

Putney students pose for a 1959 picture with U.S. Senator John Kennedy and UAW president Walter Reuther. Pictured from right to left are Ralph Mendershausen '61, Gail "Gay" Sise Grossman '61, John Simon '60, UAW president Walter Reuther, Senator Kennedy, Linda Reuther '60, Carolyn Fawcett '61, History Teacher Bob Treat and Ross Burkhardt '60.



# Former Putney Students Remember Their Brush With JFK

By Clennon L. King '78



Clennon L. King '78 has been a lot of things to many people but, as of this year, he's also known to us as The Putney School's major gifts officer and the adult mentor for United Students, a newly formed campus group for students of color. And he writes!

We just can't get enough of this guy.

PUTNEY'S CONNECTION TO THE KENNEDY FAMILY runs deep. Senator Edward Kennedy spoke at Putney's spring conference in 1975. The late Robert Kennedy's daughters, Kathleen Kennedy Townsend '69 and Mary Kerry Kennedy '77, both graduated from Putney. And the former Mary Richardson '77 became Mrs. Robert Kennedy, Jr. after marrying Kerry and Kathleen's brother.

But perhaps few know about Putney's little-known episode with John F. Kennedy in the late '50s. Former Putney School Director of Admissions and History Teacher Bob Treat recalled the chance meeting of October 12, 1959 in Atlantic City, New Jersey.

Treat and a half-dozen Putney students had been invited to attend the United Auto Workers' national convention by the father of Linda Reuther '60, UAW president Walter Reuther.

"I drove them down and we stayed in Reuther's hotel—even sat on stage with him," said the former head of Old Girls dorm, now retired and living in Putney.

During one evening, Reuther had invited Treat and the students to join him for dinner in his hotel suite when they heard a knock at the door. Standing there was U.S. Senator John F. Kennedy who was seeking the support of Reuther and the UAW in his anticipated run for the White House.

Despite Reuther's insistence Kennedy stay for dinner, the presidential hopeful declined, choosing instead to pose for a photograph with the union president.



Former Putney School History Teacher Bob Treat recently recalled a field trip he led that brought him and his students face to face with JFK.

Reuther asked Treat and the students to join them. The students included Ralph Mendershausen '61, Gail "Gay" Sise Grossman '61, John Simon '60, Linda Reuther '60, Ross Burkhardt '60, and an African-American Putney student named Carolyn Fawcett '61, now deceased.

But some former students recall Kennedy wasn't the center of attention that night. "We didn't think of Kennedy as an important person as we did years later," said Grossman. Ralph Mendershausen '61 agreed, adding he was in awe of a world-famous African American contralto who *had* joined them for dinner.

Dining at their table was Marion Anderson herself. Twenty years before, in 1939, Anderson made history when 75,000 gathered to hear her sing on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial after she had been banned from performing in Constitution Hall because of the color of her skin.

"I looked up to her as a woman who was very brave and stood up against discrimination," said Grossman.

Mendershausen recalled one remarkable moment during Anderson's concert performance at the convention when she invited the audience to request songs. "Walter Reuther nudged me to request *Ave Maria* which Marian Anderson did," he said. "It was tumultuous."

Still, for John Simon '60, the brush with Kennedy in the hotel suite and at a later press conference was the headiest experience. He remembered an aide to Walter Reuther had urged him to ask a question about education at a Kennedy press conference. Simon instead asked about the nuclear arms race.

"When we got back to school and entered the assembly singing *Solidarity Forever*, I told the students I had asked Kennedy why we needed nuclear weapons," recalled Simon. "And his response was that the Russians have more missiles." Simon in part credits the Putney Experience for helping him muster the courage to ask that question and push his agenda for peace.

It's the value of an experiential education that is a Putney School hallmark, said Linda Reuther whose nephew, Victor Dickmeyer '06, enrolled at Putney this fall. "We went to see democracy in action," she said. "Times were so different. People believed they could really change the world and there was a hopefulness."

Even Linda's sister, Elisabeth Reuther Dickmeyer '65, wrote about the power of a Putney education in the eyes of their father, the late Walter Reuther. "His enrolling me at Putney," she wrote in her 1989 memoir *Reuther: A Daughter Strikes*, "was part of his dream that I go further still."

Long haired in the late '50s, Ross Burkhardt remembers how Putney's "top brass" refused to let him go on the UAW Atlantic City fieldtrip unless he first went to Brattleboro for a haircut. This son of Bennington College's then president said he was also surprised at how soft Senator Kennedy's handshake was.

On balance though, he said, the school-sponsored trip was a testament to Putney's commitment to a progressive liberal arts education. "What other boarding school would have let its students attend a labor movement conference back then?" said Burkhardt.

Now, nearly half a century after the Atlantic City field trip, John Simon said he only hopes current Putney students know how blessed they are.

"The Putney education is a wonderful privilege." ❄️



Putney Alumna Elisabeth Reuther Dickmeyer '65 wrote about the power of a Putney education in her 1989 memoir, *Reuther: A Daughter Strikes*.



Students listen as U.S. Senator Edward Kennedy speaks during a 1975 Spring Conference in Putney's KDU.

Ross Burkhardt '60 stands with his family in front of their Westport, CT home. Ross recently recalled how he met U.S. Senator John F. Kennedy on a Putney field trip.

