

Student Handout
Oakland Museum of California
What's Going On? California and the Vietnam Era
Lesson Plan #2

1968: Year of Social Change and Turning Point in Vietnam and the U.S.

Essay on 1968 and Oral History

There is a whole 1968 Oral History website at

<http://www.stg.brown.edu/projects/1968/index.html>, created by Brown University.

English and Oral History

<http://www.stg.brown.edu/projects/1968/notes/sharonEssay.html>

Sharon Schmid, English Teacher, South Kingstown High School

In 1968, I was a high school junior experiencing that early independence that comes from getting one's driver's license, dating, cheering for the junior varsity basketball team, and studying at Pilgrim High School. Friends and music, of course, were my priorities. In 1967 on Saturdays in the fall, all my friends went to the football games to meet with friends and cheer on the team—and sometimes we won. Tuesday and Friday evenings, eleven of my classmates and I would cheer for the Pilgrim High Junior Varsity Basketball Team—I think I can still do the roll call cheer today because we practiced it so much. I was always hoarse from shouting for one team or another. Sometimes we went to the movies. *The Sound of Music* played at the Warwick Cinema for months and *Goldfinger* played at one of the downtown theaters. Most of the sports were for boys except for field hockey and gymnastics. And on Sunday night at 8 o'clock, we would watch the Ed Sullivan Show which had been broadcasting the best musical groups since the 1964 first-time showing of the Beatles. By 1968, the U.S. music scene was filled with great rock bands from England. Mod fashions a la Twiggy straight from London changed clothing overnight. Life, it seemed to me then, was simpler except for the nightly news.

Every night I watched the violence erupting from the world outside of Warwick, Rhode Island. It was a world that seemed out of control with war and protest. I remember the body counts which always proved the United States' troops were faring better because our numbers of deaths were always fewer than the North Vietnamese deaths. I watched with horror the somber unloading of bodies returning to the United States—the young men were only a little bit older than I was. I never really understood why we were fighting over there—something about dominoes and Communism; we had to keep the Communists from taking another small nation. The Civil Rights' Movement and Vietnam War reports seemed surreal to me because these events were so removed from my life and high school experience.

The Vietnam War almost touched me when my brother went into the army during my high school years. He opted to go to air traffic control school because he thought being on an air field would be safer than the infantry. He was one of the lucky ones to be sent to



Korea which by 1968 was a relatively stable area in Southeast Asia. I didn't know of anyone from my neighborhood who died in Vietnam during those years, but there was a lot I didn't know then. I didn't understand why the war was taking so long to win and I was frightened that the war would never stop. The violence which seemed endless was in my living room every night on the Huntley-Brinkley Report.

The other news story that filled the evening news for years was the Civil Rights' Movement. I felt sick to hear of children killed in southern church bombings, and people who were beaten or murdered because they were trying to help end segregation. Growing up in Warwick, a bedroom community for Providence, I went to school with only a few African Americans. We were all friends. One of my best friends in junior high school was an African American. We were best friends until her family moved away. I knew her father made more money than mine did because she had a better house than we did. I couldn't figure out why there was discrimination against people. But there it was every night on the TV screen. Regular television programming was so tame compared to the evening news that was filled with war, death, protest, and unrest worldwide. In the 1960s, it seemed like the world was on fire, and the only thing that connected me to the world around me was my television set.

I wasn't old enough to protest about the war or to join marches on Washington, but I witnessed it all first-hand in my living room. The music from those years made me feel like I was a part of the protest movements if only in spirit. I loved the music of Peter, Paul, and Mary; Bob Dylan; and Joan Baez. The mantra was to never trust anyone over 30 and we didn't. I aligned myself with the young protestors and the music of the time which kept the war and Civil Rights protests blaring from our transistor radios and record albums. Our music and clothing made us feel as rebellious as the real protestors. I went to one of the first Newport Folk Festivals that summer before my junior year and sang "Alice's Restaurant" with thousands of other teens just like me.

Growing up in the 1960s was a little bit like Charles Dickens' famous opening line, "They were the best of times; they were the worst of times." Those years were filled with friends, fun, music, first jobs, and the taste of independence and first love. They were also violent, chaotic, and unstable. These years of my youth were filled with the deaths of a young president John Kennedy, Martin Luther King Jr., and Bobby Kennedy. I was convinced that if Martin Luther King and Bobby Kennedy had lived, the world would have been different. The world changed very quickly all of a sudden and it seemed the innocence of the 1950s would never be recaptured. Before I knew it, high school was over, and the youth across America were united against the older generation.

Doing an oral history project on 1968 gave me a chance to share the literature, music, social culture, and history of the 1960s with another generation. Mostly, it was a chance for me to return to a time in my youth when I was not really aware of the politics and the rapidly changing events of those years. By doing an oral history project, my students learned about the history of this nation first-hand from people from all walks of life who allowed them into their personal lives during the turbulent year of 1968. The project had a community focus that made my students' learning real. Best of all, they became real



authors—writers of history. It was my hope that my students would not only learn about the literature of the 1960s, but also about their parents' generation. I wanted them to see how a generation could come together to try to change the times in which they lived for the better. The stories that they have written here will stay with them for a long time. They learned far more than what is usually covered in a literature class. They learned that people from all walks of life make up the stories of our times, and they learned that these stories are our shared history.

