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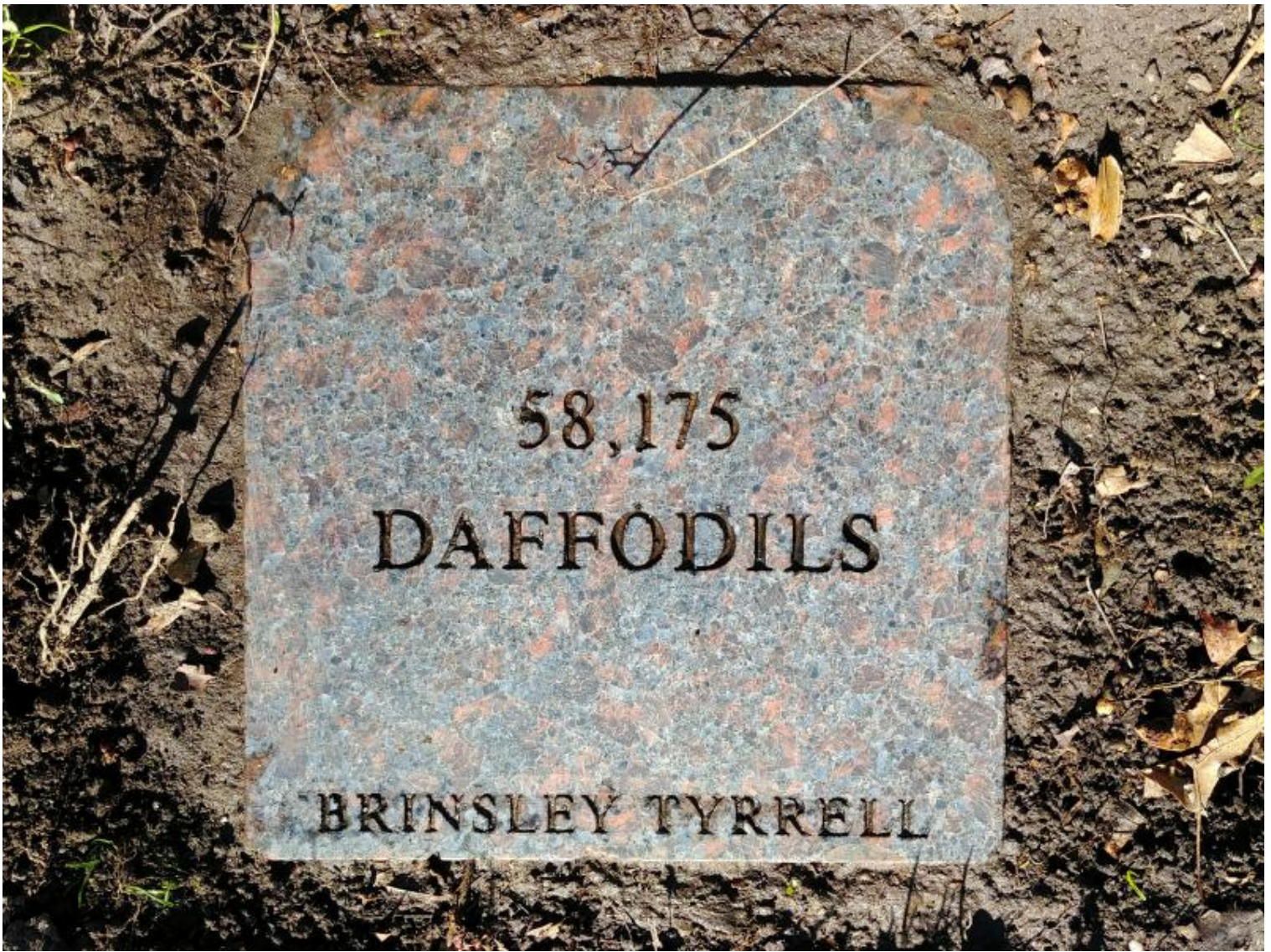


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# Fragments of May 4: The Power of So Many Flowers

By JOAN STEIDL & LYNDSEY BRENNEN • 13 HOURS AGO

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(//www.wksu.org/sites/wksu/files/styles/x\_large/public/202004/DaffodilsMarker2\_1.jpeg)

*The plaque that was unearthed this year that honors Brinsley Tyrrell and states the number of daffodils.*

JOAN STEIDL & LYNDSEY BRENNAN

In May 1990, a hillside on the Kent State campus burst with 58,175 daffodils for the first time. One flower was planted for each of the U.S. servicepeople killed in Vietnam.



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4:27

*Fragments of May 4: The Power of So Many Flowers*

Families gathered on the Commons to see the enormous carpet of bright flowers. Parents squatted next to children and pointed. People brought photographs of their husbands, sons, and brothers and placed them among the daffodils. Veterans observed proudly, silently moved. And among them stood the man who made it all possible, sculptor and Kent State art professor Brinsley Tyrrell.

Tyrrell had been present for the May 4 shootings and their aftermath. The events of that day shocked him to the core. “The idealism got knocked out of everything,” he said. “The excitement of being young ... that was in the air was all sort of sucked out.”

So when the university announced in 1985 it would hold a competition to design a May 4 Memorial, Tyrrell began brainstorming ideas that might bring people together and help them heal. In Tyrrell's mind, a field of flowers could serve as a backdrop for the memorial just as the Vietnam War had served as the backdrop for shootings.

Although Tyrrell's proposal was initially dismissed because he was not a United States citizen or permanent resident (he was teaching at Kent State on a work visa from England at the time), that didn't deter him. He wrote up another proposal and made an appointment with Kent State President Michael Schwartz.

Schwartz had been at the epicenter of the tension around the memorial. Those who protested the memorial, mostly veterans, believed that to honor fallen anti-war protestors was a sign of disrespect to those who'd fought in the war. Those who advocated for the memorial believed those who died protesting the war, not those who fought in it, should be the ones honored.

Tyrrell believed the university could honor both.

On the day of Tyrrell's appointment, President Schwartz looked apprehensive. "You could just see that he was [thinking], 'Oh God, more of this!'" Tyrrell said. But as Schwartz read through the proposal, Tyrrell watched his apprehension disappear. Schwartz looked up at Tyrrell and said, "I like flowers. This might work."

In addition to planting the flowers, the university installed a plaque that said, "58,175 daffodils" along with Tyrrell's name. The plaque had been buried until this year when the maintenance crew unearthed it. Tyrrell had assumed it was stolen.



([https://mediad.publicbroadcasting.net/p/wksu/files/styles/x\\_large/public/202004/DaffodilsMarker.jpeg](https://mediad.publicbroadcasting.net/p/wksu/files/styles/x_large/public/202004/DaffodilsMarker.jpeg))

*The plaque was unearthed by the maintenance crew this year.*

Tyrrell said he never understood why the university refused to state the purpose of the daffodils outright on the plaque and suggested that perhaps a new one is in order. "We're 50 years away and young 18-year-olds would not know what 58,17[5] daffodils means."

Unfortunately, the daffodil memorial doesn't look the same today as it did when it was originally installed. Daffodils need to be left alone six weeks after they bloom to rebuild their bulbs for the next year. Since the university mows the field immediately after the flowers bloom and does not fertilize it, far fewer than 50,000 daffodils return each year.

While student groups have volunteered over the years to plant a hundred bulbs here and there, Tyrrell said it is not enough to convey the colossal amount of American lives

lost in Vietnam.

"Fifty bulbs are pretty," he said. "A huge mass is something else."

*Lyndsey Brennan is a graduate student in the journalism program at Kent State University. Joan Steidl is an assistant professor of Human Services Technology at Kent State University's Ashtabula campus.*

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