

## 40 years after tumult, a ceremony

*BU invites class of Kent State year*

Boston Globe - Boston, Mass.

Author: Steven Rosenberg

Date: May 3, 2010

Start Page: B.1

Section: Metro

Text Word Count: 1143

### Document Text

Marsha Halperin was sitting in her dorm room at Boston University, studying for final exams, when a friend burst in to tell her the news: Four students at Kent State University, in Ohio, had been killed by the National Guard.

It was May 4, 1970, and the BU campus, like many across the country, had been roiling with protest since President Nixon had announced four days earlier that US forces were entering Cambodia.

"I felt like the whole world had gone crazy," Halperin - now Halperin-Epstein - said.

Outraged students marched on the State House to protest the Kent State killings. The next morning protesters threw firebombs at a BU administration building, and several fires were set on campus.

BU officials decided they had to end the unrest. So they scrapped final exams. They ordered students off campus. And they canceled commencement - graduating seniors got their diplomas in the mail.

Now, four decades later, BU is making amends to the class of 1970.

The university has invited all 3,000 living alumni from that year to come back May 16, don a cap and gown, and come up on stage to receive a certificate.

Halperin-Epstein will be there, along with more than 200 of her classmates.

"The whole thing is intriguing and bittersweet," she said. "It's a lot of emotions for a 62-year-old. It's a time of reflection."

BU president Robert A. Brown was a student at the University of Texas at Austin in 1970. In a recent interview he recalled that, even though he was not an antiwar activist, he was still tear-gassed during college.

"If you lived that time and you weren't [tear-gassed] then you had to stay in your room," he said.

Brown said the decision to invite the class of 1970 back for the 2010 graduation represents a step toward healing.

"I feel this is more about a debt we owe them as a class," he said.

The class of 1970 has been invited to two days of events for what would be their 40th reunion weekend, said Meg Umlas, the university's executive director of alumni relations.

On May 15, BU will hold a special remembrance service, where a tribute will be held for the Kent State victims, deceased classmates, and the late Howard Zinn, a former BU professor and an antiwar activist. On May 16, before the graduation, the class will have its own convocation ceremony at Rich Hall. After the ceremony, graduates will walk out onto Nickerson Field and join the BU class of 2010 for commencement.

The events will begin with a slide show of photographs by Peter Simon, who as photo editor of the BU News documented protests on campus during the late 1960s. Simon, a member of the class of '70 and younger brother of singer Carly Simon, recalls shuttling across the Charles River to document the unrest at area campuses, photographing students preparing strike signs at BU, the Grateful Dead playing a free concert at MIT in honor of the Kent State victims, and police and protesters on Commonwealth Avenue.

"A terrible injustice had occurred," he said. "We thought that the government was turning into a fascist state, and we were really afraid that the extreme right wing had taken over the police and our freedom. It was scary."

Simon, now 63 and the owner of a gallery in Vineyard Haven, said he believes that attending the commencement ceremony will be an opportunity to reflect on how his years at BU shaped his life.

"Sentimental as it may seem, it makes my life more complete," he said. "How many more years do I have?"

Leslie Clarke, 61, is flying in from Cleveland for the ceremony. Clarke said she'll be carrying her late mother's photo and wearing a piece of her jewelry to acknowledge her mother's disappointment at not being able to see her daughter graduate from college.

"She worked so hard as a nurse to put me through school and education was a big deal to her and she never saw me graduate," she said.

Clarke, then a nursing student, played her own small role in the turmoil on the BU campus in the 1960s. She was a member of UMOJA, a black student group. In 1968, after Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated, she joined 100 other blacks on campus in the takeover of the university's administration building to push for the admission of more black students on campus.

"I think what I'm looking for is closure," she said. "It's unfinished business."

Rich Lubin, who served as the BU student union president in 1970 and joined the antiwar protests on campus, says the cancellation of that year's graduation ceremony was proof that the students had impact.

"There were some students who were very upset about it, but I think the students felt that the cancellation of commencement was a recognition about how deeply felt the antiwar sentiment was, and that the students at the time did not want business as usual," said Lubin, a criminal defense lawyer in Florida who is unsure whether he will come to Boston later this month.

Lubin noted that there were as many as 30 antiwar groups on campus at the time.

"The invasion of Cambodia . . . made people crazy with frustration," he said. "And to have students who were protesting the war gunned down on a college campus was probably what put it over the edge."

In Newton, Halperin-Epstein recalled the events leading up to her canceled commencement as "a week from hell." She said she still has dreams about driving home with her father, who wept when he learned that the graduation was canceled. And she points to the back of her neck as she describes the time she says a policeman clubbed her on the head during a protest on Boston Common.

"We wanted to rattle things and to effect change and get leaders to listen to what we were saying," said Halperin-Epstein, who went on to teach sociology at community colleges. "And I think it worked."

This year, she plans to bring her husband and two grown sons to graduation, and she hopes the event will release some of the tensions she still feels from 40 years ago.

"I don't know if I'll know anybody, but I feel like I'll hug everyone," she said. "I just want to a chance to say goodbye and say what a nice class we were and that we were worthy."

Steven Rosenberg can be reached at [srosenberg@globe.com](mailto:srosenberg@globe.com).

03kentstate.ART

Credit: Steven Rosenberg, Globe Staff

[Illustration]

Caption: BU students protested the invasion of Cambodia in May 1970. Courtesy Leslie Clarke; "The whole thing is intriguing and bittersweet," said Marsha Halperin-Epstein of Boston University's commencement invitation to the class of 1970. Courtesy Leslie Clarke; Courtesy Leslie Clarke

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction or distribution is prohibited without permission.

Abstract (Document Summary)

Simon, a member of the class of '70 and younger brother of singer Carly Simon, recalls shuttling across the Charles River to document the unrest at area campuses, photographing students preparing strike signs at BU, the Grateful Dead playing a free concert at MIT in honor of the Kent State victims, and police and protesters on Commonwealth Avenue. Rich Lubin, who served as the BU student union president in 1970 and joined the antiwar protests on campus, says the cancellation of that year's graduation ceremony was proof that the students had impact.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction or distribution is prohibited without permission.