



Mike and Diane Byrne are pictured in their home in Camillus. They were married 50 years ago on the day after the death of John F. Kennedy. (Kevin Revell / krevell@syracuse.com)

Where were you on that day?

An invitation for those who remember to share what they felt when they heard the news



A half-century past Dallas

To share your memories of the Kennedy assassination: Email Sean Kirst at skirst@syracuse.com, write to him in care of The Post-Standard, 220 S. Warren St., Syracuse 13202 or leave a comment on his blog at syracuse.com/kirst. The Post-Standard will feature some of the reflections as part of our remembrance in November.

By Sean Kirst
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Michael Byrne was 22 when it happened, and since that day he's had a career as a Syracuse police officer and then retired, and he and his wife Diane started a family and raised their kids and then became grandparents. There are plenty of moments from those long years that are forgotten.

Not Nov. 22, 1963. That afternoon, Byrne was training as a student in the police academy, which used to meet in an old downtown courthouse in Syracuse.

"We were in a room in the attic," Byrne said. The students were learning defensive tactics — how to take a gun from a defendant, how to deal with an assailant. "Everyone was doing what they were

supposed to be doing," Byrne said, "when Lt. John Dillon stepped out of his office and called everyone to attention."

It was the same John Dillon who'd become a legendary sheriff.

The president's been shot, he told the group. "None of us had ever lived through such a thing," Byrne said. "We froze in disbelief. We stopped doing what we were doing. Everyone was just staring out the windows."

Byrne, sick with grief, had to pull himself together. He was getting married the next day.

The Kennedy assassination. Philip Bump, a writer for The Atlantic Wire, has called it the first monumental "Where were you when?" moment in the era of American mass media. Certainly, there have been other unforgettable instances of shock and communion in living memory: the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1941, the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks of 2001.

Yet the death of John F. Kennedy in Dallas, coupled with the ascendancy of television, emerged as a terrible threshold of 20th century change. It has been described as an end to American innocence — or to national illusion, if you prefer. It seemed to unleash a wave of sorrow and cynicism that would continue throughout the war in Vietnam, the Watergate scandal and the assassinations of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy, the president's brother.

For many of us, born amid the Baby Boom, it is easy to remember an era when it seemed as if all American adults — as demonstrated by the vivid tale of Michael Byrne — could tell you exactly where they were at the instant they learned Kennedy was dead.

Not anymore. Not even close. In 2010, only 33 per-

cent of Central New Yorkers were 50 and older. Even the top elected officials in this region — County Executive Joanie Mahoney, Syracuse Mayor Stephanie Miner, U.S. Rep. Dan Maffei — were born after the president was shot.

As we prepare, then, for the 50th anniversary of the tragedy in Dallas, The Post-Standard/Syracuse.com has a request: If you have a vivid recollection of where you were Nov. 22, 1963, email it to me at skirst@syracuse.com, write to me in care of The Post-Standard, 220 S. Warren St., Syracuse 13202, or leave your reflection on my blog at syracuse.com/kirst.

We'll assemble all these memories and share them with the Onondaga Historical Association, as a kind of living archive. We'll also highlight some of the stories a month from now, as part of commemorating the anniversary, and we'll create a video featuring the voices of a few readers with particularly emblematic tales.

How powerful was that day? In 1963, The Post-Standard and Herald-Journal offered grim descriptions of a city in despair. One reporter interviewed Emily Ceconi, a ticket taker at Loews, the movie house that is now the Landmark Theatre. Ceconi sat each day at a window facing what was then one of the busiest pedestrian crossroads in the region.

Ceconi struggled to find the words for the demeanor of Central New Yorkers grappling with what had just happened: "The town is dead," she said. City Police Officer John Glavin told The Post-Standard that visitors to the

police station, typically there to file a complaint, heard the news and turned in silence for the door.

They left, he said, "without even airing their beef."

The day John F. Kennedy died was a Friday. The greater Syracuse community had been joyfully preparing for its annual downtown Christmas parade. That parade was almost immediately canceled, replaced by a civic memorial service that drew thousands to the War Memorial.

Last week, a few queries brought immediate, electric



Mike and Diane Byrne on their wedding day, Nov. 23, 1963. The reception, Mike recalls, "was pretty quiet."

recollections from Central New Yorkers old enough to remember. Robert Betsey, an educator at McKinley-Brighton elementary school, said he was driving a cab that afternoon in Washington, D.C. He learned the president was dead by listening as a dispatcher and other drivers offered exclamations of raw sorrow over the radio.

Betsey pulled over near the Howard University library. "I just parked and looked around, and people were

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es	26 wks	13 wks	4 wks
	\$111.00	\$58.50	\$39.00
	\$46.80	\$23.40	\$7.20
	\$163.80	\$81.90	\$25.20

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Remembering a day that shook a nation

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already beginning to show the shock and grief," he said.

Angela Thor, a medical circuit librarian from Syracuse, was an 8-year-old third-grader at the Epiphany Elementary School, in Cliffside Park, N.J. She was in a third-floor classroom when the principal — "Sister Modesto, a very Irish nun" — announced over the loudspeaker that Kennedy had been shot.

For young children in the school, the most powerful impression was the way adults who typically seemed to be in total command were abruptly staggered, unable to contain

their own emotions. For days, Thor said, the black-and-white television at her house was locked into each bit of breaking news and coverage of the funeral.

As for Byrne, he and his wife had little choice but to proceed with their wedding. Reservations were already made; friends were arriving from out of town. "We had our reception at the Country House, out on Buckley Road, and it was pretty quiet," Byrne said.

On Nov. 24, 1963, Byrne was leaning over the counter of a hotel, half-watching a little television set up near the clerk, when a nightclub owner

named Jack Ruby shot and killed Lee Harvey Oswald, the accused assassin.

"I went to our room and told my wife: You're not going to believe this," Byrne said.

Next month will be 50 years. A president frozen in our minds as eternally young would now be 96, if somehow he lived a half-century past Dallas. The "where were you when" moment that once linked a nation now provides communion only for a generation of graying Americans.

If that includes you, send us your memories. Maybe that will help our children understand.