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# UUWORLD

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# Kent State Seeds a Ministry

By Pamela Griner Leavy

IN THE EARLY MORNING OF MAY 4, the Rev. Barbara Child is standing vigil in a blocked-off section of a Kent State University parking lot. In this exact location 30 years ago, Sandy Scheuer was shot and killed by Ohio national guardsmen as Child stood nearby. Today, surrounded by flowers, candles, and poignant messages written in chalk on the asphalt, the 62-year-old Child, now minister of the UU Church of Tampa, FL, and chair of the UUA Commission on Social Witness, is holding a heavy glass lantern. A small woman with silvery white hair, she grasps the lantern carefully, so that the flickering candle inside doesn't flicker out.

The day of the shootings, Child, then a 32-year-old assistant professor of English and member of the UU Church of Akron, stood outside a classroom building as National Guardsmen fired 67 bullets into a crowd of about 1,000 students. When the gunfire ended, four lay dead or dying in the parking lot. Nine others were wounded, including one who was paralyzed for life. Child's own life was changed forever.

Referring to people like herself who've kept the memory of that day alive, she says, "We call Kent the killing ground, and it certainly was that. But it was also a testing ground. The questions I faced included 'Do you pay attention to injustice and human suffering? Do you allow pain? Do you allow change in?' I learned we either change or die, and people work incredibly hard not to change."

Child was soon spending much of her spare time doing volunteer work for the ACLU on behalf of the shooting victims and their families. By 1973, frustrated by the ACLU's lack of interest in women's issues and believing she could be a more effective change agent with a law degree, she had begun attending law school at night at the University of Akron.

In 1977, when university officials announced plans to build a gymnasium where the guardsmen had skirmished



The Rev. Barbara Child stands vigil at Kent State 30 years after the shootings.

with students before the shootings, Child joined protesters who spent the summer in a tent city erected on the site. The protest failed. Yet Child expresses only gratitude for her whole Kent State experience. "I am grateful, as awful as it was, for being part of what happened," she says. "I had a choice as to whether to put on blinders or feel pain and face change. Kent State forced me to change in a big way."

Child left Kent State in 1978, when she passed the bar exam and joined the county legal aid office, where she focused on women's legal issues. Then, in 1981, she moved to

San Francisco to teach at the Golden Gate University Law School, and in 1985 she joined the law faculty at the University of Florida in Gainesville.

Active in the UU Fellowship of Gainesville, Child cochaired the Florida District Women and Religion Committee from 1990 to 1992. At a women and religion retreat, Child happened to tell her Kent State story. Kay Johnson, who then attended the UU

United Fellowship in Seminole, FL, listened intently. "That was the first time I had heard firsthand from someone who had been at Kent State," says

Johnson, a former combat nurse who served in Vietnam. "It was hard to be in Vietnam and see people protesting the war. It seemed like they were protesting us. I remember not feeling that way anymore when I heard Barbara speak. I had never thought about the other side because I was so engrossed in my own feelings." For her part, Child says it was humbling—and telling—to discover she could affect someone so deeply with her storytelling.

In part because of the experience, Child made another life-changing decision in 1993, enrolling at the Starr King School for the Ministry in Berkeley, CA. Now, as minister to the Tampa congregation that called her in 1997, she uses her sermons to touch people in similar ways, whether by recounting her pilgrimages to Kent State or by urging congregants to turn their own life lessons into meaningful action.

As affected as she has been by the Kent State events, Child has also come to realize that they have a different meaning for each new generation. Recently, she says, she got upset when the university choir performed at a remembrance ceremony in tuxedos and formal dresses instead of the traditional jeans and t-shirts. "Every time I catch myself doing something like this," she says, "it's a reminder of how naturally we resist change and how important it is to overcome that resistance. It's a lesson for me that I have to put into practice what I share with my congregation and teach in leadership classes." ■

*Pamela Griner Leavy is a freelance writer living in St. Petersburg, FL, a Unitarian Universalist, and life member of the Mountain.*

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