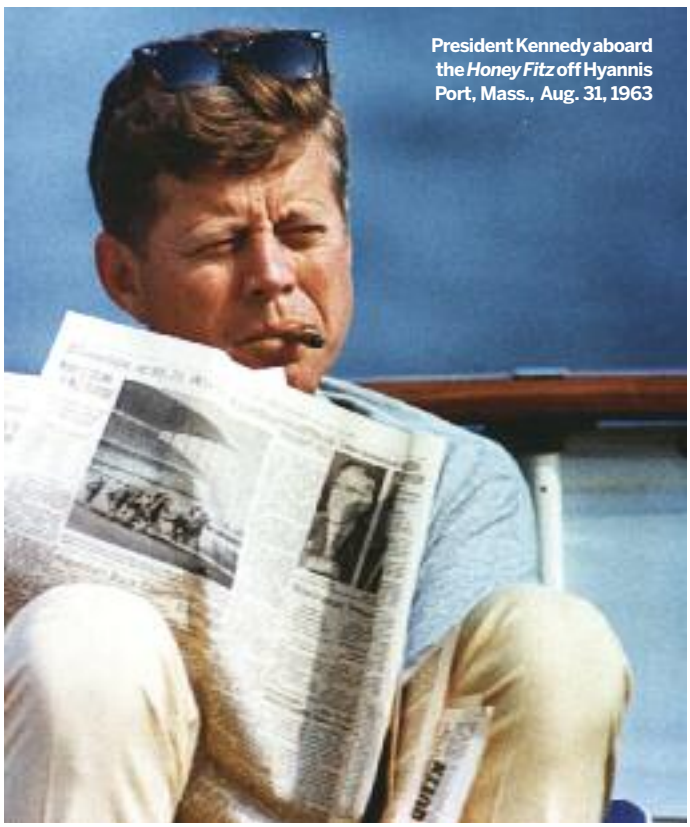
Audiovisual Archivist Laurie Austin '00 Helps to Keep JFK's Legacy Alive

In the Public Eye

BY RACHEL SAPIN '08



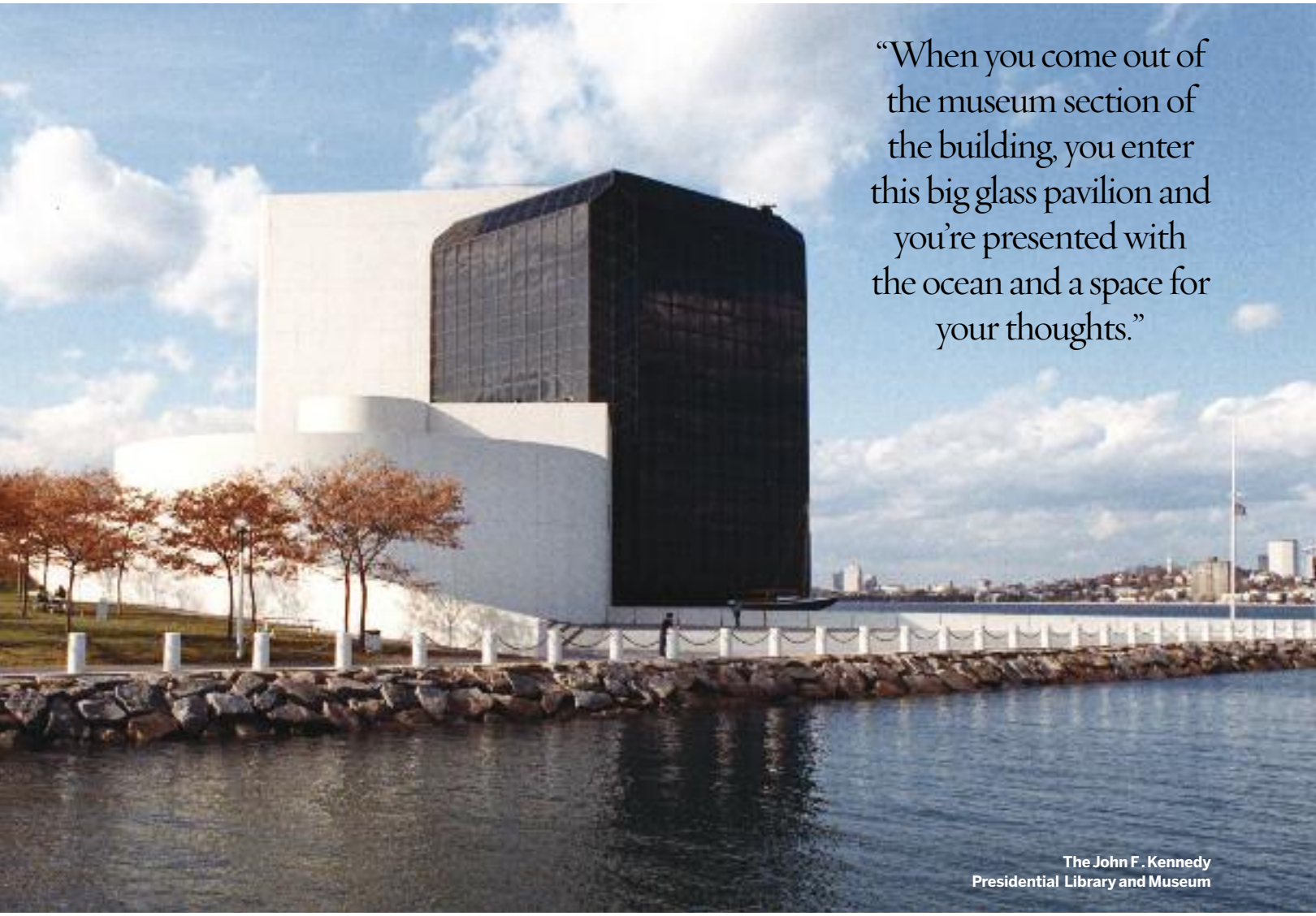


President Kennedy aboard the *Honey Fitz* off Hyannis Port, Mass., Aug. 31, 1963

When Eunice Kennedy Shriver — sister of President John F. Kennedy and founder of the Special Olympics — died on Tuesday, Aug. 11, 2009, the first place most media outlets turned for archival photographs and film footage was the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum.

And that meant many long hours for Laurie Claing Austin '00, a former history major at the College who has worked as an audiovisual archivist for the Kennedy Library for the past five years.

PHOTO: CECIL STOUGHTON/JOHN F. KENNEDY PRESIDENTIAL LIBRARY AND MUSEUM



"When you come out of the museum section of the building, you enter this big glass pavilion and you're presented with the ocean and a space for your thoughts."

The John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum

PHOTO: ALLAN GOODRICH/JOHN F. KENNEDY PRESIDENTIAL LIBRARY AND MUSEUM

"It was very hectic starting the previous Friday afternoon, when the news broke that Mrs. Shriver had been hospitalized and her entire family was with her in the hospital. We had some inkling several months ago that she was unwell, so we were at least emotionally prepared for it," Austin remembers.

While the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum houses materials related to various Kennedy family members and ancestors, it is, first and foremost, a memorial to the nation's 35th president and an invaluable resource for scholars and the general public alike. It is one of 13 presidential libraries administered by the National Archives.

Located at the tip of the Columbia Point peninsula in Dorchester, Mass. — overlooking Boston Harbor and the city skyline — the Kennedy Library building itself is a powerful symbol of Kennedy's presidency. Designed by I.M. Pei and opened to the public in 1979, its architecture is modern, ambitious and inventive. The first thing you notice when you enter the building is a glass-and-steel pavilion that measures 80 feet long by 80 feet wide and 115 feet high; the pavilion offers visitors a spectacular view of the harbor.

"President Kennedy was very attached to the sea," says Austin. "When you come out of the museum section of the building, you enter this big glass pavilion and you're presented with the ocean and a space for your thoughts."

The Stuff of Legend

Austin's work has allowed her to learn hundreds of details, large and small, about the presidency, administration and family life of one of the 20th century's most legendary figures — once she even helped a researcher find pictures of JFK riding only in Cadillacs. "The great thing about working in my field is that you learn something new and often obscure every day," she says. "Ninety-five percent of what I do here involves providing reference on our collection."

Overseeing a constantly growing collection of audio, visual and textual materials is no simple task. The library's audiovisual holdings currently include around 400,000 still photographs, 7.5 million feet of motion picture film and 11,000 reels of sound recordings.

"We get new materials all the time," she says. "It's stuff that comes not only from Kennedy family members, but also from people simply cleaning out their grandmother's attic. We recently received photos from a man who took pictures of JFK for his campus

newspaper when he was a student. If it's unique or out of the ordinary, we'll take it."

Austin gained much of her current knowledge of the collection through experience. She had two internships with the library to learn her way around the stacks of film reels, photos and finding aids that her department houses before she was hired on full time. In her first internship, she assisted a staff member who handled the library's photo requests, and her second internship involved transferring a collection of American political films dating from the 1940s through the 1960s from 16mm film to video.

That second internship provided her not only with experience working with the collection, but also with primary materials for her master's degree work in public history at Northeastern University. In her master's thesis, she specifically looked at how American political candidates were using TV even before the Kennedy-Nixon debates.

"A combination of factors contributed to the 1960 election being the beginning of the 'Television Age' in politics, as opposed to the 1950s," she explains. "The most important is that Eisenhower was far too popular for TV to have made much of a difference. But that's not to say the [1950s] candidates didn't try to experiment with it, and the 1960 candidates learned important lessons from their predecessors' efforts."

Austin's academic background has proved useful and often necessary when it comes to appropriately cataloguing the boxes of "stuff" the library regularly receives from donors. "History research skills are essential in this job, which has made my undergraduate and graduate degrees so valuable," says Austin. "We often receive boxes of film, sound recordings and photos with no real identification. A prior knowledge of what was going on historically during the time the materials were created can be the foundation you need to know where to look and figure out what they are."

Austin didn't always plan on having a career in history; she entered the College aspiring to become a lawyer. "My goal was to be the first woman chief justice of the Supreme Court," she remembers. It was an introductory course in art history with Professor James D. Kornwolf that changed her life forever. "I had no intention of being an art history minor until I took his survey," she says. "Once I took Professor Kornwolf's art history class, I loved it and took more. I think that William and Mary gave me the background, and provided me with the intellectual curiosity to want to learn more and to follow my path."



PHOTO: JAMES HILL/JOHN F. KENNEDY PRESIDENTIAL LIBRARY AND MUSEUM

Sleuthing Skills

With her penchant for intellectual exploration, Austin is a natural at handling researchers' requests, however out of the ordinary they are. "Our researchers can range from production companies, television shows and news media, to academics, Kennedy buffs and average Joes," she explains. "We also get requests from Kennedy family members, members of Congress, and other government agencies."

A notable request for Austin's reference skills came from the producers of *Mad Men*, an AMC series set in the 1960s that follows the lives of men and women at a competitive advertising agency on Madison Avenue. Austin provided producers with audiovisual materials relating to the Kennedy/Nixon campaign and the Kennedy administration that were sprinkled into episodes over the course of the first and second seasons. "Their season two finale was set during the Cuban Missile Crisis," she explains. "All of the radio broadcasts on the crisis occurring throughout the show came from us."

The requests can be especially difficult to satisfy when they are broad or obscure, which is often the case, according to Austin. "Many of the requests we have are the kind that are not terribly concrete," she says. "For example, a researcher may ask, 'I'd like photos of President

Kennedy looking like his back is hurting.' First of all, there's no specific date or occasion that this person has requested, and that doesn't matter in the least to him. But that's how we have our photos organized, so I have to figure out approximately when President Kennedy's back was hurting, and see if we have any photos around that time that demonstrate that visually.

"There's a tremendous amount of detective work and following your nose involved, which is what doing research is all about," she says. "Ultimately, the obscure requests can be the most frustrating, but also the most gratifying if you can actually find what the researcher has requested."

Living History

Earlier this year, Austin helped video journalist Ann Silvio of the *Boston Globe* put together online media components to the Globe's recent book about Sen. Edward M. Kennedy, *The Last Lion*; Austin is listed in the credits in each of the seven parts. That experience proved to be just a preview of the work that lay ahead as Sen. Kennedy neared his last days.

"I've had seemingly endless requests from members of the media, production companies and publishers for the past several months," Austin says. "I worked very closely with Kunhardt Productions on their program 'Teddy in His Own Words,' which aired originally on HBO in July."

Just two weeks after Eunice Shriver's death, on Aug. 25, her younger brother Teddy passed away. As Austin assisted the major networks on their special programming, the historian found herself in the midst of history-making events, providing her with indelible memories.

"As the public learned that the senator would lie in repose here, our parking lot filled with media trucks, cables were strewn in all directions, scaffolding was set up to accommodate video cameras, and helicopters hovered overhead. Meanwhile, my colleagues and I were fielding phone calls and e-mail requests from media outlets ranging from local newspapers to European and Asian magazines.

"On the day that the senator's body was moved from Hyannis Port to Boston, the military honor guard moved into our staff lunch room down the hall," Austin continues. "They became our neighbors for 48 hours, and they were a pleasure to have. Their ceremonial changing of the guard every hour was truly a beautiful sight.

"On Friday, I was the staff photographer, and I was in awe to see the thousands of people who waited patiently to pay their respects to Sen. Kennedy and his family. I went to the roof and took photos of the line, which had formed as far as you could see. There was such a current of uplifting positive emotion that it was genuinely heartwarming.

"It was exhausting and emotionally draining, but I would not have wanted to be anywhere else and I counted myself fortunate to have been a part of it."

Looking Forward with Hope

When asked what her favorite Kennedy material is out of the large collection the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum hosts, Austin pointed to a speech President Kennedy gave to the students at Amherst College in October of 1963; it was one of his last public appearances. "He talks about the importance of the arts and I find that really important in my life," she says. During the speech, Kennedy said, "The nation which disdains the mission of art, invites the fate of Robert Frost's hired man, the fate of having 'nothing to look backward to with pride, and nothing to look forward to with hope.'"

It seems the same can be said of history. Perhaps that's why Austin's interest in history extends far beyond being able to efficiently reference and appropriately catalogue it. "What happened in the past is really important to what is happening today," she says. "That's not to say that the past repeats itself because that I think is not true, but I think that learning about the past can help inform our choices today." ■





Top: **Members of the public pay final tribute to Sen. Edward M. Kennedy as his body lies in repose at the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum on Aug. 27, 2009.** **Above:** **The Kennedy family, U.S. Embassy residence, England, July 4, 1938: (l-r) Eunice, John, Rosemary, Jean, Joseph Sr., Edward, Rose, Joseph Jr., Patricia, Robert, Kathleen.**

TOP PHOTO: JAMES HILL/JOHN F. KENNEDY PRESIDENTIAL LIBRARY AND MUSEUM; BOTTOM PHOTO: DOROTHY WILDING/JOHN F. KENNEDY PRESIDENTIAL LIBRARY AND MUSEUM