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# Arlene Carmen

Arlene Carmen died in 1994. The following chapter was written by Abigail Hastings, with help from people who knew Arlene well during the twenty-seven years that she worked at Judson Memorial Church as its administrator.

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It was a rare lunch with Arlene that I did not leave with the same impression: After what could be a lengthy conversation, there I was feeling naked, so to speak, while it seemed she still had her coat on. I mention this because I knew from those encounters that Arlene was a private person. Only in the period of collecting remembrances of her days in Judson House did I realize how private. There was not even strong consensus about when she moved into the house—somewhere in the early to mid-1970s. These fuzzy recollections must delight her. I find Arlene’s stealthlike occupation of Judson House a fitting likeness to her furtive presence in the back of the Meeting Room during Sunday services.

Arlene was not new to the Village when she moved into 237 Thompson Street. She had lived in an apartment above a fish restaurant at Jane and Hudson, and before that and somewhat prophetically—as she would probably not have said—she had an apartment on the corner of Bedford and Carmine streets, the very corner where Judson’s predecessor church, Berean Baptist, had stood years before.

Arlene moved into Judson House as it was undergoing yet another incarnation—from student and runaway house to staff housing and a home for the Center for Medical Consumers. By all accounts, she enjoyed her twenty years there, joking from time to time about how difficult it was to get “the landlord” to attend to repairs.

Living and working in close proximity may have heightened Arlene’s need for privacy, the instinct and inclination to create a place of sanctuary for herself. Still, her apartment was open for the occasional pledge dinner or a brunch for new church members. Apparently, her kitchen was not a hotbed for cooking, although she did get involved in the “Eat Club” and managed to come up with a casserole of her own making, of which she was quite proud. But the story

I love, which may be apocryphal but so captures the spirit of Arlene, is the chicken story.

## CHICKEN SOUP FOR THE SICK

Perhaps because she was Jewish and was presumed to know such things, Arlene was asked by someone in the congregation for instructions on how to make chicken soup. Arlene's knowledge of cooking was not vast, her primary source book being the *I Hate to Cook Book*, but somewhere she picked up the conviction that for a good chicken soup you have to use the feet.

So it was when Arlene set her mind to making chicken soup for a sick friend. She knew she had to start with a *live* chicken. Fresh poultry—really fresh—was available for many years from a dim if noisy shop further down on Thompson Street. Arlene went and picked out two chickens, had them killed and plucked, and brought them back to her small kitchen to make a soup of healing properties, fortified no doubt by the inclusion of those feet. Sources that are normally highly reliable confirm that Arlene was so grossed out by the innards that she threw everything away and let her friend remain sick.

## SECURITY AND SANCTUARY

Arlene was a fastidious monitor of Judson House security. Both Arlene and Roland Wiggins were on the case of unlocked doors, lights in the garden, or unannounced guests in the house. At the same time, Arlene recognized those emergency situations where the use of the house and its hospitality were more important than the rules and regulations generally enforced.

Over the years, Arlene created sanctuary in the apartment not only for herself but also for others who needed a place of protection and acceptance. She opened her home to the working women who sought safe haven, some of whom had decided to leave the life of prostitution and others who needed an in-between place to sort things out. A small guest room off the living room welcomed the women and others over the years in a quiet gesture of hospitality. The apartment was sometimes a venue for young people in the church to gather and graduate from bubble gum to adult conver-

sations with Arlene. The apartment was also the site of a series of “flashers” meetings—a gathering of women, and at least one man, where issues of menopause were explored at a time when “the change” was rarely discussed so candidly.

There was the time during Judson’s involvement with Central America in the 1980s that a call came from a lawyer about a woman refugee who had been smuggled into the country. She had been brutalized and raped in a prison in El Salvador, and with her was a baby from that rape and a nine-year-old. The lawyer needed a secret place to take her deposition and hide her for a few days. Arlene did not hesitate for a moment, and the woman and her two children were put up in the guest room next to Arlene’s apartment. Arlene made a “safe home” for that family until they were able to move into a more permanent safe environment.

Arlene was not always alone in the apartment. For many years she had the companionship of Maxine. Max was a beagle who late in life developed a pronounced and raucous respiratory pattern (a dog only Arlene could love, someone said). Arlene also took in one of the babies of a Lee and Essie brood, a kitten named Butter. Butter was named not for the color of her coat, as I had imagined, but for a prostitute Arlene had known.

In so much of what Arlene undertook, it seemed as if she was intent on teaching us the meaning of *chutzpah*, a quality she often demonstrated in the choices she made in her life’s work and in her attitude toward life. Seeing her one Sunday morning with a bruised-up face was a reminder of the courage and fortitude that living on Thompson Street sometimes required. There were frequently those who lingered, loitered, or simply took up residence on the 237 stoop, and one such regular, perhaps in a bad way that night, shoved the heavy metal door into Arlene’s face. It is said that he later came to apologize, but Arlene bore the mark of the incident for quite some time.

If the rowdy parade of urban life—with the all-night singing, drug exchanges, car alarms, and drunken brawls—tormented Thompson Street, then the antidote was out the window on the other side of Arlene’s apartment. She loved the Judson garden, tended it, fed birds there, set out wind chimes, and kept flower boxes in bloom. She was known to sit in the garden when the choir was practicing in the Long Room, listening for the sounds she loved

coming from the open sliding doors. In the summer, on those Sundays when she did not quite make it down to the service in the garden, she still listened from her narrow and hidden side balcony, a stream of cigarette smoke the only sign that gave her away.

I was in Arlene's apartment only a few times but I remember its comfortable feel. I remember thinking how the working women must have felt to be welcomed into a place that was so unpretentious and accessible. I think about her books and her bamboo furniture, the elegant pantsuits hanging in her closet, and the oxfords she loved to wear. As with all lives well lived, an imprint is made, vivid and enduring. Little wonder that sitting out in the garden, it was hard not to think you still heard her wind chimes by the flowerboxes, or think you just saw a glimpse of curling smoke escaping from that second-floor balcony.