
The Garden

ALICE GARRARD

After church volunteers covered the garden ground with bricks at the end of the 1960s, Judson Church began to use the space intensively during summers.

I am told a building once stood, and eventually fell, on the rectangular plot that has been the Judson Garden for as long as I can remember. It has been a summer sanctuary and the backdrop for many informal gatherings, garden parties, cookouts, celebrations, and farewells. I recall jubilant parties after the hard work of planning and orchestrating the annual Judson Bazaar. We miraculously pulled off the first one in September 1972 and continued to organize eight or ten more, until we had completely run out of white elephants and old clothes to sell. At least once, the day-long event included a beer garden.

Over the years, informal cookouts took place in the garden, along with more organized shared meals and sing-alongs. After work on a few prearranged Friday nights in July 1981, we gravitated to the garden with whatever we had brought to throw on the grill and just hung out. During the summer of 1990, several week nights found us there, brown-bag suppers in lap, talking with Howard Moody about "Life after the Centennial" (the big homecoming weekend celebrating that event would occur in October). In the late 1990s, these garden get-togethers were enriched by the voices of Andy Frantz and Emmy Bean (and doubly so when they sang together), Cheri Kroon, and Vicki Manning. We listened to the lively picking and playing of Andy, Lenny Fox, Reathel Bean, Jerry Dickason, Paul Holzer, and others.

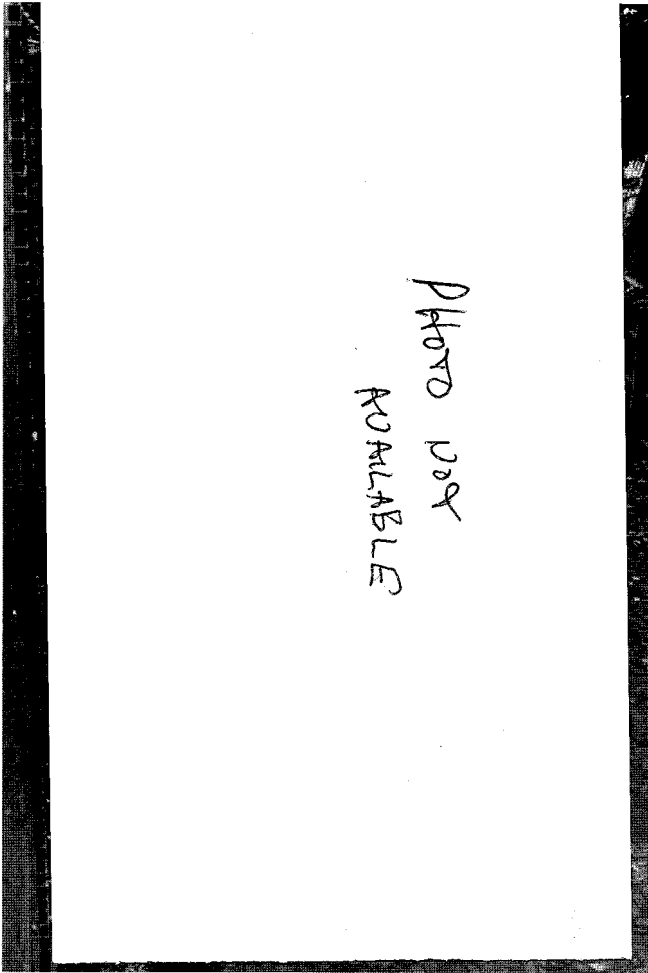
With the arrival on staff of Aziza as special program associate in 1994, garden events took on new energy and intensity. "Licks 'n'

Licks,” a unique jazz series coordinated by Aziza and members of the Single Mothers Workshop, exposed children living with their families in temporary housing to the history and power of jazz. Accomplished musicians and artists volunteered their time to lead workshops for the families and perform for them, and anyone else who dropped by, in free Sunday afternoon concerts in the garden. Unlimited ice cream, an equally big hit with the kids, was provided courtesy of Ben & Jerry’s.

Through the Open Mic, overseen by Aziza but run by junior high and high school students, young poets, dancers, singers, writers, visual artists, and performance artists from all over the city came together every month to perform for and support one another. Most of the year, they gathered in the gymnasium, the Garden Room, or the Meeting Room, but each summer they, too, spilled into the garden. At dusk one Sunday in August 1996, Judson’s little bit of Village green became the backdrop for “Sacred Ground,” a dance performance created by Aziza to honor natural environments—and natural hair—with text and choreography inspired by the Judson garden and conversations with members of the congregation.

For many years we entered the garden for services and other events via a fairly treacherous route—down steps from the sidewalk, through Judson House, past Roland Wiggins’s patio, then up more steps. On Sunday mornings, congregants sat facing the back of the church and the rose window, our folding chairs wobbly on the garden’s undulating brick carpet. For services, the church’s old upright piano was wheeled out onto the small balcony off the Long Room to accompany the singing. The pianist could neither see nor hear what was happening in front, resulting in many comical moments.

By the 1990s, the congregation—older and less sure-footed—had begun to enter the garden directly through the Long Room. The only drawback was that latecomers or parents, after dropping off their children in Sunday School, had to walk past the pianist, worship leaders, and assembled congregation to take their seats. Eventually, this setup was changed, and the chairs were turned around to face the back of the garden and rowhouses along West Third Street. For many years, the Prostitution Project bus peeped back at us over the fence separating the garden from the minuscule Judson parking lot. The sound system, indoors and out, was too loud for those close to the stage and too soft for those in the back. Whatever the seating

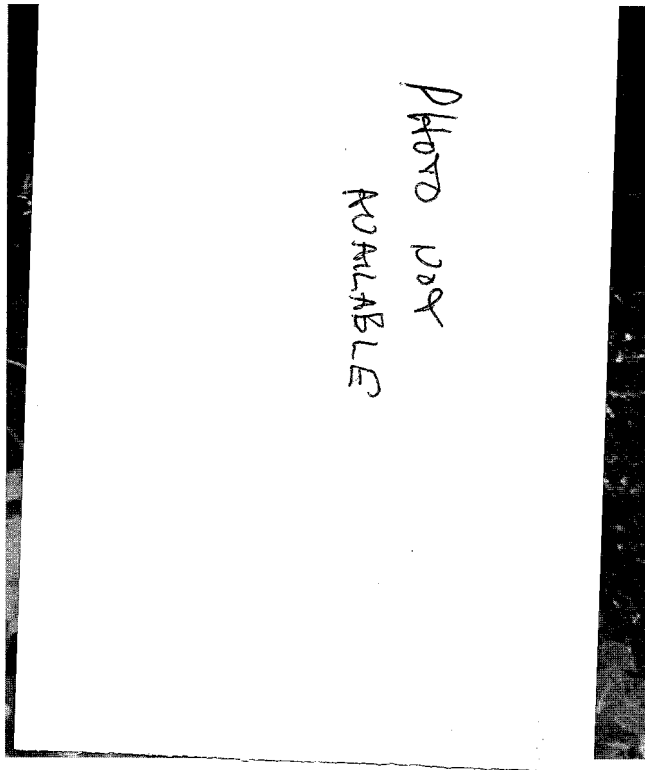


The Judson Garden, 1999. Photo by Alice Garrard.

configuration, it was always a challenge to pass trays of bread, wine, and juice for communion and finish by the time the communion hymn ended. Wise pianists just kept playing.

Judson Church is unique in giving its ministers most of the summer off for study, reflection, travel, and recuperation, and for turning summer services over to members of the congregation and visiting speakers.

“Sermons” by lay people are often introspective and self-revelatory. In the 1980s, Reathel Bean shared “Reflections on the



What is a garden without pink flamingos?

Rainbow Soup Kitchen” and performed songs by Loudon Wainwright III and Woody Guthrie; Grace Goodman revealed “Scenes from Judson History”; Jim Pentecost spoke of “Life After Addiction”; and Randy Jones and Emily Jean Gilbert offered “Thoughts About Money.” Allen Hinand mused on “Celebrating Presence and Absence,” and seventeen summers later, in 1998, his daughter Marcy stood in the same garden pulpit to reflect on “A Whole New World in Philanthropy.”

In the 1990s, Holly Bean pondered “Arrogance and the Limits of Truth”; Carol Cellman, “Aspiring to Less”; and Dave Murdoch, what it was like to grow up Catholic. Janel Cariño spoke of Freud; Susan Godfrey, of “Spiritual Roots”; and Mary Russell, of “Truth-Telling in Women’s Lives.”

Steve Arrendell walked into Judson—via the garden—for the first time in the summer of 1990. Five years later, he led a service

there, telling us about his involvement with a needle exchange program in East Harlem. Elly Dickason, a native of the Netherlands and an editor, shared “A Reflection on Calvinism” in 1991 and her passion for “The Power of the Word” in 1996.

Over the years I had the pleasure of speaking at summer services, but I was happiest on the other side of the podium—still a little groggy, clutching a cup of coffee from the corner deli, and listening as others spoke of their experiences and passions above the sounds of tinkling wind chimes, chattering birds, wailing sirens, and the shouts of angry frat boys next door awakened by robust congregational singing. The occasional leaf drifting into my lap was an unexpected benediction.

In my mind, we are all in the garden and will remain there: Miriam Corbett, smiling from under her straw hat; Irwin Mann, tennis racket in hand; Jo Dean, bringing in plants from her garden; Bob Hoffman, with an invitation to share. Michael Kelly and Judith Thomas huddle conspiratorially on a weathered bench pushed against the wall of Judson House. On another sit three generations of Thomasons, paper plates balanced on their laps. Reathel Bean, Lee Guillatt, and I hobble about on crutches, slowed by unexpected tumbles. At summer’s end, the children return to the garden, more grown up than before—blossoming, sprouting closer to the sun until eventually they will clear the garden wall: Sam Bean (with a mustache now), Blaine and Myles Dickason (so tall!), Megan Wolff (suddenly with short hair)—growing, growing, gone.

For many years, Margaret Wright readied the soil and filled the flowerbeds and boxes. In the mid-1990s the shovel passed to Jerry Dickason, who faithfully rallied the volunteers each spring.

In 1998 and 1999, knowing that our time in the garden was limited, we ventured out earlier in the year and stayed later. The seasonal migration used to occur on the first Sunday of July, right after Gay Pride Sunday, and we would retrace our steps after Labor Day. In 1998 we lingered in the garden until mid-October, and only partially because the Meeting Room was being painted.

John Burroughs once said of a garden he loved: “I come here to find myself. It is so easy to get lost in the world.” The Judson Garden cradled us and served us long and well, providing a patch of blue or a glimpse of moon in an inky sky—a respite from the sights, if not the sounds, of the world outside. It gave us a place to be alone, together.

Adam and Eve once had a garden; eventually they lost it. Many years later, Adam said of Eve (according to Mark Twain, not the writer of Genesis), “Wherever she was, was Eden.” So it goes. Wherever the Judson community gathers—to celebrate, to mourn, to bear witness—is the garden.

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walked into Judson Church for the first time in June 1971. Both ministers were away. The service was led by members of the congregation.