

11-22-2013

A Kennedy Memorial

Follow this and additional works at: https://ecommons.udayton.edu/news_rls

Recommended Citation

"A Kennedy Memorial" (2013). *News Releases*. 2846.
https://ecommons.udayton.edu/news_rls/2846

This News Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Marketing and Communications at eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in News Releases by an authorized administrator of eCommons. For more information, please contact frice1@udayton.edu, mschlangen1@udayton.edu.

University of Dayton, Ohio (url: <http://www.udayton.edu/index.php>)



A Kennedy Memorial

11.22.2013 | Campus and Community, Hot Topics

"There was just an aura of disbelief. People had a hard time accepting the fact that he was gone. We wondered, was there anything we could do?"

Pamela (Roderick) Pelc, '66, like many others, still remembers where she was when she heard that President Kennedy had been shot. She was in Chaminade Hall. Class had just started when she overheard someone say Kennedy had been killed.

"I thought it must be a joke," Pelc said. "I didn't believe that sort of thing could happen."

Janet (Weiss) Reeds '66, recalls a feeling of numbness. In the days after Kennedy's death, Reeds sat in her Marycrest dorm room, talking with friends, mourning over what was and what could have been.

Out of this sadness came a thought: The new student center, under construction since March 1, had not yet been named.

"We should name it after the president,' I remember saying to my friends," Reeds said. "So I started circulating a petition. The idea caught on, and other students got involved. It wasn't just me."

(See photos of the Kennedy Memorial Union and news clippings at <http://on.fb.me/1e80ObZ> (url: <http://on.fb.me/1e80ObZ>)

In some ways, the move to memorialize the late president with the new student center happened as suddenly as the tragedy itself. The president died on Friday, classes were canceled Monday, petitions were circulated Tuesday and Wednesday, and on Wednesday evening, the night before Thanksgiving, the University's board of trustees approved the students' request. The new student center would be called the John F. Kennedy Memorial Union.

"I guess it did happen quickly," Reeds said. "But you can't let things like that go. I didn't want people to lose the urgency of the matter, to wait too long."

Father Raymond Roesch, S.M., who was president at the time, sent letters to the First Lady and to Kennedy's parents informing them of the decision, writing that the center would be a "bricks and mortar memorial" to the late president's legacy.

Ten months later, on Sept. 6, 1964, Kennedy Union officially opened, just in time for orientation of a new class of Flyers. Mass, tours, meetings, movies and even a hootenanny helped show off the new center.

The following spring, a more solemn dedication ceremony was planned. On April 7, 1965, assistant to the president Dave F. Powers stood on the steps of the Kennedy Union, beside the sculpture of his close friend, rising out of the eternal flame, and reminisced. Powers recalled special moments with the president: how he found him calmly reading a bedtime story to daughter Caroline on Black Saturday of the Cuban Missile Crisis; how he got out of his campaign motorcade to help an old woman cross the street; how he was at his best under pressure.

Beyond just the name, the building displayed several reminders of President Kennedy: the 8-foot statue of "Kennedy's Eternal Flame" by Ohio State University professor William Thompson; the library with two Kennedy-type rocking chairs and a wood-cut relief depicting the president with John-John; Torch Lounge with a wrought-iron torch symbolizing the flame at his grave; and the presidential ballroom.

A reporter for the *Dayton Journal Herald* described the building as sophisticated, elegant, attuned to education.

"Naming the building is a means of perpetuating on this campus the ideals and hopes which made John F. Kennedy an inspiration to University students throughout the nation," read the front page of the dedication ceremony program.

Reeds attended the dedication ceremony, and felt a sense of pride at what she and her fellow students had done.

"It was a good thing for the University to have done," she said. "We were showing our solidarity with the president not just as Catholics, but as Americans. The enthusiasm that had developed on campus around the student center really brought all the

elements of the university together."

That sense of oneness, that sense of community — that's what stands out in retired biology professor Bro. Don Geiger's mind. Geiger was finishing up his Ph.D. studies at Ohio State on Nov. 22, 1963, and arrived on UD's campus two months later for the start of the second semester.

One of his first appointments as a new faculty member was to the JFK Memorial Union Board, made up of faculty, staff and students, including Pelc.

"From the first meeting, I was impressed by the seriousness of the students and wanting the Kennedy Union to be top notch and represent a very strong memorial to the president," Geiger said.

Though he had taught high school for five years and had been on a few college campuses, he had never seen such a close, sincere collaboration between students and the administration.

"I think the solidarity among everyone on campus was partly because of the small size, but more than that, it truly represented the Marianist sense of community," Geiger said. "It was seen in how everyone — students, faculty and administration — worked together to make Kennedy Union a success."

Geiger said that the spirit of community and reaching out beyond campus was embraced by members of the Kennedy Union board, particularly by Ellie Kurtz, who institutionalized that spirit the year after JFK's assassination with the first Christmas on Campus.

"That kind of community spirit was exactly the kind of spirit Kennedy represented."

And it's that message, that spirit, that was intended 50 years ago when a campus united to mourn a fallen president, and that is hoped to resonate 50 years from now with a campus that has no living memory of him.

For more information, contact Cameron Fullam, assistant director of media relations, at 937-229-3256 or fullam@udayton.edu.