Second Place Winner

The President Is Dead

by Debbie Skokan

Trying to recall a time when language first had an impact on me, I remembered sitting in my classroom on November 22, 1963 and suddenly the loudspeaker blurted out the words that still give me goosebumps. Loud and clear the principal announced that President Kennedy had been shot. He said the President had been shot by a sniper in Dallas, Texas at 12:30 p.m. We were told to bow our heads and pray for President Kennedy and for his family. As I prayed for these things, I couldn’t help but cry. I felt concern, worry, hurt, and fear, which were feelings that I had never experienced before. After what seemed to be an eternity the loudspeaker came on with additional news. This time, the words I heard felt like a knife going right through my heart and a fist into my stomach. The words still echo in my ears when I think about it. With a great deal of sadness in them, the words came forth, “Children, President Kennedy is dead.” Then we were told to have a time of silence. As I sat there hearing those words over and over again, I wondered what was happening in this world. Why would someone kill our President? What had he done? As I asked these questions I started to think back to 1960.

I remembered the first time I heard the name John F. Kennedy. I was watching television when a campaign ad to elect John Kennedy president was shown. The ad showed a picture of him and his family that impressed me. I knew from that moment that I liked him.

As time went on I saw more and more of those commercials asking people to vote for John Kennedy, and I began to hear adults talk about him. Every time someone would start to talk about him, I would listen carefully and hold onto every word that was said. I heard my parents say that John Kennedy was Catholic, and my dad in particular didn’t want a Catholic president. My mom thought John Kennedy would make a good president despite his religious background. I could not understand why being a Catholic was so important, and I asked my mom what difference it made. She told me that it really didn’t make a difference, but some people were set in their ways and did not want to change them. As I listened to what she was telling me, I felt that something was very wrong in disliking a man because he went to a different church. I decided then that I would not judge people because of the church they attended or because of small things that had little importance to the issue.

I continued to listen to people so I could learn everything there was to learn about him. I found out that he would also be the youngest president ever elected to office. This fact seemed to bother a lot of people as much as his Catholicism did. He seemed old enough to me; after all, he was a grown-up man with a wife and daughter. It appeared to me that the adults were just picking on him when they should have been looking at all the good points about him.

When Election Day arrived, I was very excited, and I prayed that John Kennedy would win. After waiting all day, I was disappointed to find out that I had to go to bed without hearing the results. I had a difficult time going to sleep since I kept wondering who would win the election. Finally, some time late that night I drifted off to sleep. When I awoke the next morning, the first thing I did was ask my mom who had won the election. She smiled at me and said, “John Kennedy, of course!” I was ecstatic over his victory.

The campaign and the election were so important and they made such an impression on me that I had to watch everything on T.V. that concerned him, including the inauguration. President Kennedy’s inaugural speech had a tone of youthful idealism and it seemed to raise the people’s hopes. The manner in which he talked to the nation showed that he cared about us and the government.

President Kennedy’s immortal statement, “Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country” has stayed with me since that day.

Even though I was only ten years old, it made an enormous impression on me. In that moment those powerful words became a personal challenge to me, and I felt he was speaking to me. I knew when I was older that I would do whatever a good citizen should do. The things President Kennedy said gave me such an admiration for him that I continued to watch and listen to him all throughout his presidency. I paid attention to newscasts and newspaper articles that said the people were pleased with him or they were mad at him. I have vague memories of my parents and their friends being upset with the president over something they called the “Bay of Pigs.”
I had no idea what the Bay of Pigs was but I wondered why people were so angry about pigs. The next thing I heard was that everyone was happy over what the president did in the Cuban Missile Crisis. He had been able to get the Soviet Union to dismantle their missiles in Cuba and then retreat. This seemed to be a big triumph for the president and our country. This Catholic president who had been so controversial was now doing more for this country than any other president had done in years.

Along with his foreign policy, President Kennedy was making some policies on the home front. He started pushing for aid to education, and he was a strong supporter of equal rights. After hearing about desegregation in schools, I wondered if he was influenced by the attitudes of people against his religion and age. He had heard and felt what discrimination was like towards him, on a smaller scale, but nonetheless hurtful. Because of all I heard about President Kennedy, I developed a tremendous admiration for him and now.....

My mind came back to the present and my feelings of tremendous loss. I kept hearing those words, “John Kennedy is dead,” and I could not believe it was really true. When I left school that day, I went straight home to my mom who was waiting for me. She knew I would be devastated, so she was prepared to comfort me. She suggested that I write to Jacqueline Kennedy and tell her how sorry I was and how much I thought of the President. After a day or so I was able to write to her and tell her how I felt. I also asked her if she could send me a picture of the President and his family.

Mrs. Kennedy thanked me for the letter I wrote, and she signed the back of the picture she sent me. As time went on I began to get over the loss of President Kennedy but I would still on occasion hear those words—“President Kennedy is dead”—and I knew that it wasn't just my loss, but the country had lost a great leader and president.