# AROUND TOWN

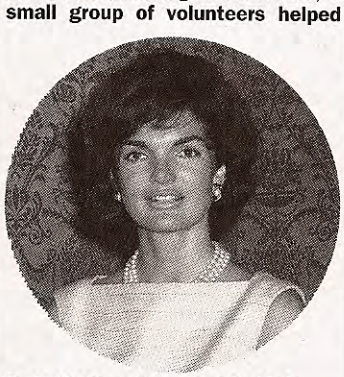
Postmortem

## WITH SYMPATHY

Reading Jackie O's mail—which isn't for sale

At this week's Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis estate auction, Sotheby's will be selling everything from simple strands of costume pearls to the 40.42-carat diamond given to her by Aristotle Onassis. For longtime Jackiephiles, it's the last chance to peer into their heroine's impenetrable world.

A few people were allowed into another corner of that world two summers ago, when in the wake of Jackie O's death, words of bereavement came flooding from the farthest corners of the earth. At final count there were upwards of 30,000 letters—more than any family could fathom coping with. Within the labyrinth of the church of Saint Ignatius Loyola, in a room piled high with boxes, a small group of volunteers helped



Oh, Jackie! The letter-perfect first lady.

open, read and organize these letters. I was one of them.

First, I sent each envelope whizzing through an automatic letter opener. After I had skimmed the contents, I stapled the pages to the outside of the envelope and filed it in the appropriate box: "John," "Caroline," "Family," "Mass Enrollment Cards," "Charity Contributions," "Foreign Mail" or "Miscellaneous." There were letters from the presidents of every country, condolences sealed with the crests of kings and queens, and notes scrawled on monogrammed stationery from movie stars. I kept my eye out for letters from the Kennedy inner circle, convinced that their words would divulge deeper insights about the inscrutable former First Lady. But gradually I realized that the revelations were to be found in the letters from those who perhaps were not so polished or privileged but whose disarming openness and spontaneity captured her spirit.

There were teddy bears clad in I Love Jackie T-shirts, blessings from priests and a sea of mass cards from fellow Roman Catholics. There were notes from Jackie's devoted doctors, dentists, opticians, hairdressers, chefs, housekeepers and even doormen. One man wrote to tell the story of his father's naval war ship rescuing JFK's when it was foundering during World War II; his father had written to the First Lady when the President was assassinated, and he still had her hand-written reply. But the most moving letters were from women who had been widowed at a young age with little children: One wrote that after her husband's sudden death, she had to be supported physically as she entered the church for his funeral, but when the image of Jacqueline Kennedy flashed through her mind, she found the strength to walk to her pew unassisted.

John and Caroline's teachers and classmates reminisced about their meetings with her, as did Jackie O's fellow parents, who had delighted in sitting next to her during school assemblies and plays. One mother recalled the rapt smile dancing over Jackie's face as John accepted his diploma at his Andover graduation.

A long-lost classmate from the Chapin School recalled that young Miss Bouvier had been an irrepressible ringleader. In the second grade, Jackie had masterminded a secret escape signal, which she would stealthily flash to her friends in class when she wanted them to meet her in the bathroom for a forbidden game of jacks. She reminded John Jr. that when he was a little boy, he would (much to his mother's chagrin) throw open his windows to lure in the pigeons from Central Park.

The variations in address on the envelopes were staggering. There were foreign letters sent simply to "The Kennedy Family—USA," which somehow managed to arrive at their destination without confusion or delay. There were envelopes bearing addresses as vague as "Somewhere Near Central Park" or just "New York City." But by far the most astonishing piece of mail was the purple Hallmark envelope that bore no address, no city, no state, no country; not even a name. It had only two words on it, painstakingly penned in a loopy script: "With Sympathy."—***Katherine Pew***

*The Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis Estate auction will be held at Sotheby's Apr 23–26, following a sold-out public exhibition (see Fri 19).*