

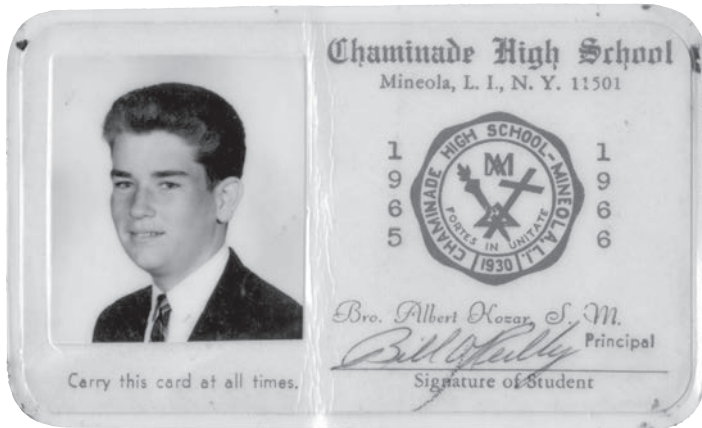
PROLOGUE

THE BAD NEWS ARRIVED in religion class. We were in Brother Carmine Diodati's room that day when the radio report came over the loudspeaker: *President John F. Kennedy has been shot in Dallas, Texas, and taken to the hospital.* A short time later, we would learn that he was dead.

We were startled. No one knew what to say. I remember exactly where I was when I heard the news, and so do most Americans who were born before 1953. I'll bet there is someone in your family who can tell you what it felt like to hear the awful news that the president had been assassinated.

Chaminade High School, where I was a freshman, was (and

still is) all boys, or "young men," as we were called, so there weren't a lot of tears then. The days that followed were filled with sadness and confusion. We had to go to several sorrowful masses and listen to lectures



The author's ID for Chaminade High School, 1965–66.

about the slain president and the tragedy that had befallen America.

Mostly, we were confused. My life at the time revolved around sports and friends. I didn't think too much about national politics. I took pride in wearing the red and gold school colors on the field, did my homework, and tried to stay in line with the school rules. I don't remember talking to my friends about the assassination.

Life was pretty simple in those days. For adults the rules seemed to be these: You worked, obeyed the law, cared for your family, looked out for your neighbors, and respected your country. The Kennedy assassination shattered that calm sense of order. People throughout America were asking themselves and one another why it happened and who really killed the president.

In 1960, when Kennedy was elected, I was in sixth grade at St. Brigid's Catholic School. Of course his picture was soon on the walls because he was the country's first Catholic president. And he was Irish, too. I had Kennedys in my background. My mother's grandmother was Winifred Kennedy, and all American Kennedys liked to think they were related to this groundbreaking president. And because we were Irish Catholic, too, our family felt deep emotional ties to the president and his family.

Soon after Kennedy was elected, there was a scary change at school. Three months after the inauguration, there was a standoff with Russia and Cuba, and people were afraid there would be a nuclear war. To prepare for this, we had fallout-shelter drills at school. When the bell rang, all the kids had to file out to the school



The Kennedys with Jackie's sister's family, Christmas Eve, 1962. The black dog is Clipper. Mrs. Kennedy is holding Charlie. [JFK Presidential Library and Museum]

parking lot. If a war had started, buses would take us to an underground bunker.

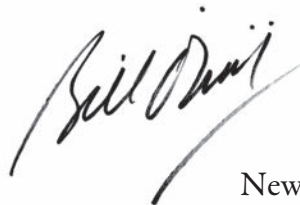
There would be other showdowns during Kennedy's presidency, as well as times of family relaxation. And it seemed as if we were in on them all. There were photos of the president in meetings, walking with world leaders, speaking around the world, sailing on his yacht, and playing with his children. He was a glamorous figure, young and energetic. He had style, and his wife, Jackie, had even more. Kennedy was friendly with the press and let them show

what his life was like. He was our first president who liked to be on television.

And it was television that kept the country in touch when he was killed. After the assassination, my mother and father, like most Americans, were glued to the TV. For three days after the 1:40 P.M. news bulletin on November 22, 1963, the country watched. Walter Cronkite, the most respected man in television news, had broken into the broadcast of a soap opera to announce the shooting. All the major networks showed the return of the president's body to Washington, D.C., his funeral mass at the Cathedral of St. Matthew, and his burial in Arlington National Cemetery. Not a single commercial was aired during those three days.

My father was not enthusiastic about the new president, Lyndon Johnson. My mother was sad and mostly worried about Jackie Kennedy and her two young children. To me, Kennedy was a distant figure who died in a terrible way, although many of the photographs of that day have stayed with me always.

It wasn't until I got to college that I began to be interested in politics and in how great men like John Kennedy met the challenges that were thrown at them.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Bill Davis". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a long, sweeping underline that extends to the right.

New York
June 2013