
Roland Wiggins

Roland Wiggins has been the custodian of Judson Church and Judson House since the mid-1970s.

I first came to Judson in September 1973. A friend of mine named Susan Marshall asked me to come. It was an Agape Sunday. I looked around and said, "What kind of church is this?" And she said, "O, you know, it's a theater and it's a church." Well, I was used to churches with preachers and pews. We sat down, and everyone was singing and eating peanut butter and stuff. So I started coming regularly. At the time I was working for Vincent Lippe. They were wholesalers of Christmas decorations on Fifth Avenue and 26th Street. I donated a lot of stuff to the Judson Bazaar.

Eileen McNutt was the first person I met at Judson. She introduced herself and said she was having a party at her house, and would I like to come. I have never forgotten that.

At the time there was a young woman named Lola who was in charge of the agape meals. She was on her way to California to make a movie, and she asked me if I could fill in for her until she came back. She never returned and I am still here, waiting for her to come back.

The job at Judson developed slowly. First, all I had to do was open up on Sundays for the service and close the church again. Then Arlene told me about this fellow Cesar, who got arrested for making bootleg liquor. He had been the custodian. Arlene wanted to know if I was interested in the job. I said I could do it at night and still keep my daytime job. Then my job with the wholesalers folded, and I came to Judson on a permanent basis.

MOONSHINE ON THOMPSON STREET

In September 1982 I moved into the apartment in Judson House where Joan Muyskens and Cesar and two other fellows had lived before me. Arlene preferred me to live in the house for security rea-

sons. Cesar had had this sideline, where he made liquor in the bathtub. On Saturday night he would take a table from the church and set up outside on the corner of Thompson and West Third and sell the stuff. I had never seen a bathtub that was so white and spotless. Cesar also had a lot of alcoholic friends who would stay the night in the Garden room and other places. That was another reason why he had to leave.

Before I moved in, I had to scrape the paint in the rooms. They were covered with sixties drawings of naked women and stuff. I also had to fix a few things, but otherwise the place was okay.

Living where you work is good in one way and bad in another. People know you live there and will bother you for things day and night. They don't make appointments. But it's good when it is snowing. I got used to the noise on Thompson Street, especially on the weekends.

DRUGS ON THOMPSON STREET

Life on Thompson Street has gotten a lot better. Back in the 1980s, it was very bad. The winos would hang out on the Judson House steps. They would drink and get into fights with broken bottles. We still have drug addicts. The pushers don't hang out. They come because they know their customers are here, but then they move on. The drug addicts stay around because they want to use what they just bought. Most of the users are New Jersey people, but some are from right around here. Also, you would be surprised to see how many cabdrivers come here, early on Sunday morning, five or six o'clock. Most of the stuff that sells here is crack and pot. Cocaine is too rich for the people down here.

It used to be even worse. Now that we have a surveillance camera on the corner of Thompson and the park, the users have moved to either Sullivan or LaGuardia Place. I also keep telling everyone, keep walking, man—the pushers and the customers, street people, everybody. You have to be careful with the street people. It could be anyone. People remember what happened to Arlene. She tried to enter the building, and one of these guys would not let her. As she opened the door, he slammed the door in her face. Her face was messed up for weeks.

Street people often come to Thompson Street with a lot of garbage, and when they leave, they don't take their garbage with them. The worst spot now is Third and Macdougall. Even some people from NYU are selling dope. They busted a security guard with seventeen years on the job.

I got a part-time job with the laundry here on Thompson. The guy that owns it asked me to be around because the people that use it feel safer that way. That way, you stop trouble before it starts. There are no more street people hanging out there.

I don't know many of my neighbors. It used to be that you knew people ten, fifteen, twenty years. Now people rent for a year or two and move on. There are mostly small apartments, so when people get married or have a baby, they have to move. Every two years you see all new faces.

This has been a good job for me. I like working with my hands. The building is not in such bad shape now as it was in the early eighties. The building was rewired and the plumbing is all right. We still have trouble with the heat because it comes from NYU. Sometimes they shut it off, and then we have to complain. Mark Rubinsky did a lot of work here in the eighties when he and Lee Hancock lived here.

I have met a lot of good people. I must say I have never met a bad person at Judson although I may not agree with everyone. I have a lot of good memories of this building and especially the people. Some are still around, others have moved on. One thing I miss these days are the parties we used to have at Judson. Boy, Judson people could party. The parties at Al's place were something. A lot of people have gotten older now and they no longer live nearby. The younger generation, when they get to a certain age, they move on.

THE SUNDAY SCHOOL KIDS

One thing I have always enjoyed is the Sunday School. I knew these kids from when they were babies, some even before they were born. And then you see them grow up and go off to college. I remember all of them. Blaine used to give Arlene a fit when instead of being in Sunday School he would be in the gym with a basketball; Josh Wolff would give Arlene a hard time, too. There were the Deakins kids, the

Craft girls, on and on. There was a group of kids, and then it seemed to stop, and now we have just girls in Sunday School. As a matter of fact, there have always been a lot of girls. You can count the boys in the last twenty years on your hands.

When you have been here this long, you can go on talking forever. I'll miss this place.

ROLAND WIGGINS

continues to be the custodian for Judson Memorial Church.