

Born Into A Life of Fear: The Story Of Rodney Kirch

By Aleah Wilson

After the Second World War there was a sense of happiness that ruled the country. The war was over and a sense of peace had been returned to everyday life. The happiness didn't last for very long, Americans didn't know what was to come. Post-war America was challenging for the nation and many lived in constant fear. Children were protected by their innocence and unknowing of the world while the adults knew the true reality. Their lives would soon be filled with nuclear fears, economic hardship, political turmoil, death, war, activism and an ever changing culture and society. Those who were born and lived through this difficult time witnessed some of the most pivotal points in American history. These events shaped the nation and changed history forever. It's fascinating to peek into the lives of those who grew up in the time period because we can grasp a better understanding of the emotions and day to day activities they experienced. Rodney Kirch, current husband and father of two, lived through this time. Although the overarching feeling of fear was hard, he enjoys revisiting his childhood memories and early life.

Rodney Kirch was born in the spring of 1956 in Gettysburg Pennsylvania. His parents, George and Nancy lived in a small house they had purchased in August of 1955.¹ "It was a house that people referred to as 'Levittown homes', they didn't call them that in my town but it was the same thing. I guess we called them GI homes."² These types of homes became popular in the 1950's as suburban America began to expand. Many of these Levitt homes were in fact built for the soldiers returning home from WWII.³ Rodney recalls his childhood home as small and compact. "There were three

small bedrooms at the end of the hallway, one bathroom and a very small kitchen.”⁴ In those days, a Levitt home’s starting price was around \$6,000, Rodney’s parents bought their home for \$11,300 and his father paid a monthly mortgage of about \$75.⁵ Rodney had everything a young boy needed in his childhood bedroom. “In my room I had a bed, a chest of draws, and a small desk because I would do homework in my room.”⁶

During Rodney’s early life, his father worked while his mother stayed at home.⁷ It wasn’t until he began first grade when his mother decided to go to work.⁸ As first graders are, Rodney was excited and eager for his first day of school. His family had visited the school a week before for orientation, they saw that each student had a desk with their name on it.⁹ “ I remember she walked me to the bus stop, watched me get on the bus and I was surprised to see that when I got to school, she was standing there when I got off the bus.”¹⁰ Rodney was confused as to why his mother would meet him at school, he didn’t see a reason for her to be there but he would soon find out. “When my mother met me after I got off the bus that first morning, we walked to the classroom together and she looked at me and said ‘okay, can you do this by yourself tomorrow?’ And I said yes.”¹¹ His mother then explained that she would be starting work the following week and that he was expected to do this by himself from then on.¹² For the rest of Rodney’s early life, his mother was always home at the same time as him. She was home in the morning before he left for school and she would be home from work by the time he got back at around 4:00pm each day.¹³

Rodney’s childhood and life at school was great, he had lots of friends and was a well-rounded student. There was one fear that was constantly present during that era, a

life filled with nuclear fears. "When I was younger in elementary school, we would practice nuclear drills."¹⁴ This was common across the whole country, the fear of a nuclear attack was widespread across the nation. "We would go downstairs with blankets our mothers gave us and we were told to get down and cover our heads. They warned us that there would be a bright flash and that it would be okay."¹⁵ The nuclear test alarms had a different sound than the fire alarms. Rodney remembers the excitement him and his friends felt when they heard the nuclear alarm verses the fire alarm. "Well I was growing up in Pennsylvania so it was freezing during the winters. I knew that if I heard the fire alarm we'd have to go outside in the cold but if it was the other alarm, my friends and I would get excited because we knew we could just stay inside."¹⁶ Looking back now, Rodney knows none of his family or friends would've survived a nuclear attack if one was to occur. Parents rarely told their children the truth about nuclear attacks, children were under the impression that if they did what the drill said to do, they would survive, they would be fine.¹⁷ "We lived about an hour away from Baltimore or Washington so the overkill would've gotten us. We were about ten miles away from a thing called Site R, a big airforce station, but they used it for overseas communication so that was definitely a target."¹⁸

The nation was soon to be hit with devastating news—the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. To many Americans, the death of JFK felt like a death in the family, no other public death produced such an impact on individuals lives.¹⁹ Rodney was still quite young when the incident occurred, but he recalls some of it. "I remember what happened and when it happened...I was about six or seven when it happened. We

had the day off in school so I stayed home and watched the funeral on TV.”²⁰ Although children typically don’t have a full grasp on the concept of death, Rodney understood the sadness of it and how it affected his parents and the rest of the adults in his life. His perception of the world was shaped by the news, and this would continue throughout his early life especially once he reached his teens. “I remember seeing the news replay when Jack Ruby shot Lee Harvey Oswald. They played it over and over and at that age I thought ok great the guy who killed the president was also killed so this has to be a good thing. I was still confused about it all.”²¹ What followed was a series of ongoing conspiracy theories regarding both the assassination of JFK and the killing of Oswald.

Lyndon B. Johnson took oath the night of the assassination onboard Air Force One besides widowed Jackie Kennedy. The event changed the spirit and lives of so many Americans. Rodney never formed much of an opinion on LBJ when he was younger but in the present day, he has one. “I think most of the problems we have today are rooted in the legislation passed by LBJ. Everything we saw with him helping out with the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act were great but the war on poverty was a joke...we threw so much money into things like we do now but it didn’t work.”²² It was hard for Rodney to fully grasp what was going on in the nation because he was so young. So much legislation was being passed by LBJ but most of it didn’t affect Rodney. Afterall, he was a white male whose parents earned stable incomes. “The education programs were great though but still LBJ in my mind was a dirty politician. That’s how I feel about it now.”²³

As time went on, the nation became divided as the United States entered the Vietnam war. Rodney was starting to get older and he had an overwhelming fear of the draft. "When I was in junior high I was becoming more cognizant about what was going on, I was starting to get closer and closer to eighteen and everyday they would announce the bodycount of Americans who died in the war. I just kept thinking, holy crap...one of those is gonna be me".²⁴ Vietnam was the first televised war, Americans could see the brutality of it everyday on TV. Rodney recalls seeing the war on TV, his parents wanted him to see it because they wanted him to understand the reality of the world.²⁵ "I remember seeing Walter Cronkite on TV and him saying that we can't win the war in Vietnam. I had so much sympathy for the men in the war, and I was scared that it would be me. I saw the war on the news everyday."²⁶ His mother's side of the family was fairly liberal, his grandmother tried to convince him to run away to Canada.²⁶ Like many Young men, they couldn't just escape the draft because of the overwhelming amount of guilt they would feel. Most of the men in Rodney's family had served in previous wars, he knew that if he escaped to Canada, he would never be allowed home and that frightened him.²⁷ "I was born in a town of 6,000 people...I knew nothing else."²⁸ Filled with terror, Rodney was afraid of the things he continued to see on TV, he would see videos and pictures of dead soldiers every day.²⁹ "I felt bad for the guys fighting and I had a draft card but I got that right before the war sort of came to a close and by that time I was also about to go to college so I wouldn't of even gone."³⁰

At the same time, the anti-war movement was emerging. Rodney wasn't involved in much of it but he was aware it was going on because of the news.³¹ "I feel like most of

us were confused because we didn't understand why nothing was changing, people were still dying, we weren't winning, and we were confused about what the point was because it kept dragging on.”³² Young adults and college students across the nation were protesting against the war but in some places, their freedom of speech was being compromised. Many students at UC Berkeley used the Bancroft strip—a specific area on campus, to protest but the university kept trying to take that freedom away.³³ The administration placed rules prohibiting students from planning or soliciting for advocating off-campus causes on university property.³⁴

Rodney was born into an era where civil rights was a constant battle. Although he had no part in it, African Americans had been fighting for equality and rights for years prior, and years to come. When it came to activism, many of the older African Americans admired the spirit of the younger generation. “These young people today, sitting in at lunch counters and kneeling in churches, are different from my generation. They aren't afraid and they aren't bitter. They know what they want and they're determined to get it.”³⁵ A pivotal point of the Civil Rights Movement was the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr.. MLK was an important example of a new kind of leader in America, one who couldn't exercise leadership without first coming to terms with the probability of his own violent death.³⁶ Rodney's father was quite conservative and didn't fully support the movement. Rodney remembers when the news broke out about his death. “I can remember the night MLK was killed. I was watching TV and my dad came in off the phone and told us something that wasn't racially appropriate.”³⁷ Rodney was confused about the movement because all he saw were the constant riots on TV. “We

didn't really appreciate or know enough about the struggles they went through because I grew up in the north...we weren't exposed to all the segregation and Jim Crow laws."³⁸ He never saw 'whites-only' signs or the brutality faced by African Americans in the southern region.³⁹ African Americans who experienced Jim Crow laws were constantly beaten down by society. They were called names, spat on, and even had ammonia thrown on them.⁴⁰ Rodney recalls there being six African American families in his town. "They were pretty integrated with us, they played on our sports teams and worked at the same stores as the whites. They were a little poorer but it wasn't that different for them."⁴¹ Things were much different for other African Americans, when schools were slowly becoming integrated, they still weren't fully accepted. Many African American students were suspended—for what the administration believed, their own safety.⁴² Most people Rodney's age were confused as to why the African Americans were so angry, they were never exposed to the struggles faced by non-white Americans.⁴³ "We had a negative opinion about it all because it just looked like they were ripping our country apart...for in our minds...no reason."⁴⁴

By the time Rodney was getting ready to leave for college, he was sad to see his—once flourishing town, beginning to lose its spark. He lived in an agricultural area which was pretty busy up until the 1970's.⁴⁵ "The economy started getting tough and businesses started going out of business, things started getting made overseas so stores started shutting down which was pretty sad."⁴⁶ Rodney felt that if he didn't go to college, he would end up staying in his small town and that's the last thing he wanted.⁴⁷

He decided to attend Florida Tech University for a few reasons, one, they had his degree, and two, the drinking age was eighteen.⁴⁸

Rodney, like other Americans, lived through a difficult time. He witnessed some of the most significant events in American history. He grew up forming his opinions based off of his parents, peers, and Television. Once he grew up, he was more exposed to the reality of the world. The world is a great place, yet it's filled with trouble, death, disagreement, and injustice. He transformed his fears and challenging experiences into something great. Rodney overcame his fears and all of these factors built him into the person he is today—educated, well-rounded, certain, and aware.

Citations

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Interview Notes

I interviewed Mr.Kirch, my friend's father from Texas. It was pretty easy and comfortable to talk to him because I have known him for many years. I pretty much came up with a series of topics (those in bold) and questioned him on those.

Birth/early life + miscellaneous:

Where were you born/what year?

“Gettysburg Pennsylvania in march of 1956”

Tell me about your town, what was it like?

“I lived in an agricultural area, it was a pretty busy area up until the 70’s. The economy started getting tough and businesses started going out of business, things started getting made overseas so stores started shutting down which was pretty sad.”

What were your parents names?

“George and Nancy”

Where did you attend college?

“I went to college at Florida Tech, they had my degree and hey it was a 18 year old drinking age. I didn’t want to be stuck in the same small town. I knew I’d have to work at a factory and just live my life there, I didn’t want that.”

How was your college experience? Did you go home for breaks like all of us do now?

I went to college and my mother would send me \$10 a week when I was away because we didn’t really have much money. I only went back for Christmas.

The red scare:

Did you fear the russians?

“the Russians were considered the boogie man when we were younger and later the fear was the Vietnamese.”

Did they tell you about this stuff in school or?

“well no, it was everywhere, it was a new story every day. “It was like everyone was afraid of the Russians, the communists, the soviets...almost everything we were told to fear...we were scared of.”

Nuclear fears:

Were you fearful of a nuclear attack of some sort? What was it like?

“when I was younger in elementary school, we would practice nuclear drills. we would go downstairs with blankets our mothers gave us and we were told to get down and cover our heads. They warned us that there would be a bright flash and that it would be okay.”[he recalls the sound of the nuclear test alarm.] Well I was growing up in Pennsylvania so it was freezing during the winters. I knew that if I heard the fire alarm we’d have to go outside in the cold but if it was the other alarm, my friends and I would get excited because we knew we could just stay inside. we lived about an hour away from Baltimore or Washington so the overkill would’ve gotten us. We were about 10 miles away from a thing called Site R, a big airforce station, but they used it for overseas communication so that was definitely a target.”

How to survive an atomic bomb:

Did you know how badly a nuclear bomb/attack would be/ Did you actually think you’d survive it?

“at that age the children were always under the impression that we would survive it. None of our parents every just came out and said...we would all die. as a kid you always think you’ll survive. you could see the fallout shelters, the little triangle sign that pointed to its direction.”

Suburban america:

What was your childhood home like?

“My parents bought the house in august of 1955, it was a house that people referred to as ‘levittown homes’, they didn’t call them that in my town but it was the same thing. I guess we called them GI homes. They were bought for the guys that came back from the second world war. There were 3 small bedrooms at the end of the hallway, one bathroom and a very small kitchen.”

How much did it cost in those days?

“My parents bought the house for about \$11,300...my dad paid a mortgage of \$75 bucks a month and that was including taxes. In my room I had a bed, a chest of draws, and a small desk because I would do homework in my room.”

Have you visited since?

“When I went back to visit...i thought...how the hell did we all fit in this house? With 4 adults in the house it was super claustrophobic. When I went off to college, my dad fixed up the place and made a living area because him and my mom wanted more space.”

Society and culture in the 50's:

What were your parents like?/ what about your family life?

“Most moms stayed home. My mother stayed home until I left to start first grade. Then she started to work when I went to school. I remember she walked me to the bus stop, watched me get on the bus and I was surprised to see that when I got to school, she was standing there when I got off the bus. We had gone to the school for about a week before to see how things were for i guess what you could call an orientation. We saw that each student had a desk with their name on it. So when my mother met me after I got off the bus that first morning, we walked to the classroom together and she looked at me and said ‘okay, can you do this by yourself tomorrow? And i said yes. She then said ‘okay well I’m starting to work next week so you’ll have to do this on your own’. She would get home at about 4pm which is around the time I would get back. So basically my mom was always at home when I was at home.”

Civil rights:

Do you remember when MLK was killed?

“ I can remember the night MLK was killed. I was watching TV and my dad came in off the phone and told us something that wasn’t racially appropriate.”

Did you understand what the movement was all about?

“At the time what we saw on the news were all the riots going on, even when I was in high school, I would see it. We didn’t really appreciate or know enough about the struggles they went through because I grew up in the north...we weren’t exposed to all the segregation and Jim Crow laws. We didn’t see the whole whites only signs or anything.”

Did you go to school with African Americans?

“There were only 6 black families in our town and most of the kids were as white as we were. They were pretty integrated with us, they played on our sports teams and worked at the same stores as the whites. They were a little poorer but it wasn’t that different for them. You never

noticed what was really going on until we watched TV...then we couldn't figure out why these people were so angry because like i said we weren't exposed to their struggles. We had a negative opinion about it all because it just looked like they were ripping our country apart... for in our minds... for no reason.”

JFK/assassination:

Do you remember when JFK was killed?

“I remember what happened and when it happened...I was about 6 or 7 when it happened. We had the day off in school so I stayed home and watched the funeral on TV. it was tough to see.”

Did it affect you at all?

“I was so young but i knew it was sad and that so many people loved them. There were so many conspiracy theories about what happened but it's so hard to have a handle around death when you're that young.”

What did you think about Lee Harvey Oswald getting killed?

“I remember seeing the news replay when Jack Ruby shot lee harvey oswald. They played it over and over and at that age i though ok great the guy who killed the president was also killed so this has to be a good thing. I was still confused about it all.”

LBJ/great society/legislation:

What's your opinion on LBJ/Did you know much about him when you were a kid?

“I think most of the problems we have today are rooted in the legislation passed by LBJ. “

Did you think he did anything good for the nation?

“Everything we saw with him helpling out with the civil rights act and the voting rights act were great but the war on poverty was a joke... we threw so much money into things like we do now but it didn't work. The education programs were great though but still LBJ in my mind was a dirty politician. That's how I feel about it now.”

Vietnam war:

What do you remember about the war? Did you see all of it on TV?

“I remember seeing walter cronkite on TV and him saying that we can’t win the war in vietnam.

How did it make you feel?

“ I had so much sympathy for the men in the war, and I was scared that it would be me. I saw the war on the news everyday almost.”

Did your parents let you watch the news about the war/ all the graphic images?

“My parents wanted me to see it because they believed the world was a hard place and that was the reality of it.”

Gulf of tonkin incident/resolution:

Can you remember much about the Gulf of Tonkin incident or resolution?

“I don’t remember anything about the gulf of tonkin resolution. What I do know is the mindset that was placed upon us and even up to your generation, that the only way to contain communism is to have the series of crazy fiery wars...now we just fight all of these unnecessarily can’t be won.”

The draft:

Did the draft scare you?

“when I was in junior high I was becoming more cognizant about what was going on, I was starting to get closer and closer to 18 and everyday they would announce the bodycount of americans who died in the war. I just kept thinking, holy crap one of those is gonna be me”.

Did other family members serve in previous wars?

“My uncles, my dad , my grandpa had been in the service...I couldn’t run to canada.”

Who introduced the idea of going to Canada?

“My mother’s mom was pretty liberal and she kept telling me just go to Canada! I never did because I knew if I did, I wouldn’t come home. at the end of the day this is our country, this is all we know...what if i got up to canada and had no idea what to do? I was born in a town of 6,000 people...I knew nothing else.”

Anti war/Counterculture/Society during the war:

Did you take part in any activism?

“I wasn’t really involved with many of the anti-war movements. I knew they were going on because of what I saw on the news.”

How did all of this make you feel?

“I felt bad for the guys fighting and I had a draft card but I got that right before the war sort of came to a close and by that time I was also about to go to college so I wouldn’t of even gone.”

Did that scare you?

“I kept getting scared because I would see the videos and pictures on TV of all the dead soldiers.”

Did you truly understand the war?

“I feel like most of us were confused because we didn’t understand why nothing was changing, people were still dying, we weren’t winning, and we were confused about what the point was because it kept dragging on.”