the terrible impression that some part of this is on a string — I am being pushed by the wind, the memories of so many people, back — in the same patterns, in the same footsteps. And then I see the markers, and the weather is forgotten.

I have heard before that the Earth has a memory. That ghosts can be seen with their legs cut off to the knee, ancient Roman soldiers marching on an ancient road below the new one. I move, my legs amputated. I walk to William's Marker, and think it must be impossible for me not to have been exactly where he was before he died.

At the marker, there are cones set up, as if it is under construction, or has been parked on. (I find out later that someone has hit one of the light poles with a car.) I wheel around, looking, looking. And then I find her.

Sandy's Marker

People used to park here, I think. People must have parked here. I sit down, on the black asphalt, next to one of the lights that blocks off a coffin-shaped space on the ground, and turn on the tape. Gravel bites into my thighs. My body feels still.

Ellis Berns: We both hit the ground. I had my arm around her, my left arm around her. We both were kind of diving, if you will, towards cover. Not sure why, other than we just knew we didn't want to be standing. We dove for cover, and I remember waiting until I felt it was safe to get up. Until we felt like the shooting was over. You didn't know it was shooting. It felt like it was shooting. You knew it was some kind of shooting. So you waited, and I couldn't even begin to tell you how long we waited for. But we waited.

My gaze drifts to the space between the lights, that thick pavement, and the black must be too much — the space and nothing too much — because I realize I am staring at the skeleton of a leaf as I listen, tracing the outline of its dead spine with my eyes. In the tape, the narrator, Ellis, says he had long hair. I wonder if it was longer than mine.

Ellis Berns: I remember I had my arm around her, and she was laying on her stomach face down. I remember calling out to her, "Sandy, it's over. Let's go, let's go." I remember calling out to her, and there was no response. And then I looked. And then I realized that I believe she had been, she was hit, I think it was the left side or the right side? I think it was the right side. I could be a little off on this. [pause] It had to be the right side. The right side, because the bullet had not just grazed her but had severed a carotid artery. So there was a lot of blood.

Would blood soak into the parking lot, or would it roll over it? Would you be able to hear someone screaming in the middle of all that noise? Something is in the air. People in cars are pulling past me, trying to find parking. I don't think they see me — small against the ground, sitting so close to this spot. I wonder if the ground inside the ring — the ring I don't let even my fingers cross — I wonder if it was as hard as this ground is now, under my body. What could someone see from this spot? Ohio gray sky. Trees. Ohio sky.

Ellis Berns: So that was it. There are some accounts, I believe I have heard that she actually had a heartbeat to the hospital, but I can't attest to that at all. In my mind, she had died right there.

Her last moments, I think, were here. And yet, the side of one of the light posts flakes with red rust. My throat feels tight, and I pull myself up. I know where I'm going now.

Jeff's Marker

From Sandy's spot, I can see the markers of where Jeff died. But I am not heading there, not yet. I walk past, and up the concrete stairs to the back of Taylor Hall. I shut the door behind me, and switch on the tape.

Chuck Ayers: I went back up the same stairwell I'd come out, I came back out the same door, and the very first thing I saw was Jeff Miller in the street. Initially, I found out when he fell he was face-down, chest-down, his head to the side, and somebody had turned him over, and

there were several people kneeling around him, and there was already this river of blood rolling down, I mean it must have been 12 to 15 feet long at that time.

I have opened the door, and I am standing on the steps. From here, I can see the four markers that surround where he would have fallen. (They are the length of a human body, laying on the ground.) I think I have seen this photograph before — black and white, the back of someone, crushed under the weight of death. The blood, black in the film, rolling away in a torrent down the uneven ground. But maybe I made it up in my mind, I think — the voice in my ears anchors me to the spot.

Chuck Ayers: I was 22. And there was this guy in the street, and I kept saying to myself, No, he's not dead, they'll patch him up, he'll be okay. And I just remember looking at how utterly limp he was–and they had pulled his shirt up–and how absolutely hollow his stomach looked.

I walk down the stairs, slowly, toward the place near the grass. People pass me on either side. My eyes are straight ahead, and by the time I get to the place Jeff died, I want to kneel, but I am too afraid — I don't want others to question why I'm lingering, or think I'm being disrespectful. Chuck says he was 22, looking at his bleeding body from the doorway. I am 22, too. But now, the space is empty.

Olson Hall

The cold is catching up with me. I walk away from Jeff and Sandy, and toward the other side of campus. The last tape, I know, is not on the hill at all. It is supposed to be in Olson Hall — somewhere I lived once, when I was a junior. It had always felt cold to me — unwelcoming. I spent all my time away from it.

Naomi Goelman Etzkin: When we heard the gunshots, we did not believe that they were real bullets. We thought they were shooting in the air, and we just didn't believe that bullets could be real. And we went running back to our dormitory, and we watched out the fourth floor window in Olson Hall as the ambulances came over the hill.

You could see the sidewalk from the bathrooms of Olson Hall — pull open the frosted glass panes and peer down onto the street to people watch. I remember thinking I could have written a letter and dropped it to let it sway in the air.

Naomi Goelman Etzkin: So I went back to Olson Hall, and I was the only one left in the dorm who was a resident. The National Guardsmen were having dinner in our cafeteria. And I sat down at dinner, and a couple of them came and joined me. The guys who I was having dinner with were not the people who had shot because it was my understanding that they were whisked away. The guys that I had dinner with were people my age who went into the National Guard so they didn't have to go to Vietnam, and they felt a deep sense of horror over what had happened.

I sit on a table outside of Olson, and watch students come and go. There was no dining hall when I lived here. I imagine opening the door to a silent hall — the same feeling as the deserted dorms in the summer, undercut with something else. A burning. I get up, halfway through the tape, and start to walk away. On my left, the old art building again, and its yellow insect shell. Again, the hill rises in the distance, Naomi in my ears.

Naomi Goelman Etzkin: And two weeks later we were told to come back and pack up our bags, in a matter of four hours. And then we finished our courses by correspondence. The campus was never the same.

I am cutting through, to the parking lot, across crabgrass and pinecones, and suddenly, I am halfway to the field, when I cannot hear her anymore.

The sound in my earbuds cuts out, buzzes free, and I am left with the sound of my own feet, the sound of my walking on the cold ground.

I dial my mother on the phone in a coffee shop. Outside, though I thought spring had finally broken through the frost of winter, snow is coming down in flurries. On the phone with her, I ask her. *Why did you take me?* The connection is bad, or else she can't hear very well over the phone, and I have to repeat myself.

Oh, that's right. Yes, she remembers. We all went as a group that one time.

Yes, that's right. And why?

"I think it's a very important part of history," my mother says. She says we would never want it to be recreated. People send their kids to college, thinking it's safe. "Dead people on campus, dead young people on campus," just demonstrating for peace, killed by our own military. We can't let ourselves repeat this history. This is what she tells me.

I think back to the ground by Sandra's marker, and the cars passing me by, and the feeling that the sky must be very much the same one as she saw that day, walking back from the hill. Myself, in the May 4 museum, feeling for the first time as though I was about to be a part of something much greater than I had realized I would be.

Sometimes, when I am in places I have been before, I feel a shivering in my back and up to my head. A form of bodily Deja-vu, the same feeling as I once had walking through the abandoned backyard of my neighbor's house — somewhere I had played as a child. I get the feeling it must be a head-rush, the sudden realization that I am making an impression in the same place as I did before — that if I could just pull time together like a sheet, pinch two sides of it and stick them to each other, that I could reach out and touch the memory of myself.

Sitting near Sandra's marker, I thought about that again. In 2019, a college student, sitting in the spot in the parking lot where in 1970, another college student lost her life. But I could get up, could walk forward and move away, could put myself out of the cold. I am older than Sandra will ever be. I was born in 1997 by chance. Things could have been different, so easily. So easily, I am the one who cannot get up anymore.

2.

Growing up in upstate New York, I didn't have close ties to Kent or the shootings of May 4th – It wasn't until an English substitute teacher inquired about college plans that I learned nine students were injured, and another four died. I wouldn't understand the tragedy until I was standing on campus, where everything happened. Something is unsettling about seeing students walk across the Commons where the National Guard opened fire on unarmed students as if nothing happened. Students and faculty can park right next to memorials where victims laid bleeding out to death and go about their days. This picture shows people out by Taylor Hall, collectively demonstrating amongst the chaos, against a government that wasn't listening. As I spoke to my generation of students, almost all said they believed this generation protests but differently–instead of taking protests to the streets, people use social media to voice their opinions. Movements like #MeToo and #MuteRKelly grew universally with people around the world because social media has the power to reach millions. But I wonder if this generation gravitates to social media more because it's accessed from the comfort and safety of their own homes, people no longer have to expose themselves to the risk of getting shot for expressing their beliefs.

After those 13 students were shot, protests erupted across college campuses all over the country. It helped change the perceptions people had of who anti-war protestors were, and that they weren't hippies or drug addicts. There are many perceptions people carry about this generation and its lack of direction that I wonder if it's best to unite in the streets in solidarity once again. Every time I walk up Blanket Hill or park next to a memorial, I silently remember the people who were there before me and have an urge to do more.

3.
In May 1971 — a year after members of the Ohio National Guard opened fire on unarmed Kent State students protesting the United States military's bombing of Cambodia, killing four and wounding nine — James T. Lawless turned to words.

In his poem, "They Didn't Cry," he recounts a candlelight vigil in remembrance of the tragedy that, even today, is the first thing people associate with the university's history.

"They walked, 5,000 of them / with candles, mainly quiet / but strangely not saddened," goes the first stanza of the poem.

"Candles and night make the symbols / of serious shit. Hushed voices, / the odor of grass; they walked slowly. / At the top of the hill, they still / could see themselves," it goes on.

In the next stanza, "Pagoda and memories: they crowded / a circle, played taps, read / a poem (?) and laid candles."

And finally, "It just didn't work. No body, nobody / cried. No body, nobody weeped. It / just didn't work; how do you learn to be sad?"

I have been lugging this question around for weeks, wearing it on my back like some sack of guilt I didn't ask for.

I was just amazed at — and I don't mean to say people were giddy — but people seemed to have no solemnity. It was like they were disconnected.

– James Lawless

I found Lawless online and learned he worked for Kent State University News Service from 1970 to 1978, and later as a reporter for the Plain Dealer. He took the job at Kent State hoping to write a book on May 4 — "silly optimism," Lawless told me. He never wrote it, but eventually published two other books of poetry.

The vigil he describes in the poem took place near the site of the shootings, by Taylor Hall — "Is Taylor still around?" Lawless, 82, asked me — and mostly students attended. "I was just amazed at — and I don't mean to say people were giddy — but people seemed to have no solemnity. It was like they were disconnected," he said about the scene that inspired his poem.

Almost 50 years have passed since the shootings on May 4, and every year the university tries to honor, to learn, to reflect on the disaster that took students too young and too soon. But how do I — a college student and member of a young generation — connect to a catastrophe I didn't live through? How do I not only sympathize, but understand student

protesters of the ‘70s when my unfledged body is not versed in the the Vietnam War? How do I carry a grief that isn’t mine? How do I learn to be sad?

Before coming to Kent State, I had never heard of May 4. Sure, I was born and raised in Ohio, but as a child of immigrants from Ukraine, I grew up confused about my identity, working to earn my familial history. I always wanted to be more Ukrainian, less American and Ohioan. I’ve spent the last year or so interviewing my parents to learn who they were before they came to the United States 26 years ago.

Trying to fathom someone else’s pain isn’t simple; it doesn’t sting in the same way. It wasn’t until I realized sadness was something to discover on my own terms, a personal effort to seriously pursue, that a feeling coursed through me.

– Valerie Royzman

Most recently, I’ve been writing an essay about my paternal grandmother, Tatyana, and reflecting on our relationship, which wasn’t a close one. I’ve been trying to understand her paranoia and unpredictability and why she was the way she was. Sorting through my grandmother’s frayed journals, faded artwork and other ancient memorabilia, most of it from Ukraine, has helped me discern how mental illness touched her.

My mother, Irena, sat on the couch about a month ago, reading from a page in my grandmother’s notebook, dated 1980. I sat by her side, my eyes scanning the delicate pages.

“It’s beginning again. Everything is like before,” my mother read aloud. “There’s a rash from my hands to my elbows. I went to the doctor’s twice, and twice, they threw away my analyses. … Life gives me only grief and anguish. I barely leave the house. The vegetables and fruits are rotting the day after I buy them. All of my groceries are covered in a liquidy mold.”

I stayed quiet. Suddenly, a sadness flooded over me. I was getting to know my grandmother in a new, frightening way. I was hearing the schizophrenia bubbling up inside of her. And I was coping with the realization that I would never have the chance to step back in time to be with her, to touch her pale hands, to understand her.

My learning to be sad meant putting in work. Real work — taking the time to sort through keepsakes and talk for hours with my parents — and emotional work, all to eventually arrive at a deeper insight.

I know I am not alone in this. We all experience moments when our loved ones sit us down and give us the things that mean the most. Words that become stories, faded photographs, torn-up recipe books. And there we are, so busy and thoughtless. Listening, but not hard. Not thinking that someday, the people who nurtured us will die, and the stories will gray. When

we remember to remember them, to pass the stories onto our own children, we won't be able to call grandma on the phone and ask about that thing that grandpa always used to say, because grandma will be sick, and grandpa will be long gone. We do this our whole lives, until it's too late.

Honoring May 4 is the same, in a way.

This record of the past has much less value if young people living today have little awareness of it.

– Thomas Grace

So I sat at a wooden table on the mum eighth floor of the University Library some days, at the humming Starbucks on East Main Street other days, and combed through all things May 4 in search of a story that would connect me to the past, even though this revolving sphere of news and events seem to push me further from it.

I found that story in the library's Special Collections and Archives, specifically May 4 poetry. I marked my favorite poems and returned to them the next day, the day after that and the day after that. *How do you learn to be sad?* I repeated to myself. The question struck me, and I knew it was one I wanted to explore. The ending of Lawless' poem carried an importance, an urgency to grasp a complex sadness before everyone close to May 4 withered away.

In learning it, I returned often to the distance between the May 4 generation and my own. It's a trauma that isn't mine. And I asked questions: Did I have a responsibility to bear witness to this trauma, anyway? To be a keeper of history? To pass on the story?

The answer, Lawless told me, was, of course. "Kent is still the touchstone for that [Vietnam] War. Everything that could've gone wrong [that day] went wrong. We need to think about what the hell we're doing," he said, "and *you* need take responsibility to get involved."

A few weeks before, I spoke with Thomas Grace, one of the students wounded on May 4. Grace, a sophomore studying history and political science at the time, was shot in the left heel, and the bullet exited the right side of his left foot. He, too, told me there were lessons to be learned from May 4 and stressed the power of today's students getting involved in social change. "This record of the past has much less value if young people living today have little awareness of it," Grace wrote to me. The phrase stuck, and I knew to keep searching for something more. Awareness of May 4 wasn't enough. The tragedy demanded to be felt.

Chasing change, Grace said, can be difficult and risky, but "ignorance of previous change, and how it was achieved, can be lethal."

My sadness took work and time and caring. It took calling Lawless on the phone and hearing from Grace and staring at the words carved into the May 4 memorial on campus: “Inquire. Learn. Reflect.” Even that didn’t feel sufficient. Trying to fathom someone else’s pain isn’t simple; it doesn’t sting in the same way. It wasn’t until I realized sadness was something to discover on my own terms, a personal effort to seriously pursue, that a feeling coursed through me.

“We’ve gotta do something in our lives,” Lawless’ voice echoed as I sat in the field near Taylor Hall, the midday sun bouncing off my cheeks, and counted the yellow daffodils beginning to sprout from the cold, hard ground.

I remembered the last thing he told me — a story about his first reporter job. A man hired young Lawless, ill-prepared for the responsibility, and taught him how to be a journalist. “And he said to me, ‘This is not for me. It’s not for you. It’s for the next guy that you teach.’”

I replayed Lawless’ story in my head, and sat in my sadness. It was not automatic. I *wanted* to be sad. We don’t always need to be so delighted in life. We do that enough. Look around. There is so much to be sad about. Sadness that doesn’t have to break us, but sadness that will teach us. Sadness that is OK to feel. Sadness that reminds us we are human. And if I, a child of immigrants who knew nothing of May 4 until stepping foot on campus, can learn this sadness, so can my peers.

4.

A date that forever changed Kent State and American national politics when the Ohio National Guard fired 67 bullets into gathered crowds of Kent State students in 13 seconds, killing four students and wounding nine others. The shooting went on to be recognized as one of the key events that led to the eventual impeachment of President Richard Nixon and the dismantling of the Nixon administration. The event resulted in college students going on strike and forced hundreds of colleges and universities to close nationwide.

Last September, it was an interesting paradox watching Kaitlin Bennett and her student organization, right-libertarian digital media outlet Liberty Hangout, host an open carry rally on Kent’s campus. The fact that one of the biggest rallies on our campus championed arming students with firearms on a campus that made worldwide headlines for its gun violence is something I struggle to understand.

Kaitlin Bennett in front of the news cameras. By Carter E. Allen

The protests grew extremely tense amid an ever-present police force which intensified the dispute between Bennett and the counter-protestors. Bennett’s original plan was to begin from the Schwartz Center parking lot and walk around campus to encourage discourse about open carry laws in Ohio and why she and her supporters believe they should be allowed to

carry their firearms on Kent's campus. The presence of student counterportestors, the Cleveland chapter of Black Lives Matter and Antifa all led to heated confrontations during the rally and caused the the hundreds of police officers tasked with maintaining safety to don their riot gear. The university spent $65 thousand on security measures for the event. Fortunately, there were no serious injuries sustained during the rally as four individuals were arrested in total.

I am still conflicted in how I feel about Bennett's rally and the tension it brought to a campus that has already endured trauma inflicted by gun violence. Was Bennett following through with the planned open carry walk to exercise her right of free speech and to advocate for an issue that she have every right to be passionate about? Or was she performing this act because she knew how much attention the university, its students and the media would give to Liberty Hangout, increasing their exposure along the way?

The fact that one of the biggest rallies on our campus championed arming students with firearms on a campus that made worldwide headlines for its gun violence is something I struggle to understand.

– Tyler Haughn

It is difficult to learn about May 4th and not feel disturbed by the events of that tragic day. Four students were murdered while voicing their disagreement with the government's decision to invade Cambodia and continue the Vietnam War efforts. Allison Krause, Jeffrey Miller, Sandra Scheuer and William Schroeder lost their lives while engaging in a democratic nation's most important liberties: freedom of assembly and freedom of speech.

Jerry M. Lewis, professor emeritus of sociology, witnessed the senseless violence on May 4th. Lewis first came to Kent State in the Fall of 1966 and taught as a sociology professor here until 1996. He earned his bachelor's degree from Cornell College, his master's degree from Boston University and his doctoral degree from the University of Illinois.

"Eight or ten guardsmen turned together and fired, and I had been in the army, so I knew they were firing real bullets, so I dove to my right behind some bushes. I started running around Prentice Hall parking lot yelling, "we must leave, these are real bullets."

– Jerry M. Lewis

Lewis still comes to Kent's campus to give lectures about May 4th and provide insight into what transpired that day. During his career teaching at Kent State, Lewis served as a faculty marshal and was in charge of protecting students when they first began protesting on May 1st in the buildup to the planned rally that was scheduled for May 4th.

Jerry M. Lewis, courtesy of The Kent Stater. By Graham Smith

Lewis said many students believed the guardsmen were firing blanks in an attempt to disperse the gathered crowds. Lewis immediately understood the shots fired were real bullets capable of taking students' lives. "Eight or ten guardsmen turned together and fired, and I had been in the army, so I knew they were firing real bullets, so I dove to my right behind some bushes," Lewis said. " I started running around Prentice Hall parking lot yelling, "we must leave, these are real bullets."

Lewis said the rally was nonviolent and should not have been met with such violent measures. He believes the unprovoked shootings were a direct violation of the student's first amendment rights.

"The National Guard were agents of the state of Ohio, and consequently agents of the United States, and they broke up a rally that had a perfect right to go on," Lewis said. "There was shouting and profanity but other than that it was a very peaceful rally. It took away from students a legitimate right to protest the invasion of Cambodia, the right of assembly and the right of freedom of speech, which is essential to the survival of democracy."

Lewis said many students today do not understand the impact May 4th forever had on not only Kent State but higher education as a whole.

"I think most of the students now have brochure knowledge, they have maybe been to the visitor's center or seen the film, but don't have the depth and knowledge that the students who went through it have," Lewis said. "Many students who go through the visitor's center do not realize the scope of the impact May 4th had on American higher education. There were responses all over the world to May 4th."

Lewis said universities are places where education should be the most important priority of the students and faculty. He believes this is jeopardized when students do not feel safe on their campus.

"On a personal level, independent of May 4th, people do not need to carry a gun onto a college campus," Lewis said.

Lewis has played an instrumental role in ensuring Kent State preserves the remembrance of May 4th and its symbolism for freedom of speech. He said Kent State has respected the memory of all who witnessed and endured the shootings by planning and hosting the annual commemoration, vigil walk, visitor's center, archives and giving students time off on May 4th.

"In general, I think Kent State has been very responsible in responding to the demands of society," Lewis said. "Society says, "Kent State, do something about remembering May 4th.""

Michael Heil, president of Liberty Hangout, believes students should be able to carry firearms on Kent State's campus because it is their property. Ohio law permits open carry on public property, including public universities, though firearms aren't allowed inside campus buildings. Kent State students and staff are not permitted to possess firearms on campus. KSU's policy says that "students, staff, faculty and third parties doing business with the university are…prohibited from possessing, storing or using a deadly weapon while outside on university grounds, that is owned, operated or leased by the university."

"If they are legally able to acquire them already then they should be able to do that on campus as well," Heil said. "It is your right, and nobody should be able to tell you not to be able to defend yourself."

Heil pointed out it was not a citizen but the government who committed the shooting and believes if the students present that day were armed, they would have stood a better chance in avoiding any casualties.

"If the government knew that the group of students that day was armed, I think they would have been a lot more hesitant before they fired into that crowd," Heil said. "An armed society is a safe society."

Heil believes May 4th and its aftermath should not be cited as a reason to ban current Kent State students from carrying their own firearms across campus.

"I've always looked at May 4th with the view of the government overstepping," Heil said. "Our organization looks at it as an unfortunate tragedy that didn't need to happen and is just another example of why big government is not good."

Maddie Camp, the current student chair of the May 4th Task Force, said the May 4th Task Force strives to remind students and the general public the importance of activism. The task force is an on-campus organization founded by Kent State students in 1975 in direct response to Kent State's refusal to sponsor annual programs designed to commemorate the events and victims of May 4th.

"I do think the history of May 4th creates suspicion and anxiety towards guns, maybe more so than on other college campuses. In the lens of May 4th, students were just throwing rocks that day and even at the time of the shots, there were no rocks or projectiles being thrown, and 4 students were murdered, so add more guns into that equation and I don't think it equals fewer casualties."

– Maddie Camp

"It is about preserving the legacy and memory of the students who lost their lives that day and the students whose lives were altered forever but also preserving the legacy of activism,"

Camp said. “The task force has always been an activist organization bringing up issues of the times.”

Camp said if the student protestors carried firearms on May 4th, there would have been more death. In her experiences, the unique history of May 4th and its historical relationship with firearms has shaped the current student body’s views of gun violence. “I do think the history of May 4th creates suspicion and anxiety towards guns, maybe more so than on other college campuses,” Camp said. “In the lens of May 4th, students were just throwing rocks that day and even at the time of the shots, there were no rocks or projectiles being thrown, and 4 students were murdered, so add more guns into that equation and I don’t think it equals fewer casualties.”

The notion that more guns equals greater safety is a common belief among many Americans, as a recent poll conducted by NBC News and the Wall Street Journal indicates that around 58% of Americans agree with the statement that “gun ownership does more to increase safety by allowing law-abiding citizens to protect themselves.” Only 38% agree with the statement that “gun ownership does more to reduce safety by giving too many people access to firearms and increasing the chances for accidental misuse.”

A 2014 study published in Annals of Internal Medicine concluded that higher accessibility to firearms tripled the risk of suicide and doubled the chances of a homicide being committed. The claim that 2.5 million Americans every year use firearms to protect themselves or their property has repeatedly been refuted. The skewed numbers were based off of an inconsistent 1990s study. Rather, there is overwhelming evidence that more guns results in more risk for everyone involved. An analysis led by the FBI in 2015 concluded that “”private citizens are far more likely to use guns to harm others or themselves than to use them to kill in self-defense.”

The evidence leaves me inclined to strongly believe that had the students wielded firearms on May 4th, this would have only increased the number of deaths and reduced the safety of all participants.

Camp said May 4th encompasses so much more than just what happened on that day. It is representative of students and their right to peacefully protest.

“The legacy of May 4th is a living legacy; it is always changing and is consistent with the times,” Camp said. “It changes to whatever is going on in that time.”

Eugene Shelton, co-chairman of the diversity and globalization committee for the School of Journalism and Mass Communication and an associate professor, clearly remembers sitting in his dorm room inside of Wright Hall on May 4th, where he could see everything unfold from his window. Shelton said Jeffrey Miller, one of the four students who lost their lives that day, stayed in Wright Hall too.

“A young man who I lived in the same dorm with was murdered,” Shelton said. “So that was an emotional attachment.”

Shelton said guns should not be allowed on any college campus, particularly Kent State’s considering its connection to May 4th and the vulnerability of college students.

“I don’t want guns in my life, period,” Shelton said. “Why do you need to carry a gun? Yes, it is a right but when you see innocent people being killed on a daily basis in the most innocent of places like schools or churches, I don’t understand why people say what is more important—somebody’s life or my right to bear arms?”

Shelton believes there is too much accessibility to firearms throughout the United States, resulting in less gun regulation and increasing the chances of an individual acquiring a firearm who should not be allowed to possess the weapon in the first place. Last year alone, there were nearly 40,000 deaths as a result of gun violence, marking the third consecutive year firearm deaths rose in the United States.

“It’s too easy for a person who is mentally disabled to get guns and their minds operate in a different world,” Shelton said. “Too many people who have had access to guns should not have had them in the first place.”

Alexis Atwater, president of Kent State college democrats and chief of staff for undergraduate student government, said May 4th demonstrates the need for college students to share their opinions about issues that affect them.

“The legacy shows students should have a voice. Whether it be to administration, state politics, national politics,” Atwater said. “It is so important students have a voice because these things do impact them.”

Atwater said many Kent State students, particularly out of state students, do not understand what really happened on May 4th and only know basic facts surrounding the tragedy.

“Yes, we want to be remembered as a school where something happened, because it’s important to remember but also to educate,” Atwater said. “We should keep bringing speakers here and doing the vigil every year. I think it’s important to remember and I don’t want to see it decline.”

Atwater believes police and other security measures should consider how peaceful the majority of protestors wish to be during campus protests and demonstrations.

“There are people on the left and on the right that get pretty extreme and protest in the wrong way and don’t go about things peacefully, but the majority do and that is what we need to see,” Atwater said. “It’s so important to share your voice.”

I agree that it is important to share your voice. As a college student and a senior at Kent State, the history of May 4th absolutely shakes me to my core. These four students prematurely lost their lives in this senseless act of violence while practicing their constitutional rights to express their personal views, which are protected by the First Amendment. During the open-carry protests, what if shots were fired at my fellow Kent State peers, regardless of whether or not they support open carry on campus, who had every right to assemble and protest? As college students, we are the intellectuals of the future. We equally possess the constitutional right to share our personal views on any contemporary political issue. We should be able to do so without fear of aggressive retaliation.

Dear President Warren, Shay Little, and Rod Flauhaus,

The May 4th Task Force is appalled by the university’s repeated mistreatment of our organization, and we feel we can no longer advocate for ourselves privately. Therefore, we have written this open letter detailing our grievances and demands.

When Dr. Warren first came to us with the idea that the university would help organize programming for the 50th commemoration, we were told that the Task Force would still have an integral role in the planning. However, the closer 2020 approaches, the less power we have in this process. We went from keeping decision-making power over speakers and themes to being a minority voice in committees most of our members aren’t allowed to attend.

Our alumni and community members are, according to the May 4th Task Force constitution, official members of the Task Force. They’ve done the most work and have the most wisdom

to share out of all of us. Yet, because they aren't students, they aren't invited onto the committees.

Our questions and concerns are routinely dodged. We send emails to the 50th commemoration director that get no response. When the Task Force asked Mr. Flauhaus at a meeting whether or not we would still get to decide who the speakers for the 50th would be, he acted confused. He waived the issue away for weeks claiming to not understand what we were saying. But after enough pressure, he came back and says that the Task Force has no role in the 50th planning other than its participation in committees.

Our future is being decided for us without us. A resolution concerning May 4th education and memorializing after 2020 is supposed to be presented to the board of trustees this Wednesday. We believe this resolution will give the university the authority to hold the commemorations after the 50th and become the main educational body for May 4th. Many current and former Task Force leaders have objected to this proposal. Even though this resolution would take the Task Force's mission (to educate around and commemorate the events of May 4th, 1970) and give it to the university, we haven't seen the language of the resolution. We weren't even consulted about the matter when it was being written. This resolution was made undemocratically and appears to us as a clear power grab by the university over the future of May 4th.

Our (now former) faculty advisor, Idris Syed, who tirelessly advocated for the Task Force at every chance he had, was removed as a professor of the May 4th and its Aftermath class with

no explanation. Despite his decades of direct involvement with May 4th history, he no longer teaches the only May 4th course offered at Kent State–after he spoke out against the university's bad faith relationship with the Task Force.

Professor Syed resigned as faculty advisor specifically because of the university's persistent mistreatment of the Task Force. He no longer feels like he can hold the university accountable at committee meetings, because he gets dismissed by Mr. Flauhaus and other, or elsewhere, because he gets ignored. The May 4th Task Force stands in full support of Professor Syed and his decision to resign.

It's become clear that trying to advocate for ourselves only within the closed space of meeting rooms has failed to convince the administration to work with us in good faith. Therefore, we have decided to make our grievances public. If the university wants to continue on its path, it can no longer do so in bureaucratic darkness. We want to expose their wrongs to the broader May 4th and Kent activist communities. We ask for vocal support from those communities as we try to hold the university accountable for its actions. We have drafted this set of demands, which if met would put the Task Force and the university on the path to a better working relationship.

1. Open 50th commemoration planning meetings to any member of the May 4th community.
2. Write minutes from the committee meetings and publish them publicly so that all community members can stay informed about what goes on at those meetings.

3. The administration must commit to acting in good faith with the task force in the future. This means taking demonstrable actions to alleviate our concerns and bring us into 50th planning projects.
4. The resolution concerning the future of May 4th commemorations and education must be shared with the May 4th Task Force and made public so the larger May 4th and Kent activist communities can see and comment on it. The task force must be allowed to revise the resolution before it goes to the board of trustees. The resolution must be approved by a majority vote of Task Force members before going to the board of trustees.

We expect a response from Mr. Flauhaus or another university representative before the board of trustees meeting on Wednesday.

Signed,

The May 4th Task Force