

John F. Kennedy Jr.'s plane crash off of Martha's Vineyard marks the most recent tragedy in the history of the nation's most prominent political family. The unstated public expectation that Kennedy would someday follow in his father's footsteps will forever be an unfulfilled hope.

While many Americans spent the last several days glued to CNN for the latest breaking reports of the massive rescue search for Kennedy, his wife Carolyn and his sister-in-law Lauren Bessette, the image of a 3-year-old toddler saluting the casket of his father, the martyred president, remained ever-present, frozen in time.

I don't have that memory. I was only 4 years old when President Kennedy was assassinated.

But I do have memories of his son as an undergraduate at Brown University.

As a graduate student in American history at Brown in the early 1980s, I moved in many of the same circles as JFK Jr. Though I didn't know him personally, I was always impressed with the candor as well as the insightfulness of his remarks in a senior-level history class, especially when addressing the not-always-complimentary revisionist accounts of his father's presidency. It was almost as if he was single-handedly assuming the burden of responsibility for his father's legacy while other students sat idly by in awe of the effort.

On a campus that was home to the children of Jimmy Carter, Walter Mondale and Garry Wills among other prominent families, JFK Jr. treated all his peers, regardless of their lineage, with the same good nature. While he did have his own small circle of friends, he was

not a "pretty boy" who isolated himself from others. It was not unusual, for example, to see him working out at the field house weight room or organizing a student initiative on U.S. divestment in South Africa, whose apartheid policies greatly disturbed him.

Although there was a certain shyness about him, JFK Jr. had already grown accustomed to being the object of public scrutiny by the time he arrived at Brown.

His previous stints at the Collegiate School in New York City and Phillips Academy in Andover, Mass., prepared him for it. Private schools tend to cultivate their charges for both the intellectual as well as public demands of adult life. After all, for those to whom much has been given, much is expected. It is a principle known as "noblesse oblige," or of inculcating a belief that benevolent and honorable behavior is the responsibility of a person of high birth or rank.

JFK Jr. carried that mantle with great dignity. He didn't have to be a public servant to serve humanity, which he did briefly as a Manhattan prosecutor and quietly by subsidizing an alternative school for disadvantaged youth in East Harlem.

Yet at the same time, my heart went out to him. For all the advantages of wealth and birth that he enjoyed, he was, in my estimation, a lonely person. A prince of a human being, often left wondering who loved and respected him for who he was, and not for being the son of a martyred president.

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