
Paul Chapman

Paul Chapman used Judson House as his base for the Employment Project.

In May 1994 I meet Peter Laarman for the first time and talk about the employment crisis: Our economy is eliminating jobs, disposing of people, sending jobs overseas. People are working longer, yet wages are stagnating. What happens to us when there are no more jobs? I tell Peter about the Employment Project, which I started in Vermont, where I am living at the time.

In December 1994 I have a question for Peter: The year-old project needs to relocate to an urban center. Does Peter have any ideas? His answer is: "We have some rooms in Judson House. Contribute some sweat equity, and the space is yours. Your project will be independent of Judson, but the Judson community will get behind you."

In January 1995 the Judson board agrees, and on February 1, 1995, I confront the second-floor mess: two rooms at the end of the corridor on the West Third Street side and about 200 square feet of storage space. There is one room for my office and one room for associates and eventually for job seekers, where they can practice their computer skills, compose and print their resumes, access the Internet in their search for jobs, and know that Judson supports their efforts.

The graffiti we find are nothing very original, by-words of an era: Sex, Love, Peace, Pot. Death Is Out There, Home Sweet Home. "Anna" and "Carlos" are scrawled in lipstick red on the black-painted walls. Someone created a white peace symbol with paint so thick it ran.

The dark walls make the rooms look even smaller than they are: 9 by 10 feet, with a bare light bulb in the ceiling and a few crude shelves nailed to the wall or hung with wire from the ceiling. Each room has a 3 by 3 closet. Some walls are glued with burlap to prevent the plaster from crumbling further.

DUMPSTERS FULL OF TRASH

First, the trash must go. It takes two dumpsters to remove the junk that has accumulated since the rooms were abandoned and the pigeons took over. There is almost nothing to save. Then follow the long hours of tearing out, plastering, cleaning, and painting. Five gallons of plaster and three coats of white latex are needed to cover the old wounded walls and dark paint. Still, some of the lipstick graffiti leaks through, still legible: "Anna."

We replace the ceiling with sheetrock and paint it. (Later, the leaking roof stains our new ceiling.) We remove the closets but save the sturdy two by fours. It's hard to find straight two by fours like these. New windows are installed and the offices are equipped with new wiring to run office equipment. We install air conditioning. The bright morning sun shining over the Catholic Center is a joy year around, but it gets hot in the summer, warns Art Levin. A month later the carpet is laid and in come two telephone lines, the fax machine, the copier, the computer, the file cabinet, and the old cherry rolltop desk (19 cubbyholes, 11 drawers) that goes wherever I go.

On July 31, 1995, Bob Herbert, a columnist for the *New York Times*, writes about Judson Memorial Church and the Employment Project. We are now on the map. The column gives rise to dozens of telephone calls from people facing an employment crisis.

NO MORE JOBS

We begin our Wednesday night meetings in September 1995 in the Judson House Lounge. Every week we see people without work, people who want to change jobs, people in their twenties who cannot figure out how to get the required experience no one will give them, people in their fifties who have been either downsized or replaced by younger, cheaper workers. There are people who have been let go from jobs after many years: executives, cooks, buyers, doctors, administrative assistants, waiters, school teachers, managers. Others come because they cannot handle the long hours, job insecurity, and hostile environment of their jobs: nurses, editors, drivers, warehouse workers.

They come to express their anger, uncertainty, distrust, depression. *I am so angry at the way they made me leave. I had given so*

much to that company—my life—and they pushed me out like flotsam. An hour to clear my desk while security watched.

People describe their crises at home. It is hard to get started in the morning. The children are embarrassed. The bills are piling up. The spouse is getting impatient and irritable. There is no longer health insurance. Friends do not want to hear about it. *Where did I go wrong?*

Six different versions of their resumes are out there. Sometimes there is the encouraging interview, followed by days of waiting, hoping. The phone finally rings. *Sorry, we are looking for someone else.* There is temp work, a few days here, two weeks there (but no benefits). People dream of starting their own business, becoming a graphic designer. But there is so much competition out there.

Some people do get new jobs, decent jobs. Others come back to the group after a year because things did not work out. *I was doing well. They said they liked me. I don't get it.*

Since March 1995 the Employment Project has published a monthly newsletter, *No More Jobs*. We print it on pink paper, to make the connection with the new workplace reality (the dreaded pink slip) and send out 1,200 copies. We want to deepen the awareness of the religious community to the economic crisis in the lives of their members. We remind churches and synagogues of their biblical mandate to work for economic justice, to assure equitable distribution of the Earth's resources, with special concern for the least among us: welfare recipients, minimum-wage workers, the millions of children who grow up in poverty.

How do we live responsibly in an economy that favors the privileged few and marginalizes the majority? How do we live responsibly in an abusive economy? How can we be a sign of hope and of God's love?

Carlos? Anna? Have you found a place in this world after leaving your 9 by 10 Judson home? Have you found your Home Sweet Home in this hard world? We are still here and the door is open.

PAUL CHAPMAN

continues his work as director of the Employment Project.