

Where Were You When...? Plastic Surgeons Remember John F. Kennedy

Rod J. Rohrich, M.D.
Mary H. McGrath, M.D.
M.P.H.

Fernando Molina, M.D.
Ivo Pitanguy, M.D.

Randy Sherman, M.D.
Shoulu “Wei” Wang, M.D.

Robert L. Walton, M.D.
Anthony Wolfe, M.D.

Charles Verheyden, M.D.

*San Francisco and Los Angeles,
Calif.; Chicago, Ill.; Miami, Fla.; Temple
and Dallas, Texas;
Mexico City, Mexico;
Rio de Janeiro, Brazil; and Shanghai,
People’s Republic of China*

November 22, 2013, marks the fiftieth anniversary of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. *Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery* asked several prominent plastic surgeons from around the world a simple question: “Where were you when John F. Kennedy was assassinated?”

We received several personal notes and stories from that day. It is safe to say that the assassination of John F. Kennedy changed the lives of all Americans, and perhaps of all citizens of the world even—just as the events of 9/11 had an impact on the entire globe. That said, some of the plastic surgeons surveyed did not feel that they had anything to share. For others, the events were still, even 50 years later, too raw to discuss (Fig. 1). Of those that submitted responses, you will find a variety of thoughts and echoes of the past about the death of a president; for some, the assassination made a direct correlation to a career in medicine; for others, the event perhaps only tangentially affected their life and career path. One thing unifies their voices, though: President Kennedy, the events and conspiracy theories surrounding his assassination, the aftermath, and the president’s legacy have not been forgotten. I believe that they never will be.

—Rod J. Rohrich, M.D., Editor-in-Chief

Randy Sherman, M.D., Los Angeles, California

It was cold, more disturbingly chilly. I was way over school and just going through the motions at Bellevue middle prep, our local version of junior high in a town just across the city line of St. Louis, Missouri. The reprieve of Thanksgiving vacation was merely days away. After lunch, on the playground, marking time, things all of a sudden changed. Several adults appeared, only a few familiar. They looked foreboding but not threatening. We were instructed to form a line and be quiet. Into our classrooms we were led, regimentally. You felt it then without any words, no inclination as to what was about to befall us, but it was as clear and unequivocal as a 7.0 California earthquake. All seated, we were given time to ruminate; stew in the anxiety of the moment toward the impending news to be delivered. Our teacher, a very forgettable older technocrat, started into the declaration. Kennedy, Dallas, book depository, assassination, Love Field, Connally. The remainder of school was cancelled, parents were notified, we were to

report to our bus stations and proceed directly home. Then we waited and just stared, boats unmoored, drifting away from the dock but not yet thrashed about by the violent waters of the approaching storm.

In front of the television, Walter Cronkite left no possibility for misunderstanding, President Kennedy was dead. The oxygen went out of the room. No telling whether the emotional residue had any bearing whatsoever on later decisions in my life to pursue medicine, plastic surgery, education, or aviation. However, it was a day that left many lessons. The world was now by measure fractionated much more by uncertainty, unpredictability, and risk than ever before. The difference between being told a story and being in a story was fresh, raw, and thoroughly unpleasant.

Ivo Pitanguy, M.D., Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

I was in my clinic when President Kennedy was shot. I still remember the sense of grief and emptiness I felt on that Friday afternoon. Suddenly, gone was the person who I believed would lead the world toward a more tolerant future, with mutual respect among the different peoples. His short term in office was marked by adverse events that demanded from him a profound reflection and great power of

Received for publication July 11, 2013; accepted July 12, 2013.

Copyright © 2013 by the American Society of Plastic Surgeons

DOI: 10.1097/PRS.0b013e3182a598a8



Fig. 1. President John F. Kennedy's casket lying in state. (White House Photographs/John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum.)

decision, averting a global nuclear confrontation. John F. Kennedy, as the leader of the most powerful nation, gave all of us hope that man could live in peace and strive for freedom. This promise was cut short on a very sad day, 50 years ago (Fig. 2).

Anthony Wolfe, M.D., Miami, Florida

I was an undergraduate at Dartmouth College, and on March 6, 1960, was walking across the campus. Jack Kennedy walked within a few feet of me as he left a building where he had given a lecture in The Great Issues series (we called it "Grey Tissues"). What I recall of him was that he had a deep tan, something that one did not see in New Hampshire in the middle



Fig. 2. Ivo Pitanguy, M.D., circa 1963. (Used with permission from Ivo Pitanguy.)

of the winter, visible evidence of his having a house in Palm Beach. He wore a dark overcoat, and no hat.

I was again in close proximity to the Kennedys when Jacqueline Kennedy went into premature labor on August 7, 1963, and Patrick Bouvier Kennedy was flown to Boston Children's Hospital, where he died of hyaline membrane disease 2 days later.

On November 22, 1963, I was in my dormitory room at Harvard Medical School's Vanderbilt Hall, across the street from Boston Children's Hospital, where we heard over the radio that the President had been shot. He had been taken to Parkland Hospital, and we soon heard that he had died. The national tragedy began, still unended, and I think a substantial percentage of the American population, myself included, still believe that dark powers were behind the assassination and not Lee Harvey Oswald acting alone.

I had a tangential relationship to another presidential assassination attempt. Wesley Price, who later became my craniofacial fellow, was on call in the George Washington Hospital Emergency Room on March 30, 1981, when Ronald Reagan was brought in after shots had been fired by John Hinckley, Jr.

When Reagan's shirt was removed, Wesley was the first to notice a bullet wound which everyone, including the president, was unaware of. Two presidents shot, only one able to finish his second term.

Robert L. Walton, M.D., Chicago, Illinois

The day was Friday, November 22, 1963. It was just after lunch. We were whiling away in Myrtle Burns's senior English class at Turner High School in Kansas City, Kansas (Fig. 3).

The message came in waves. The first inkling something was amiss came around 1:30 PM when Ms. Burns was summoned to the hallway by the vice principal. Theirs were frantic whispers. Ms. Burns returned to the classroom and solemnly proclaimed that President Kennedy had been shot. Though shocked, we remained hopeful. A short time later, the principal announced over the school's public address system that the president had died from an assassin's bullets. The silence was palpable. Soon, Ms. Burns was inundated with questions she could not answer. As if on cue, the screechy public address system came alive again, and an unsteady, breaking principal's voice announced that school would be dismissed for the remainder of the day.

We went home and, for the next week, remained glued to our television sets watching reruns of the assassination, news commentary, and funeral events. That following Sunday morning, the shooting of Lee Harvey Oswald was on live television as he exited the Dallas Police Station. I remember friends applauding the appropriateness of that vigilante justice—Jack Ruby, a barbershop hero. Kennedy's funeral procession left indelible poignant memories: a black-veiled Jackie Kennedy; the caisson; "Black Jack" the riderless horse with boots placed backwards

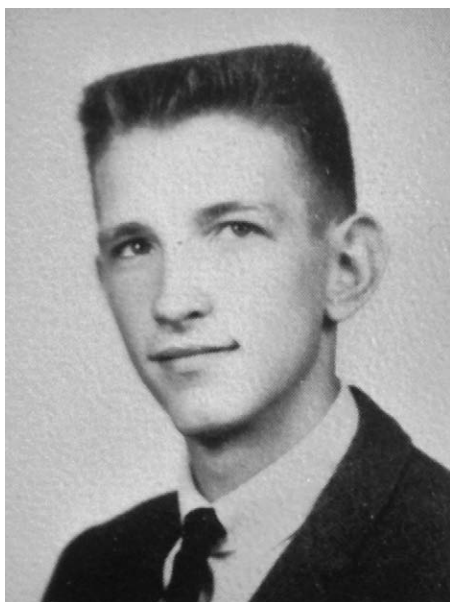


Fig. 3. Robert L. Walton, M.D., circa 1963. (Used with permission from Robert L. Walton.)

in the stirrups, alone, clod hooves echoing on pavement; John F. Kennedy, Jr. saluting his father's casket, the eternal flame being lit at Kennedy's grave.

I really cannot say with any certainty how the Kennedy assassination influenced my life. The event triggered a roller coaster of emotions. It was the first time I had seen actual footage (Zapruder tape) of a person getting shot—it was horrific, head exploding, blood, brain matter unceremoniously disassembled from that magnificent head. And, in retrospect, how futile the efforts to put everything back together. The event was so impersonal, yet the tragedy, so very personal. I remember being saddened for a long time. I also remember feeling a deep down dread that my ideal America was changing.

Over the years, I have been fascinated by the tales of conspiracy that have surrounded JFK's assassination. I always hoped that something/somebody greater than Oswald brought Kennedy down. It seems unfair that this wannabe nobody, psycho, Oswald, drawing from a hat, chose Kennedy as his ticket to infamy. What a shame.

Shoulu "Wei" Wang, M.D., Shanghai, People's Republic of China

On the day of November 22, 1963, I was a young plastic surgeon at Shanghai Guanchi Hospital and had just worked to study animal small vascular anastomosis and a dog groin free flap replantation research in a laboratory of Shanghai Second Medical College. The news came on, telling of Kennedy's assassination: Dallas, Texas, at 12:30 on November 22, 1963, President Kennedy had been shot dead. He was the fourth U.S. president killed, after Lincoln, Garfield, and McKinley. The news was earthshaking. No one could understand what had happened and why or how an American president could be assassinated in this modern era. Such a strong democratic country such as the United States. We wondered, "Why could the president's life not have been protected? If the president is not safe, what about the common people?"

Mary H. McGrath, M.D., M.P.H., San Francisco, California

As a high school student, I was a distant admirer of President Kennedy, who projected vitality, idealism, and modernism. Everything was possible, and youthful optimism and athleticism were the order of the day. The young people would shake up the

sedate lives of our parents, change our country, and serve with enthusiasm. President Kennedy's assassination was shocking—and terribly incongruous in this time of confidence and promise. After the assassination, the tenor of optimism was replaced with a harder mood—but a new, steelier resolve to carry on the mission. This segued into activism, and many of us joined the fight for equal rights for minorities, women, and the poor (Fig. 4).

By June of 1968, I was a vocal student leader in the New York primary of Senator Robert F. Kennedy's bid for the presidency. His assassination was a brutal shock—this time I was more deeply involved, and it was a mortal blow to the assumption that we could change the country through national political consensus. With the second Kennedy assassination, the loss of faith was profound, and with it went my enthusiasm for social change. A chapter closed and I was left with a sharper focus on being a physician and surgeon; I have never gone back to political activism. However, I think the idealism of the Kennedy years left an imprint—the duty to make a difference, change the status quo, act for the greater good. It is a good legacy, but the grace and hope of those short lovely years in the 1960s vanished.

Fernando Molina, M.D., Mexico City, Mexico

The drama of the life and death of John Kennedy wakes deep archetypes. The young leader arises in our lives like a lightning that illuminates the heavens and then one day in Dallas 50 years



Fig. 4. Mary H. McGrath, M.D., M.P.H., circa 1963. (Used with permission from Mary H. McGrath.)

ago, the hero is killed and robbed of the fullness by his tragic fate.

Consequently, mythical dates marked my childhood and youth: the launching of artificial satellites, Oswald's murder on live television, the moon landing, and the resistance against the war in Vietnam. At that time, the U.S. aura was pink and round like a bubble gum and hard as Superman's chest, and so I began to understand the desire or impulse of everybody to imitate Americans.

Kennedy, as President Wilson and President Franklin D. Roosevelt before him, tried to use the reserve of idealism of the American people, but was also, like Roosevelt, a practical and tenacious politician. His presidency was not only a triumph of style but also a substantial victory. He dealt with the international and supreme crises from the 1960s (to prevent nuclear war in the world) and also with the supreme national crisis in his own country (the quest for racial justice in America).

The lesson learned was democracy and respect for civil rights. Since then, I have tried to discover this wonderful country in a literary way: finding a wider world, a larger culture, and another style of life. This enriching experience allows me to know another environment where competition for knowledge, skills, faculties, and experience is recognized. It also separated me from a narrow road and eliminated the opportunity to be killed by the local misery present at that time near to me.

Charles Verheyden, M.D., Temple, Texas

November 22, 1963, started out as a pretty routine day. It was cloudy and humid, but there did not seem to be much threat of rain. I was a high school senior and went to school that morning as usual. Our football team missed the playoffs by a touchdown, so there was no game to play on that Friday night. Morning classes went as usual, but over the noon hour, the principal came on the public address system to announce that President Kennedy had been shot. This obviously was a huge event and quickly displaced any other conversation all over the school. Since it occurred in Dallas, just over 100 miles away, we were particularly interested in the details, but none were available at that time. I had a choir class right after lunch, a popular one for the football players because there was never any homework. Having a functional class was quite impossible, so we all, with the choir director, sat around and discussed the event and its implications, including the fact that Lyndon Johnson, a Texan, would become president if Kennedy died. A little after 1 PM, the principal came back on the loudspeaker and told us



Fig. 5. President Kennedy, Caroline, and John Jr. in the Oval Office, October 10, 1962. (Cecil Stoughton/John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum.)

that the president had indeed been killed. In our relatively new school, one of the classroom walls was all windows, and I remember that, at that moment, we saw the sun come out, and it stayed shining the rest of the day. I have often wondered whether there was some significance to that.

Rod J. Rohrich, M.D.
Editor-in-Chief
Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery
5959 Harry Hines Boulevard
POB 1, Suite 300
Dallas, Texas 75390-8820
rjreditor_prs@plasticsurgery.org

American Society of Plastic Surgeons Mission Statement

The mission of the American Society of Plastic Surgeons® is to support its members in their efforts to provide the highest quality patient care and maintain professional and ethical standards through education, research, and advocacy of socioeconomic and other professional activities.