

Americans drawn to JFK's assassination even after 40 years
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FT. LAUDERDALE, Fla. - (KRT) - More than half of today's America wasn't even alive on Nov. 22, 1963, but they are still drawn to the tragic and timeless tale of the country's 35th president and his assassination.

``President Kennedy transcends politics. He has earned a special place in all Americans. Every year those scenes are played over and over again. It keeps it fresh in your mind," said Richard Yon, 26, of Boca Raton, a graduate student at Florida Atlantic University who is a Republican.

Kennedy's assassination in Dallas was his generation's Challenger disaster, the death of Princess Diana or like September 11, he said. ``Everybody knows exactly where they were when it happened and what they were doing." The life and death of President Kennedy has been drilled in schools and throughout society, how a young president was killed at the prime of his life - and how his ambition lived on. And how he was the first president born in the 20th century, the youngest elected to office and the last to die in office. Outside Saint Benedict's Episcopal Church in Plantation recently, a group of teens rested after a performance. They were eager to share their knowledge of President Kennedy. For Brittany Gooden, 16, of Coral Springs, President Kennedy was a president like no other, she said. ``You can't get through school without knowing about him. You see the footage every year and you learn about his vision for this country and how many of the things he pushed for are happening today," said the junior, who attends Taravella High in Coral Springs.

``He helped civil rights. If not for him, African Americans wouldn't be as far today," she said, relaying how she, as a young black female, relates to him. At Florida Atlantic University, Robert Watson, 41, a political science professor, conjured up images of the Kennedy years. He spoke with the passion of a historian ready to share his knowledge of politics. This week students in his U.S. Presidency class discussed everything from the impeachment of President Andrew Johnson to the Cuban Missile crisis, which happened under the Kennedy administration.

``The students who are in college now were born in 1984," Watson said.

``They don't even remember (President) Reagan or the first (President) Bush. They don't even remember the first Gulf War," he said.

But the day President John F. Kennedy was killed is one of their most prominent historical references, he said.

``The unique thing about the Kennedy assassination is that it seems to transcend generations. Students not only remember what they read in history books. They see it on television," said Watson, taking a break from class.

``Kennedy was the first major event caught on film. We remember seeing the riderless horse pulling the coffin. Who doesn't remember John John saluting and the photographs of Jacqueline Kennedy and Lady Bird Johnson next to Lyndon Johnson as he was being sworn in," Watson said.

For students like Edward Miller, it is Kennedy's words that had more of an impact. His speeches are his legacy, he said.

``He is my favorite president. I guess that is easy to say when a president was assassinated but I have found Kennedy's speeches inspirational ... immortalized in American history," he said.

Miller, 17, of Plantation, has a collection of President Kennedy's speeches. His mother Barbara Miller says he and his younger brother have shown more than a passing interest in President Kennedy, so she keeps some books about him in her home.

``There is a general aura that is felt about him. He was a really good man," said Edward, a senior at David Posnack Hebrew Day School in Plantation. What folks 40 and under know are the grainy images they see flashed across the television; an older generation remembers the man.

They too have become caught up in Camelot - Jacqueline Kennedy's description of their idyllic life - a rich and young attractive Irish-American Catholic, his picture perfect wife and family, who all seemed able to connect with the average person. ``A lot of times I'm thinking if only they sped up. If he listened to his advisors who told him to put the top on the motorcade, a whole lot would have been different for him and the country," Yon said.

Kennedy's name is emblazoned in memorials across the land - an airport, a space center, a performing arts center, museums, libraries, arts honors and schools from elementary to high. Locally, two middle schools carry his name, one in Miami-Dade County and the other in Palm Beach County, as well as a housing community in Broward.

And there's MTV's Clone High for those who want to watch a cloned teenaged-cartoon version of Kennedy and other historical figures as they get caught up in sophomoric antics in high school.

This year the independent booksellers' list of the all-time top 10 books on President Kennedy included two children's titles.

``I start at the very beginning of his life," said Deborah Heiligman, author of High Hopes: A Photobiography of John F. Kennedy.

Heiligman's children's book is one of the two that made that top 10 list.

``Children identify with Kennedy because he beat the odds ... His story is so dramatic. He was the second oldest and was sick all of his life," Heiligman said of her book for children 10 and older.

``Children like the idea of what he overcame to be president and just to live. They especially like the hero aspect of how he was determined to fight in World War II, got himself into the Navy and then became a hero even with a bad back, towing an injured man while swimming," she said. ``These are the kinds of stories that transcend generations. "