

The Magazine of the Mizzou Alumni Association

# MIZZOU

## Protest Remembered

Mizzou antiwar leaders remember Kent State-inspired 1970 protests.



Approximately 500 students and community members gathered May 5, 1971, to protest and hold memorials for the students killed at Kent State and Jackson State during anti-war demonstrations in the spring of 1970. Photo from the 1971 *Savitar*.

*Story by Erik Potter*

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**T**he evening started with a guitar and Bob Dylan and Pete Seeger protest songs, settled into a lengthy discussion about spring 1970

antiwar protests at Mizzou, and ended with a veteran's passionate denunciation of U.S. military actions in Vietnam.

In all, about 100 people attended the April 21 Tucker Hall auditorium panel discussion on Vietnam War protests, sponsored by MU Peace Studies. Speakers included Bill Wickersham, BS Ed '55, EdD '63, then an MU assistant professor of recreation and park administration who advised the student protesters, which earned him a 28-page FBI file; Paul Wallace, then an assistant professor of political science (now professor emeritus), who organized "teach-ins" about how to end the war; Musa Ilu, MA '89, PhD '00, a graduate student in the 1980s (now a professor of sociology at the University of Central Missouri-Warrensburg), who was involved in the anti-apartheid movement; and Curtis Edwards, BA '09, MA '11, a doctoral student in the peace studies program, who works on current social justice initiatives, including housing affordability and foreclosure.

Sparked by the U.S. invasion of Cambodia, announced April 30, 1970, and the killing of four student protesters at Kent State University May 4, about 3,000 MU students gathered May 11 at a hunger strike on the Quad to force then-Chancellor John Schwada to meet with student protesters.

Wickersham, now an adjunct professor of peace studies, recalled police busing away about 30 people,

including himself, to police headquarters, “but since we’d broken no public law, they didn’t know what to do with us.” The students were soon released, though Wickersham was detained longer while it was determined whether his use of a bullhorn might have broken a law against disturbing an educational setting — “but that was what we wanted to do,” he said.

University reaction against sympathetic faculty earned a censure from the American Association of University Professors. Wickersham was among those affected, having lost his job after the spring protests. His final paycheck was also docked \$834, which he later recovered in a lawsuit.

John Betz, a U.S. Army Vietnam veteran who was “lurking” at the edge of the 1970 protest, spoke during the open-microphone portion of the panel discussion. Betz was drafted into service from 1966 to 1968, serving a one-year tour in Vietnam, and returned home distraught and shamed by the killing he had participated in — an estimated 2 million Vietnamese were killed during the war. Although his working-class social circle disliked the student protesters, he said he’d found redemption in their movement and had vowed then to tell the truth about his war experience for the rest of his life.

“We murdered 2 million people for what? For what? For *what?*” he said with tense voice and trembling hands. “I was involved in that. I will never live it

down. I can only tell the truth of what it means to be involved in a miserable, vile, immoral conflict we should not have been in.”

Now president of the Columbia Veterans for Peace chapter, he told Wickersham and other antiwar leaders in the crowd, “You changed my life. You started moving me in the direction I wanted to move.”

**Topics:** History, News, Web Exclusives

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