

Anonymous Female Interviewee

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This story is based on one of a series of interviews conducted by South Kingstown (RI) High School students in the Spring of 1998. All of the interviews were focused on recollections of the year 1968. In addition to the student's edited story below, you can find on this site the electronic transcript of the interview .

Making a Revolution

In 1958, I wanted to be a nun. In 1964, I may have wanted to be a scientist or a teacher. In 1968, I didn't have a clue! I did not have plans to go to college immediately after high school, which upset my college advisor. Who wants to go to college? There is too much fun to be had out there. I wanted to go lead an exciting life somewhere, make a New World; I wanted to make a revolution.

I was born a nice Irish, Catholic girl in South Providence which in the 1950s was a mixed neighborhood of primarily working poor people. My father worked in a factory. We lived in a series of tenements. I lived on the first floor with my mother, my father, and my two brothers. There were fourteen kids in my father's family. Most of us lived in the same neighborhood. I had fifty-two cousins. I came from an insular neighborhood; my school was attached to my church. My life five days a week was centered on school and Sunday was centered on church. A lot of people did not own cars. If you couldn't get there on a bus you didn't go there which meant we didn't leave our neighborhood very much.

My birthday happens to be on November 22. JFK was shot on my thirteenth birthday! I came into puberty with a bang. I was going into high school and the President gets killed. By the time I graduated from high school, Bobby Kennedy had been killed, Martin Luther King had been killed, Watts had gone up in flames, and the war was happening. I graduated from high school wearing a black armband protesting the Vietnam War. The world was blowing up and they wanted me to learn Latin. I went to Classical High School. I reached rebellious puberty before then and decided I had had quite enough of Catholic education. The only public high school that my parents would even consider me going to was Classical. Classical made it very clear that they weed students out, which I found revolting. Their whole point is they like their statistics; they only want the cream of the crop, the kids that were going to get into the good colleges. They would stand everyone up the first day and say to everybody, "Look at the person to the right of you, look at the person to the left of you; two of you won't be here when it comes time to graduate." In 1968, I was dating one of the black boys at Classical. He was a great guy; we had a great time together. His family, actually, had more money than my family and was much better positioned socially than my family, but I did not bring him into the house. My family would have lost their minds. I was interested in art, very interested in the world politically, and in music. At Classical, Latin, Greek, mathematics, in those days seemed completely irrelevant in a world that was in a major revolution; I went into Classical at the top of my class and left at the bottom.

The generation right before me was terrified of sex, for fear of unwanted pregnancy. In poorer neighborhoods, sexual activity begins earlier. We don't take ballet lessons, tennis lessons, learn how ski, or have swimming pools to go to. When you are hanging on the street corner, you become sexually active; it becomes recreation. I was the post birth control, pre-AIDS generation. I was running around with a bunch of "artists", "revolutionaries", "long hair, drug taking freaks." The sexual "liberated" women were girls I ran around with. We felt for the first time in generations that we had control of our own bodies, and we were going to use them in any damn way we pleased. We weren't playing hard to get; we were making the decisions. If we slept with someone, it was because we wanted to, not because they wanted us to, and we did not use sex as a way to manipulate men. The fear of unwanted pregnancy, the fear of a bad reputation, was laughable to us; that put the power in the boys' hands and they could determine if you were a good girl or a bad girl. If I was going to fix my own car, I was going to decide with whom I was going to sleep. If the jobs were not going to be broken down by gender lines anymore, *none* of the jobs were! In 1968, the last thing on my mind was to find a husband and raise a family. We did not fear unwanted pregnancy because we had this sense of security about birth control. There was a huge shift in everything from expectable norms of social behavior, to sexual activity. Those things were based on communication and health care. The fact that there was safe birth control changed the way women treated their bodies. There was a very different attitude. Unfortunately, this is not an attitude I can pass on to my children. When my children were old enough to be sexually active, there were issues like AIDS. Sex is a funny piece of business. You put it in a relationship and everything shifts, everything changes.

My father fought in World War II and my uncles fought in Korea. You would ask them about it and it was a story far, far away. There were only still photos. Everything changed so rapidly. By the 60's, everybody had televisions, probably more than they had cars, almost everybody had telephones. In the 60's, Vietnam was the first war that was televised. My friends fought in Vietnam and I sat at night and watched them die on television. It was the first time TV was on the front lines, and it brought the war home. I watched Jack Ruby shoot Lee Harvey Oswald, Sunday morning on TV in real time. I was thirteen years old, and I watched it while it was happening and that is not an experience my parents ever had. Can you imagine having three major national figures shot in four years? Then, Watts, the scene of a huge racial riot, was on fire, and people going to the south to register blacks to vote disappeared off the face of the Earth and turned up in ditches. All of this was coming up on the TV screen.

Vietnam was a real racist war. We had to turn people who were Asians into "Gooks", so we could hate and kill them. Their people were women and children in villages. These were peasants fighting. There are images of kids being napalmed and people being executed. The two most famous photos of Vietnam were the little girl running down the street naked, burning from napalm. The other was the man being executed. These were the images of Vietnam. Our guys massacred a village. They cut off ears and noses for trophies. I knew kids who came back from Vietnam who told me stories. They were sitting in camps watching the poor villagers, people going through their dumpsites, looking for things to build houses. They would pick them off like target practice. They had to kill everybody because they did not know who the enemy was.

We saw the U.S. as a superpower imposing its will, as we saw it, on people in small countries like Vietnam. We kept saying, get the hell out, let these people determine things for themselves. The "Domino Theory" was the prevalent theory of the time. We did not believe it; we did not like the way America was. We did not like the male-female models of relationships, where guys get all the say

and power. The Womens' Rights Movement came right out of the Civil Rights Movement which was addressing race issues; all of these things were mixed up together. That was the Counter Culture chucking all those rules and trying to recreate a new paradigm.

When my boyfriends would come home with their hair down their backs and ponytails, this was such a statement to my parents. It made them crazy. I kept saying to them, "it's only hair." But it wasn't. It was really insulting to my parents because we used to wear clothes that were the uniform of poverty. That was not anything people wore in public. Denim blue jeans were working clothes. All of a sudden, you had the rich kids running around in rags, wearing working boots and blue jeans, having long, straggly hair. It made parents crazy. Parents worked so hard to bring us some place. I also saw the ravages of alcoholism all around me every day and said who wants that? But I was a great believer in drugs at the time. This whole idea that we thought it was expanding our consciousness and making us more creative was all horse pucky. 1968, was the summer Sergeant Pepper came to town, and if anyone does not remember that they weren't paying attention. It was a major turning point in rock and roll. Janis Joplin came and blew everyone out of their seats. There was a huge generation gap, probably larger than there was in generations following.

I was active in the Anti-War Movement. I helped take over the administration building at URI. I went to Washington every year. We came to URI one year, and said, "now here's the thing, we're going to Washington, we're going to sit down, and we're going to stop traffic. When we stop traffic, no one in Washington is going to get to work. The government is going to close down, and when the government closes down, the war is going to end." I don't know where my mind was. It seemed to me that if I sat down in traffic, I could end the war. We all went down to Washington, got beaten and got jailed in large stadiums. The war did not end. What a big surprise! We came back and we got off the bus at URI, and there were these people at the administration building. We were all black and blue from the cops. We hadn't slept in four days, dirty and hungry. I was not in the mood to get beat up by the cops at URI. I remember saying, "I'm going to sit in the back against the building," thinking all the action would be in the front. A cop came up to me, and I put my arms around his leg, and he hit me with a billy club. I was just too tired to fight with him. The cops were not trained and they were beating people bloody. It was way too much of a response that they made. They saw an angry mob; I saw a bunch of tired kids. We were trying to create a new reality. We were reexamining everything from foreign policy to inter-personal relationships. We were trying to make new rules.

I wish I could say the Sixties affected the United States more. It affected me personally; it affected the people in my life who mean the most to me, my longest standing dearest friends. I checked the things they do for a living, they all in some way or another are involved in things that require personal commitment to make the world a better place. They're involved in politics in the best possible way. They are lawyers who do a lot of free pro-bono work, are anti-poverty lawyers, or they run veterans' centers. I have a lot of friends who work in veterans' centers working with the guys who were destroyed by Vietnam. I deal with the people that have nowhere else to go. Most of the people that I care about are people who have a shared value system and it is not this "family values" thing. For me the values were of social justice and fighting to end bigotry. I had no tolerance for any kind of bigotry. Bigotry against people of different colors, cultures, experiences, or sexual orientations. You stand on who you are and who you are is based on what you have done in this world. I see it as what kind of integrity you have, not in what you say, but in what you do.

Money is great and I wish I had more of it, but it's not enough to make me happy. I see it as just a tool to do something else. The 1960's have clearly impacted me, my values all the choices I made, and the way I raised my children. I never bent over my kids' cribs and said, "grow up and be a doctor." I said, "grow and do something meaningful to you, be decent, be honest, and be happy." That is very much a Sixties mindset. It's clearly not what my parents said to me. It is not what parents are saying to their kids now. I never said, "make me proud, make a lot of money." I said, "be a decent person, and make me proud."

The 60's, broke down a lot of the rules and what we've found is that a lot of the rules need to be reinstated. A world without boundaries is a messy situation. I think it is a job for young people to ask questions. The more questions they ask, the better. It's interesting; they want to know if their government lies to them. Young people are the people who get sent to these wars. Get very comfortable with asking questions, and do not expect to find answers. Try to stay positive and imaginative in the way you approach problems. That is what makes change, and that is what makes life exciting.