

## **Rural Roots Rising Web Extra: Remembering Kent State -- Transcript**

*For more episodes of this radio show and podcast go to [RuralRootsRising.org](http://RuralRootsRising.org)*

Narrator: Welcome to a special episode of Rural Roots Rising: Remembering Kent State. If this is your first time listening, Rural Roots Rising is a monthly radio show and podcast created by and for rural Oregonians who are creatively and courageously building stronger and more vibrant communities for a just democracy. My name is Hannah Harrod, and I'm an organizer with the Rural Organizing Project. On May 4th, 1970 members of the Ohio National Guard fired into a crowd of nonviolent Kent State University demonstrators who were protesting the war in Vietnam. Four students were killed: Allison Beth Krause, Jeffery Glen Miller, Sandra Lee Scheur, and William Knox Schroeder. Nine more students were wounded. One of those wounded students was Joe Lewis, who is now a leader and organizer with Columbia County Coalition for Human Dignity and a member of the ROP board of directors.

The Vietnam era was a tumultuous political time, the nation was already sharply divided and the Kent State shooting solidified that gulf. Nationwide student strikes followed the Kent State shooting and hundreds of colleges and universities closed. Some historians argue that Kent State was a lead up to Watergate which would eventually lead to the end of the Nixon administration. This year marks the 50th anniversary of the Kent State shooting. And 50 years later, we are still seeing the presence of the National Guard at protests around the nation.

We wanted to take the opportunity to create this special episode of Rural Roots Rising to share Joe's story, and the courage that he and the other students showed in the days and years that followed the shooting. With the support of the ACLU, families of the students who were killed and who were wounded filed a wrongful death civil lawsuit against then Ohio Governor James A. Rhodes and 52 National Guard commanders and troops. At a Rural Organizing Project board of directors retreat, Joe sat down with my colleague Cara Shufelt and shared this story with us for our listeners and for our community organizing archives. If you'd like to learn more, we'll offer some additional materials at the end of this piece that are recommended by Joe.

Joe Lewis: In high school, you know, we, I'm 68 now. And so, my youth in the early 60s was very, I don't know if it was dramatic, but there were definitely, it was definitely climatic, climactic is that the word I want to use? There was climaxes, periodically, we, I witnessed the assassination, I didn't witness but I lived during the time of the assassination of President Kennedy. And then later Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy. And the time of the Vietnam War, which, in those days, it was broadcast over TV. Every night on the six o'clock news, you would see film coverage of people who, of soldiers who were, who were shot and dying, right on the camera with gaping chest wounds. And the storyline that was being told to the American people was about how essential this war was to preserve democracy, how we were defeating this enemy who actually were just defending their home, their homeland, their home country. And, and they had no other option but to fight the occupation, the invasion and occupation of their country by, by foreign soldiers. So that, in high school that rankled me and I, I became

strongly opposed to the war in Vietnam, although I didn't understand at the time, I wondered what the motivation was for us to go there. And I suspected it was for resources of oil or minerals or something. I was confused by the reason that we were there. And only later have I come to realize that a war itself is a profit making machine. And that that was the sole reason for the engagement, was for companies that manufacture weapons, and even transportation and motors and engines. They were making money on war. And that was the reason that I think, I believe that was the duplicitous reason that our government leaders wanted us involved there. And that really rankled me. And so, I participated when I went to college in 1969. I participated in the fall in the moratorium against the war. It was a march in October and in November, and I, and I joined with hundreds of other students at my university, Kent State, to protest the war. We marched from the university down in downtown and rallied outside the draft office. And just to, to show our opposition to the country's policies, intervening in that war in Vietnam.

Well, as I participated in these peaceful demonstrations, I never expected to have things develop the way they did. In the spring of 1970, there were some demonstrations result, that resulted from Nixon's announcement of the Cambodian incursion, which was when he sent troops into Cambodia, and anti-war folks like myself considered that an expansion of the war. So, so I, and I remember reading the news about it on a ticker tape machine in the office of the journal's, journalism school on campus. And that night and the following days all around the country, anti-war people gathered in protest of that government decision. And, and there was a scheduled demonstration on the campus where the constitution was buried because Nixon had killed the constitution, was the idea. And they scheduled another demonstration for the following Monday. Well, that weekend in the town of Kent, which had a love/hate relationship with the university. They provide, the university students provided a lot of income but they were of a different kind of mindset than the small town mindset of the folks who lived in town. So that on Friday, there were some demonstrations in the, in the street on May 1st, 1970.

And the, the authorities and the, and the town really reacted poorly instead of, instead of just trying to disperse people, they, they closed down, the mayor closed down all the bars. And Kent was a university town in northeastern Ohio that had a lot of appeal for the surrounding area. And one of the reasons was there was live music every weekend. And there were 28 bars in five blocks. And so people came from all around northeastern Ohio and the mayor unwisely at 11 o'clock on a Friday night, closed all the bars. It was almost like by design. He wanted to feed the, the demonstrations rather than slow them down. And so people came out of all those bars onto the street and some of them were unhappy. There was a resulting demonstration where some windows were broken, and some traffic disrupted. And the mayor at that time declared a state of emergency and called the governor's office.

The governor was James Rhodes, who was about to be in a primary election the following Tuesday for the Republican primary for the Senate from Ohio. And he was notorious for being a law and order kind of guy. In fact, James Rhodes called out the National Guard more than any

other governor in the country, which included Ronald Reagan who called them out many times in California. And so I believe there was a decision made to make this an example. Well the following night Saturday, May 2nd, there was a demonstration around the ROTC building, which were targeted all across America as homes of the, the home of the war machine, you might say. And on the Kent State campus that night, there was, the building was actually burned down. There was an attempt by a group of people who I watched from afar to ignite the building. And that attempt seemed unsuccessful. After several different measures were taken to try and ignite the building, it didn't ignite. And I followed a group of students around the campus as they tried to get more supporters and we went around to the front campus and as we got there, from the East, the Ohio National Guard was pulling into town and Jeeps and trucks and, and armored personnel carriers. And so I quickly went back to the middle of campus where my dormitory was, right across the commons, which was a soccer field, from the ROTC building and upon returning the building, at that time was fully involved in flames. And I thought that was pretty suspicious that the students, or the persons who tried to ignite it earlier who may or may not have been students, seemed to be unsuccessful. But once the group of students left the area, the building caught fire and the building burned to the ground that day. And the next day Sunday, May 3rd, Governor Rhodes came to Kent. He came to the fire station in Kent. And he made an inflammatory speech, pounding his fist on the table and claimed that this was being done by an organized group traveling around the country, the Nixon administration always referred to "outside agitators," and trying to make an excuse for who, who did this damage to the building and he called these people, Governor Rhodes called these people the worse than the brown shirts, the Nazis and the vigilantes. The worst kind of people we harbor in America was his quote, as he pounded his fist on the table, being broadcast to the National Guardsmen who now were bivouacked, on the campus. There were 900 Ohio National Guardsmen on the campus. And so I think he incited, enflamed, their attitudes. And that night, there was a terrifying scene of helicopters overhead and curfews both in the town and on the campus that were enforced by Ohio National Guardsmen in full battle dress with M1 grand rifles, bayonets, fixed helmets, tear gas, and two helicopters with searchlights flying overhead. The Guardsmen were marching around campus doing a sweep of anyone who was out after curfew. It was, it was 10 o'clock in the city and 11 o'clock on the campus. And so exactly at those times, the National Guardsmen were herding people at bayonet point into buildings around the campus. And I watched as they, as they did this from my dormitory and saw and talked with my dorm counselor, my RA, Lou Jeffries, who was encouraging students to come into our dormitory to get away from the, the Guardsman. Even if they didn't live there. He said come, he could get through our dormitory to other dormitories by passing through the front to the back. And he told the story about how as one student came through the door, National Guardsman lunged at him with bayonet and Lou closed the door quickly behind the student and and the National Guardsman's bayonet got jammed in the door as he tried to lunge at the student.

And I remember talking to him that night about not being able to tell who the good guys and the bad guys were, because there was bad behavior on the students' part too. There was a little bit of rock throwing and a lot of yelling obscenities. But I also saw the Guardsmen throwing rocks at students in the dormitory windows. I saw them tear gas and I heard about stabbings of students

and beatings of students that night as they were forced into the buildings on campus because of the curfew. So the next day, May 4th, there was the scheduled demonstration that followed up the burying of the Constitution at noon. The campus was occupied by 900 National Guardsmen, but there were classes as usual. And that was, that was complicated because the National Guard had decided to enforce, it wasn't really martial law, but they weren't going to let, weren't going to let groups of four students gather anywhere on the campus. So any group of four students was technically illegal. And that was absurd. I had worked all my high school summers to save money to go to school and, and I was, I felt, in the right place on the campus, and they were in the wrong, chasing us around with bayonets and helicopters the night before. So I lent my body to the demonstration, joined a group of hundreds of students to demonstrate against the Guards' presence. And they took measures to, to disperse the crowd, first with tear gas which proved ineffective because of the wind. And some students actually cover their faces with cloths and threw the tear gas canisters back at the Guardsmen. And observing from the distance it seemed like a bizarre, but, but not threatening, kind of game, like a tennis match where the Guardsmen would fire tear gas at the students and there would be boos going up. And then some student would grab the smoking tear gas canister, throw it back in the direction of the Guardsmen, then there would be cheers. And it didn't, it didn't seem like foreboding or the possibility of any serious harm coming at that point. But since the tear gas wasn't effective, the Guardsmen lined up and proceeded to disperse the students with their bayonets at the ready and marched forward towards the group of students. Before they moved out, though, there was an announcement made, by apparently the law requires the announcement to be made three times - So that the Jeep came out towards the group of students across the field between the Guardsmen and the students. And they announced "The students of Kent State: This is an illegal assembly. Return to your dormitories," which, as I say, was absurd, because there were classes as usual. And if anyone was in the wrong place, it was the National Guards and students lived there. I mean, I was right near where I lived in my dormitory.

And after they announced that three times, they moved on the students with bayonets and herded them up between two buildings, up and over and down a hill on the other side and pushed the students up between two buildings which were my dorm, Johnson Hall, and Taylor Hall, which was the School of Journalism and Architecture. And so the crowd is divided in half as the students went up over the hill they divided in half, and the Guardsman went between them, past them down the hill to the other side, on to what was a practice football field where they assembled and received a lot of flak from people in the parking lot at the end of that football field. There were some people throwing gravel. No, no Guardsmen were injured. I mean, they talked about rock throwing, it was gravel that was thrown not, not rocks, no Guardsmen were injured. But there were people who were throwing gravel at this, at the Guardsmen from the parking lot. And there was one student who had a black flag, who appeared to be taunting the Guardsmen. Well, in fact, he had the black flag because his neighbor from Barberton, Ohio, had been killed in Vietnam just two weeks before. And so there's photographs of all this activity because as I said, it happened in front of the School of Journalism. There's hundreds of photographs that can be analyzed to see what the students were actually doing and what the Guardsmen were actually doing. And who was prepared to

cause harm and who was not. It's very clear from the photographs. And after a time, the Guardsmen kneel down and aim their rifles at the crowd of students in the parking lot and the student with the black flag, as if to threaten them. And they held that position for a while. Then there was apparently a group of perhaps, officers gathered, and we don't know what happened there. But I have a suspicion that, a conspiracy had took place at that time to show these students, to give these students a lesson. But they didn't do it there. They, they turned and marched back the way they had come, up on to the higher ground and many of us thought that it was over. They had dispersed the crowd and they were leaving. So there was kind of a cheer about, "Yeah, they're leaving." Well, when they got up to the top of the hill, as they approached me, I was over, I was watching them from the hilltop. And when they turned to the return, retrace their steps, they were walking directly at me. So I was foolish, but not that foolish. So when I saw them coming, I moved out of their way. But I was still very near to them. And I could see them climbing the hill and looking back over their right shoulders, at this area in the parking lot where they had received the most grief. When they climbed past me up the hill, I noticed that they were, I could hear their equipment jostling, and there was a group near the front that seemed very agitated looking back to that parking lot. And when they passed me and got to the top of the hill, at the corner of the railing in front of Taylor Hall, which was the School of Journalism and Architecture. The first three riflemen suddenly turned and aimed their guns back at the direction of the parking lot. And as, at that time, me. And I recall the gesture they had made before kneeling, and aiming their weapons and a threatening gesture. And so I foolishly gestured back at them with the middle finger, my right hand up raised. And then I heard sounds that sounded like firecrackers. But I didn't realize it was live ammunition until the ground in front of me poofed up in some poofs of dirt. Then I realized that they were actually shooting and at that same moment, I was struck by a bullet in my, my abdomen on the right side, which sent me flying back to the ground and landed on the ground. I didn't realize that I also, after having landed on the ground, was shot through the lower leg just above my ankle on the left, my left leg. But I remember lying on the ground, and there was 13 seconds of gunfire, 67 shots were fired. And when they stopped there was this just a heartbeat of dead silence before all kinds of screaming and crying out took place. And I remember laying there and a student came up to me to see, to talk to me and see how I was. And he came over to me. And he saw from my wallet which had fallen out of my pocket, that I was a classmate, a high school classmate of his little sister. And so he came up to me and I asked him, I said, "How bad is it?" Because I didn't know, I couldn't, I couldn't sit up. And he said "it's just a flesh wound," which was comforting to me but not true. Because it had been through and through wound, entering my right abdomen in a smallish hole and exiting in my left hip in a large hole the size of a coke can. I couldn't get up. And he, he stayed with me and a couple other people came around me, students, and a young woman came over to me and held my hand and I squeezed the heck out of that girl's hand. And she comforted me and just stayed with me there until a while later an ambulance came and picked up me and another student who had been behind me and also shot, but shot through the lungs. I later learned it was John Cleary. And on our ambulance ride he was, he was in horrible pain, every bump and every turn would cause him to scream out. And I was, I thought I was gonna die. And I, I had been raised in the Catholic tradition. So I had kind of fallen away from that belief, but just to be safe I, I said an act of contrition that I was sorry for my sins, in case I

would die. But I wasn't afraid to die. I felt like it would be the release of tension more than anything else. But it began to freak me out because John was in such horrible pain. And I asked the attendant in the ambulance, I said, "I can't breathe." And they said, "We don't know how to use the oxygen." So I wound up going to the hospital. And the last thing I remember, it was uncanny because I didn't lose consciousness this whole time. It was uncanny when I got to the hospital, the last thing I remember is they said, "We're going to cut your clothes off." And I remember thinking, my mom is not gonna like that. But that was the last thing I remembered for a couple of days where I was fighting to stay alive. I did receive the last rites. And I learned lately at my 50th class reunion that a couple of my friends from high school came to visit me in the hospital. And I had no idea because I was unconscious for 48 hours, fighting an infection and basically trying to stay alive.

So this definitely radicalized me. When it comes to disbelieving anything the government says or anything in the media, because the media coverage of this event really blamed the students for what happened. And Nixon called the students bums and Rhodes called the student activists the worst element of American society. And he said we will, we're not going to deal with the symptoms we're going to, we're going to get a solution if it takes an armed guard in every classroom, is what Rhodes said, Governor Rhodes. So coming away from that, at first, I was very humbled and, and intimidated. So it took me a little while to begin my organizing after that happened. It took me time to realize after getting to know some of the other people who were involved, and the eight other men who were shot, and the parents of the four people who were killed, to realize that I had to do something if I could to make this government change.

And so that was the beginning of my organizing attitude. Although I didn't really do much organizing, I participated. But I mostly organized after I moved to Scappoose in the late 70s, early 80s. I had found refuge there at first and modicum of healing.

In 1995, with a 25th anniversary of the shooting, a friend of mine who I encouraged to move to Scappoose with me, who was also wounded. We were interviewed in the Oregonian newspaper. And then a teacher at Clackamas High School invited us to come speak to his class about it. And that began a real healing time, where we shared our story and found that it was actually beneficial for our state of mind to talk about it. Prior to that, you know, we were really shy about talking about it because of the attitude that was prevailed in the media and by the government. So that led me to question lots of things and, and formed the basis of my activism for the rest of my life, really. So that's a long story, but the true one

MUSIC

Narrator:

You've been listening to "Remembering Kent State," a special episode of Rural Roots Rising featuring Joe Lewis, who was wounded at Kent State 50 years ago. Joe lives in Scappoose and organizes with Columbia County Coalition for Human Dignity and is a member of the ROP board

of directors. If you want to read more about this history, Joe recommends the book *Kent State: Death and Dissent in the Long Sixties* by Tom Grace, and *Truth about Kent State: A Challenge to the American Conscience* by Peter Davies. For movies, he recommends *Fire in the Heartland* and *When the War Came Home*. Kent State is hosting a 50th anniversary virtual commemoration online, including a teach-in in partnership with the Kent State Truth Tribunal and Project Censored. You can find this online at [truthtribunal.org](http://truthtribunal.org). You can also find links to these at [ruralrootsrising.org](http://ruralrootsrising.org) and in the rural media center at [ROP.org](http://ROP.org).

Rural Roots Rising is a monthly radio show and podcast created by and for rural Oregonians who are creatively and courageously building stronger and more vibrant communities for a just democracy. Do you have comments, questions, or reactions to what you just heard? Tell us what you think at [info@ruralrootsrising.org](mailto:info@ruralrootsrising.org).

We featured music from the Road Sodas and Trouvaille. Rural Roots Rising is created by the Rural Organizing Project, a network of over 65 autonomous member groups who are committed to advancing human dignity and democracy across rural Oregon. To learn more about the Rural Organizing project, go to [rop.org](http://rop.org)! If you liked what you heard today, you can find more episodes at [ruralrootsrising.org](http://ruralrootsrising.org). Please follow us on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and subscribe wherever you get your podcasts. Thanks so much for listening!

Transcribed by <https://otter.ai>