
Lee Hancock

From 1981 to 1985, Lee Hancock served as assistant and associate minister at Judson Memorial Church. She and her husband, Mark Rubinsky, and eventually their first daughter, Hannah, lived in Judson House.

The unassuming metal door never revealed the secrets that were inside. The door opened to a multitude of hospitalities that often collided, confusing those who entered: a residence for some; for others, a place of learning, of group interaction and argument, of decision and celebration. Over this threshold, people came to investigate a health problem, attend a study group or board meeting, or, like Arlene Carmen with her signature quart of milk and us, find home. It was the site of the Center for Medical Consumers. Art Levin, with his maniacal grin, presided with an eager quip, barb, or joke. His sidekick, Maryann Napoli, always the foil, was perpetually amazed by his foolishness.

It was not always easy adjusting to multiple activities. The desire for refuge, to escape from city life, was often denied. Judson House was a collision of public and private that challenged the practiced urban art of ignoring one's neighbors.

THE B AND T CROWD

Weekdays were heavy with the traffic of the church and its various ministries. Weekends were rife with the presence of what Roland Wiggins poetically termed the "bridge and tunnel crowd from 'Bohoken.'" Thompson Street was the shortest distance between two points: the beer store and Washington Square Park. The smell of vomit, urine, and beer on Sunday morning always created a unique context for church, especially during those hot summer days when worship was held in the garden. Roland, always a firm believer in the virtues of water, would throw gallons of it—hot, sudsy, and cut with ammonia—over the steps and into the stairwells to neutralize the souvenirs of Saturday night revelries.

One Saturday evening in the early spring, the crowd was renewing its energies as the trees in Washington Square Park began to bud. I was downstairs in our apartment doing laundry. We had just installed our first bourgeois accouterments, a washer and dryer brought in by sturdy Sears employees from the outer environs of New Jersey. As I bent over the dryer, a member of the B and T crowd jumped over the grate into the stairwell to relieve himself. Startled by the noise, I turned and met him eye to eye with less than three feet between us. Here I was, playing the role of the suburban housewife, maintaining the order and normality that come with folding laundry, when the intruder entered my stairwell to pee. The abrupt encounter jarred us both. With youthful braggadocio, he let fly word and gesture designed to mask his dismay at my unexpected presence. I, in the role of matron, and he, the aspiring Village punk reminded of the world he inhabited before entering the Holland Tunnel, were caught in the dance of an unexpected rendez-vous. This colliding and crashing of worlds and roles and expectations shaped the very life of Judson House.

HANNAH ARRIVES

The advent of Hannah in 1985 added another layer of texture. I vividly remember the mother of all surprise showers pulled off in the garden literally under our noses. It was beyond our wildest imaginings to be feted with a shower so grand that the child to be born received more presents than baby Jesus himself. Then there were the careful preparation and decorating of the nursery, a room once dedicated to late-night revels and assignations, now transformed into a vessel of innocence in yellow and white.

During the summer of 1985 while on maternity leave, I would stand in the nursery window on Sunday morning overlooking the garden, holding my infant and watching worship. I would listen to the words and sounds of Judson being Judson at its best, in the songs and prayers and truth telling called worship. I would sway and rock with Hannah in my arms, and ever so often a stray eye—from Sue Harwig, Kae Lewis, Dan Shenk, David Johnson, or others—would glance at the nursery window to embrace the infant in our midst.

Then there was Roland Wiggins. Roland was the sentinel, keeping watch over the property. Nothing escaped his vision, eagle-eyed yet friendly. He was our protector, not self-proclaimed but always steadfast. Roland brought a sense of quiet security to the place. One moment invisible, the next he would pop out of nowhere, green eyes flashing smiles for baby Hannah bundled up for a park excursion. Roland adored babies, cooing and flirting with her while deftly maneuvering an awkward stroller down the steps of Judson House.

LIFE ON THOMPSON STREET

Glancing down Thompson Street, your eyes were always met by those of another inveterate watcher: Billy Soto, who owned and operated the newsstand on the corner of Thompson and West Third. Between Billy and Roland, our block was always covered. Nothing got by, nothing was missed, not the antics of the drunken Indian man who, more than once, poured out his story of woe on the naive ears of an earnest associate minister.

The top floor of the building, long in disrepair, was downright spooky. Beyond Arlene's apartment and up a flight of stairs, ghosts of other lifetimes inhabited tiny rooms with chipped paint and windows painted black, adorned with an occasional abandoned peace symbol. In his characteristically enthusiastic but low-key way, Howard, the dreamer of dreams, would sporadically take us up to the top—Art, Arlene, and myself—to discuss the prospect of resurrecting the space, hoping against hope that it just might not be impossible to find the necessary energy. In its silence, this floor stood as an odd monument to history, its uninhabited status in direct contradiction with the lower floors, which burst with activity.

The lounge of Judson House held its own mysteries. It was inhabited with furniture that provided equal opportunity discomfort. The couches were comic: frighteningly low but unquestioned, since they were neither purchased nor in ill repair. One had to sink very far down to hit bottom. Getting up was always a challenge; others seemed to master the art more gracefully than I. But comfort did not matter. The intellectual querying, the sparring and sparking of the imagination, distracted from immediate fleshly concerns.

The walls and stairwell of the basement floor had the feeling of catacombs thanks to their dank and musty ambiance, not to mention leaks from the bathrooms upstairs. In those low spaces, history was made in art and revolution, and in the human heart. Witness and creativity wound round each other in acts of resistance and imagination and love that brought life to those who, gathered into community, breathed in its heady and aromatic Spirit.

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and their two daughters live in Upper Nyack, New York.