

# The Girl in the Kent State Photo

In 1970, an image of a dead protester immediately became iconic. But what happened to the 14-year-old kneeling next to him?



(John Filo/Getty Images)

By **Patricia McCormick**

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**L**ast May, when Mary Ann Vecchio watched the video of George Floyd’s dying moments, she felt herself plummet through time and space — to a day almost exactly 50 years earlier. On that afternoon in 1970, the world was just as riveted by an image that showed the life draining out of a young man on the ground, this one a black-and-white still photo. Mary Ann was at the center of that photo, her arms raised in anguish, begging for help.

That photo, of her kneeling over the body of Kent State University student Jeffrey Miller, is one of the most important images of the 20th century. Taken by student photographer John Filo, it captures Mary Ann’s raw grief and disbelief at the realization that the nation’s soldiers had just fired at its own children. The Kent State Pietà, as it’s sometimes called, is one of those rare photos that fundamentally

changed the way we see ourselves and the world around us. Like the image of the [solitary protester](#) standing in front of a line of tanks in Tiananmen Square. Or the photo of Kim Phuc, the naked Vietnamese girl fleeing the napalm that has just incinerated her home. Or the image of [Aylan Kurdi's](#) tiny, 3-year-old body facedown in the sand, he and his mother and brother having drowned while fleeing Syria.

These images shocked our collective conscience — and insisted that we look. But eventually we look away, unaware, or perhaps unwilling, to think about the suffering that went on long after the shutter has snapped — or of the cost to the human beings trapped inside those photos. “That picture hijacked my life,” says Mary Ann, now 65. “And 50 years later, I still haven’t really moved on.”

**M**ary Ann Vecchio has granted few interviews in 25 years, and as a child of the '60s — with her own entanglement with the FBI — she’s still a bit wary. Partway through the first of what would go on to be a dozen interviews

over the phone, she stops abruptly. “Are you doing this on your own?” she asks. I’m freelancing, I tell her. Is that what she means? No, she wants to know if I’m working with a political party. Or law enforcement. “When you’ve lived the life I have,” she says, “you still worry that maybe people are after you.” She also tells me she’s researched me before agreeing to speak. “I’m a little FBI-ish myself, in a renegade way,” she says. “And I’m also still that hippie kid who always sees a rainbow.”

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Before Kent State, she says, she was a free spirit. “I was the kid rolling down the river on a raft,” she recalls. “I was magic. In my childhood, I believed anything was possible.” But her home in Opa-locka, Fla., not far from Miami International Airport, where her father was a carpenter, could be

volatile. When her parents fought, she and her brothers and sisters would scatter, with Mary Ann hiding out in spots as far away as Miami Beach, some 15 miles from home. Soon she got in trouble — smoking pot, skipping school. So in February 1970, when the police told Mary Ann, then 14, that they'd throw her in jail if they caught her playing hooky one more time, she took off — in her bare feet. She says she wasn't rebelling against her parents' authority or seeking to join the antiwar movement: "I just wanted to be anywhere that wasn't Opa-locka."



Mary Ann Vecchio today. She is the 14-year-old kneeling in the Kent State photograph at top. (Jeffery A. Salter for The Washington Post)

Hitchhiking her way across the country, Mary Ann slept in fields, at hamburger shacks, at crash pads, working here and there for money for food, which she shared with other kids who were also bumming around. Seeing the country, meeting new people, sharing music and the occasional joint — the adventure had that feeling of magic from her childhood. Until, that is, she got to Kent State in northern Ohio, where,

on May 4, student protests erupted over President Richard Nixon's decision to invade Cambodia. Mary Ann, in her jeans, white scarf and a pair of hippie sandals someone had given her, headed toward a field where students were gathered. On her way to join the protest, she struck up a conversation with a guy in bell-bottoms. The two of them watched as another student waved a black flag, taunting the National Guard troops who had been sent in after protesters had burned down the ROTC building two nights before. The soldiers seemed to retreat to a nearby hill; then, in the next 13 seconds, they fired more than 60 shots.

Mary Ann dropped to the pavement and waited until the smoke had cleared to look up. Jeffrey Miller, the student she'd been talking to, was facedown on the ground; he'd been shot through the mouth. She knelt over his body as blood seeped onto the pavement. Other students walked by, too stunned or confused to look. "Doesn't anyone see what just happened here?" she remembers crying. "Why is no one helping him?"

As the soldiers approached, their guns at the ready, she recalls asking them a question that countless others across the country would soon ask as well: “Why did you do this?”

Nearby were more bodies. Allison Krause was shot in the chest; William Schroeder in the back. Sandy Scheuer, who was just passing through the area on her way to class, was struck by a bullet that hit her jugular vein. Four dead in Ohio.

**“I would have stayed anonymous forever,” Mary Ann says. “But that guy from the Indianapolis Star, he knocked out my future.”**

**J**ohn Filo was a senior at Kent State in May 1970, a student photographer who almost missed out on covering the



protests because he'd been in the woods taking pictures of teaberry leaves for his senior thesis that weekend. All the other photographers on the student paper had assignments from out-of-town papers, so John, 21, was working in the newspaper office to help process their pictures. On his lunch break, he grabbed a camera and stepped outside. He went straight toward the action, where a student in the no man's land between soldiers and students waved a black flag. John snapped a photo thinking, "Okay, I've got my picture." A moment later, the soldiers formed a rifle line. "I put my camera to my eye and trained it on one of the soldiers," he says. "He aimed toward me, and then his gun goes off. The next thing I know, a bullet hits a tree next to me and a chunk of bark flew off."

John dropped to the ground and waited out the 13 seconds of gunfire. When the smoke cleared, he stood and patted his arms and legs, checking to see if he'd been hit. "It was like slow motion. I just kept wondering, 'How come I'm not shot?'" Then, not 10 feet away, he saw a body on the ground.

John was running out of film as he saw a girl kneel beside the body. “I knew the boy was dead, but I could tell she didn’t know,” he told me. “I could see something building in her, and all of a sudden she lets out this scream and I shoot. I shoot one more picture, and I’m out of film.” By the time he had reloaded his camera, the girl was gone.

John remembers the soldiers ordering students who were lingering at the scene to disperse — “or they’d shoot again.” A few moments later, soldiers using bullhorns announced that the university was closed. “They ordered everyone to go home.”

Mary Ann just remembers running. She didn’t know anyone at Kent State; she’d known Miller for only 25 minutes. But she saw National Guard troops herding students onto buses, so she followed in a daze. Some two hours later, when the bus arrived in Columbus, the soldiers told everyone to get off. Many of the students ran to waiting parents. Mary Ann stumbled around the streets of the city; she’d never even heard of Columbus.

Back on campus, students were yelling at John, calling him a pig, a vulture. John yelled back. “No one’s going to believe this happened,” he told them. “This,” he said, pointing to his camera, “is proof.” When he saw Guard troops cutting down electric lines, John ran to his car. After hiding the film inside a hubcap, he drove two hours to the office of his hometown newspaper in western Pennsylvania to process his film. As he watched the film develop, he knew he had something the world needed to see.

When he called the Associated Press from the newsroom of the Valley Daily News of Tarentum, he was told the news service had plenty of Kent State photos coming in from its bureau in Akron, Ohio, and that its entire wire capacity was being used to transmit those photos. But when there was an unexpected break in the transmissions from Akron, John jumped on the wire and sent his photo. His image of the grieving girl ran on the front pages of newspapers all over the world the next day. The caption identified her simply as a “coed.”

I remember seeing the picture in my hometown paper. At 12, I wondered if the nation's adults were intent on killing their own children, in Vietnam and now at home. But Mary Ann cannot remember the first time she saw the photo; she has no memory of the moment when she became the most famous unknown person in the world.

LEFT: Photographer John Filo in 2014. As a student, he won the Pulitzer Prize for his coverage of the Kent State shootings, including the iconic image featuring Mary Ann Vecchio. Today, he is the head of photography for CBS. (Taylor Hill/FilmMagic) RIGHT: Protesters gather around Jeffrey Miller. He and three other students were killed in the shootings. (John Filo/Getty Images)

he days after the shooting went by in a haze for her. She hitchhiked out of Columbus, drifting west and sleeping wherever she could. She had heard she was wanted by the FBI, so she didn't tell anyone who she was. She wound up at a crash pad in Indianapolis, thinking that if she could just get to California, she could start her life over again, but a kid at the house where she was staying recognized her and tipped off a reporter from the Indianapolis Star. Mary Ann, barely disguised in a granny gown and fake glasses, talked to the reporter, hoping he'd give her bus fare to California in exchange for her story. The reporter got his scoop, then called the authorities, who put her in juvenile detention as a runaway.

"I would have stayed anonymous forever," she says. "But that guy from the Indianapolis Star, he knocked out my future." Within days, she was back home in Opa-locka.

Many people refused to believe the nearly 6-foot-tall girl with the long, flowing hair and the mournful face was only 14. Her family received calls

and letters calling her a drug addict, a tramp, a communist. The governor of Florida said she was “part of a nationally organized conspiracy of professional agitators” that was “responsible for the students’ death.” While some people saw her as a symbol of the national conscience, some Kent State students expressed resentment about her fame, saying she wasn’t even a protester.

Back in Kent, Ohio, local business owners ran an ad thanking the National Guard. Mail poured in to the mayor’s office, blaming “dirty hippies,” “longhairs” and “outside agitators” for the violence. Some Kent residents raised four fingers when they passed each other in the street, a silent signal that meant, “At least we got four of them.” Nixon issued a statement saying that the students’ actions had invited the tragedy. Privately, he called them “bums.” And a Gallup poll found that 58 percent of Americans blamed the students for their own deaths; only 11 percent blamed the National Guard.

The FBI also questioned John. They demanded his film, he says, and when he refused, he remembers them tailing him for nearly a week. He says his phone rang nonstop with crank callers insisting that the photo was fake. He got hate mail, including a letter that, as he recalls, read, “I had a friend die in Vietnam. You’re next.”

John was still reeling from his close call with the Guard when the Indianapolis Star ran the story identifying the subject of his photo not as a college student but as a teenage runaway. That, he says, “was a heavy weight to carry.”

**On “60 Minutes,”  
Morley Safer said  
Mary Ann “wasn’t a  
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anything.”**

**B**ack in Opa-locka, Mary Ann couldn't go to Royal Castle for a burger without reporters and hecklers following her. Death threats filled the Vecchio family mailbox. "It's too bad it wasn't you that was shot." "What you need is a good beating until you bleed red." "I hope you enjoyed sleeping with all those Negroes and dope fiends." "The deaths of the Kent State four lies on the conscience of yourself." At 14, she was a human flashpoint, her face on magazine covers, posters and handbills. The humor magazine National Lampoon ran a fake ad for a Kent State playset, complete with toy soldiers, protesters and "1 kneeling student." And not that long ago, the Onion ran a satiric news story calling a loss by the Kent State basketball team a "massacre." Mary Ann's face is photoshopped onto the body of a cheerleader, kneeling over a fallen basketball player.

Her father sold T-shirts with Mary Ann's grieving image on the front. She signed the shirts — and the occasional autograph — still in a state of shock. "People thought we were getting rich, but we never had any money," she



says. “It sounds bad, but my dad did what he did for me. He was taking care of me in the only way he knew how.”

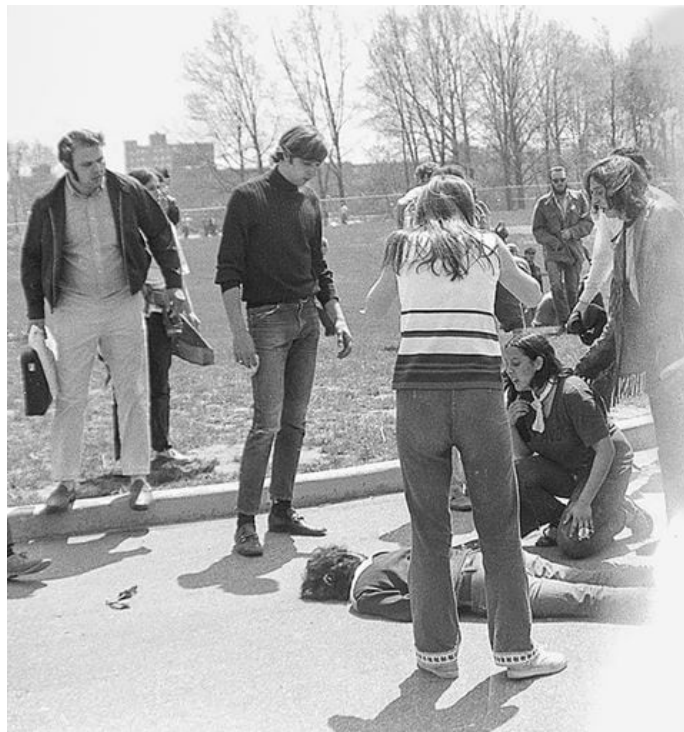
What the traumatized teenager didn’t get was counseling. It didn’t even occur to her. “I was too afraid,” she says. “He,” she notes, referring to Jeffrey Miller, the boy in the photo, “was a college student. I was just a runaway. I felt less than. And I felt like I did something dirty because that’s the way I was treated.”

She ran away from home again and got caught, ending up in juvenile detention. “They tried to give me Thorazine,” she says. She ran away from there, too, was caught again and returned. But when she was sent back home, she recalls, the police followed her incessantly, arresting her for loitering, for smoking pot. “I was a mess, like I was trying to punch my way out of a paper bag,” she says.

Later, in 1977, Mary Ann was profiled by “60 Minutes” as a “maladjusted kid.” For the segment, she read aloud from the hateful letters she’d received,

which were spread out on her parents' dining table. Morley Safer said she "wasn't a symbol of the tragedy of the Vietnam War. She wasn't a symbol of anything." Just a "14-year-old nobody hitchhiking from nowhere to nowhere." He seemed, at least to me as I watched the segment recently, to take smug satisfaction in the trouble she had after Kent State, turning her into a national cautionary tale.

"Everyone had a piece of me," Mary Ann says. "And when everyone in the world thinks they know who you are, *you* don't want to be who you are."



Mary Ann Vecchio, kneeling by the body of Jeffrey Miller after National Guard troops shot at protesters at

**J**ohn Filo's picture would win a Pulitzer Prize. His photo, Time magazine said, captured the sense that the Vietnam War had come home and "distilled that feeling into a single image." But he, too, was haunted. "I felt very guilty," he says. "An arm's length to my right, a guy was shot. An arm's length or two to my left, that's where Jeffrey Miller was killed. I'm alive and I'm relatively famous, and they're dead." And when he read that the police had been harassing Mary Ann, he felt responsible.

Eventually, at age 22, Mary Ann took off from Florida, moved to Las Vegas, married and got a job in a casino coffee shop. She was rarely mentioned in news stories commemorating the events of May 4, 1970. In May 1990, she told the Orlando Sentinel that the photograph had "really destroyed my life." Still, she said, she was proud of a job where she wore a nicely pressed blouse and skirt and where she'd built a new life far removed from the

shooting. “Kent State has nothing to do with my life,” she said.

By that time, she’d also learned it was risky to tell people that she was the girl in the iconic photo. “The less I said, the safer I felt,” she recalls. And while she took pride in her job and the stability she’d achieved, underneath she carried a sadness about the way her life had turned out. “My life was already upside-down by the time of Kent State, but with some different guidance, maybe I could have made something of myself,” she says.

“Maybe I could’ve done something good with my life. That’s the damage, when you don’t get to be who you were going to be.”

Meanwhile, John went on to have a successful career as a photographer. (Today he’s the head of photography for CBS.) He says that not a day went by that he didn’t think about the Kent State students — or Mary Ann. Sometimes he had nightmares about her. When he became a father and looked in his daughter’s eyes, he saw Mary Ann’s eyes. He tortured himself by wondering how he’d feel if someone

had taken his daughter's photo in such a vulnerable moment. "I thought about reaching out to her many times," he says. "But I figured she hated me."

It was Gregory Payne, a professor at Emerson College and author of "Mayday, Kent State," who had an idea that he thought might help them both. In 1995 he organized a 25-year retrospective on Kent State and Mississippi's Jackson State, where students had been shot and killed by police around the same time. He invited both Mary Ann and John to attend. "Mary Ann was open to the idea, but John wasn't initially," Payne says. "He always felt terrible about trapping her in that picture, and he'd read that she said it ruined her life." The day before they were to meet, Payne recalls, he asked Mary Ann what she was going to say to John. "She said she had no idea."

"I was kind of mad at [John] for a long time," Mary Ann says. "He's lucky. He's done very well. He's got a nice house. He's got everything. He got the

pony.” She laughs at that. “I got the crap.”

John says he “dreaded ever meeting Mary Ann,” but he accepted Payne’s invitation to the retrospective, unsure, until the last minute, if he would go through with it. When Payne brought the two of them together for a private meeting before the opening ceremony, no one knew what to expect. “John looked so scared,” Payne says. But Mary Ann surprised everyone. “I saw the anguish in his eyes,” she says of John, “and, you know, I felt sorry for him.” She smiled, took his hand and hugged him. They both cried.

Even though they’d never before met, Mary Ann says that she and John had the instant bond of a pair of old army buddies. “It *was* kind of a war,” she says. And neither of them had ever really been recognized as among the casualties. Kent State had haunted them both, from opposite ends of the lens.

Later that day, as Mary Ann spoke to the assembled group about the trauma of the Kent State shootings, John had

an epiphany about the power of his photo. “It was *because* she was 14, because of her youth, that she ran to help, that she ran to do something. There were other people, 18, 19, 20 years old, who didn’t get close to the body. She did because she was a kid. She was a kid reacting to the horror in front of her. Had she not been 14, the picture wouldn’t have had the impact it did.”

After the retrospective, John gave her a signed copy of the photo. The inscription: “For the courageous Mary Ann Vecchio, I cannot fathom how this photograph affected your life. I’m proud to call you a friend.”

**The public glare defined her as someone she never was. Now she’s who she wants to be.**

**M**ary Ann lived in Las Vegas for nearly 20 years, moving up from her job in the

coffee shop to the casino floor, where she had the keys to pay out the slot machine jackpots. She says she dreamed of being a lawyer. But something told her, “Don’t get too successful, don’t get too visible. Don’t be too happy.” Hiding was much safer, she says.

In 2001, however, she took the story of her life back into her own hands. She had earned a high school diploma at the age of 39; now in her mid-40s, she was ready to study for a career in health. She also ended an unhappy marriage and started over again by returning to Florida. She bought a 24-foot camper, worked full time at the Trump Spa at Doral, enrolled at nearby Miami Dade Community College and studied to be a respiratory therapist. Between shifts and classes she spent time nursing her dying mother.

“Everybody at the Doral loved Mary Ann,” says longtime friend Charlotte Brewer, 85. “She has this very caring personality.” Still, Mary Ann didn’t tell her about the photo until it popped up on Charlotte’s phone one day. “That’s



me,” Mary Ann said. At first Charlotte couldn’t believe it, but she soon understood: The girl who ran to help an injured student at Kent State was the same person who saw her massage work as healing treatments for her clients and who was training to help patients with respiratory problems. Charlotte and her fellow massage therapists were so happy to see Mary Ann on a new professional path, they took her out to lunch after she passed each course. “Maybe that’s why I got such good grades,” Mary Ann says.

After school, the woman who perhaps had been the most visible symbol of protest against the Vietnam War worked at the Miami VA hospital, where she cared for men who’d served in that war. But she never told them she was the girl from the Kent State photo. Sometimes, she says, she wanted to tell the veterans who she was so she could explain that the protesters weren’t anti-soldier, just antiwar, and that they did what they did to bring soldiers home. Instead, she operated on a “no-need-to-know policy.” She wanted “to be in the vets’

shoes,” she says. “I had to make a connection on a spiritual level.”

By working with veterans, she learned about resilience and came to understand what being in the line of fire had done to her. “I tried to hide my shell-shockedness from them,” she says, but she saw ways in which they were traumatized that echoed some of her own behaviors. “I’m very positional,” she says. “Wherever I go, I sit with my back to the wall so I can see what’s coming in the front door.”

Mary Ann is retired now — she didn’t remarry or have children — and leads a quiet life, growing avocados and oranges on a small plot at the edge of the Florida Everglades. Payne, who keeps in regular touch with her and has invited her to speak to his classes at Emerson, credits her “incredibly strong spirit” for her survival. “She also still has that unaffected purity,” he says. “That’s what you saw in the photo on May 4th. And that’s still who she is.”

Charlotte says Mary Ann is more like a neighborhood sprite. She pops in to

see their older neighbors, bathing them and delivering home-cooked meals. She gets offers to work for pay, but she prefers to “be that surprise person that shows up with banana bread.”

Last May, however, when she watched the video of [George Floyd’s death](#), she was so shaken, it was as if the electronic scrim of her TV had dissolved. She jumped off her couch and yelled at the crowd in the video, “Why is no one helping him?” She sobs as she describes that moment to me. “Doesn’t anyone see what’s going on?”

“Mary Ann,” I say. “It seems to me that you’re still that girl in the photo, you’re still that girl saying, ‘Doesn’t anyone see what’s happening here?’”

She stops crying abruptly. “But it’s been 50 years,” she says. “Why can’t I move on?”

What would it take to move on? I ask.

“Maybe if I do some good for the planet,” she says. She tells me that she does small, secret acts of charity every

weekend, when she goes “undercover” to the Walmart parking lot near her home and leaves canned foods, staples and her homegrown avocados in an empty shopping cart for someone to discover. “I feel like I need to do something good,” she says, crying again.

You’ve already done something profoundly good, I tell her. “In that moment when you knelt over Jeffrey Miller’s body,” I say, “you expressed the grief and horror that so many people were feeling. You helped end the Vietnam War.”

“You can say that,” she says, “but I can’t feel it.”



Today, Mary Ann Vecchio is retired in Florida. No one follows her or sends her hate mail, though once in a while she receives an autograph request. (Jeffery A. Salter for The Washington Post)

**N**owadays, the girl who wanted to be anywhere but Opa-locka lives not far from there. No one knows her as the girl from the photo. No one follows her or sends her hate mail, though once in a while she finds an autograph request with a faraway address in her mailbox. Sometimes students find her online and send her letters saying they read about her in their history books. This cracks her up. “I’m a living person,”

she says with a laugh. “*And I’m in a history book! Not many people can say that.*”

For me, it’s hard now not to look at that photo and see a 14-year-old girl, unaware of how that single moment will shape her entire life. She’ll become a public figure — as a minor — with no consent and no control over her image or her reputation. Well before there’s such a concept as victim-blaming, before social media or *Us Weekly*, she’ll become an object of national fascination — a target for some, a footnote in history to others. She’ll be the subject of a photo known the world over, but never really known as a person.

And yet, she eventually defied the narrative that was written for her. She built a new life on her own terms. Far from the public glare that defined her as someone she never was, she’s now who she wants to be: someone whose life is both private and purposeful. And on weekends, as she roams the Walmart parking lot near her home, leaving gifts for strangers, it’s possible to see that 14-year-old girl before the

shutter is snapped, that kid who  
thinks she's magic.

*Patricia McCormick is a two-time  
National Book Award finalist. She  
writes about the effects of trauma on  
young people.*

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editing by Dudley M. Brooks.*