
Robert A. Yangas

Robert Yangas was a participant in the 1959 Church in Urban Life project.

The year was 1959. I had just completed graduate study at the University of Missouri-Columbia and was looking for a way to transition into the world of work. I had a strong religious and social service orientation, which had been reinforced by my undergraduate study at Ottawa University, an American Baptist College in Kansas.

I read about the “Church in Urban Life” project sponsored by Judson Memorial Church in an annual publication titled *Invest Your Summer*, which I believe was put out by the National Council of Churches. Participants were expected to find a summer job in New York City and participate in communal life, study, and daily worship.

I found my job through the *New York Times*. It was a temporary position located at the Labor Temple, a Presbyterian church on 14th Street affiliated with the New York City Mission Society. My responsibility was to lead a work project made up of Puerto Rican and black teenagers. We prepared the pews in the sanctuary for refinishing, that is, we scraped and sanded for eight weeks.

At night and on weekends, the students in the Judson program made field trips to night court; visited Father Divine’s Peace Center in Harlem and the Riverside (narcotics) Hospital on North Brothers Island; attended Broadway and off-Broadway shows; listened to and discussed a recording of *Waiting for Godot*, led by Bud Scott; and listened to a surprisingly young Dan Wakefield, who had just authored *Island in the City: The World of Spanish Harlem*. Featured guests were clergy from such churches as the Church of the Sea and Land, Mariners Temple, and the East Harlem Protestant Parish.

When the summer program came to an end, I was allowed to stay in Judson House even though I was not a student at the time. This was crucial for me. Based on my performance at my job that summer, the New York City Mission Society had offered me a low-paying position as a youth counselor at another affiliate, the DeWitt

Memorial Church, a predominantly black church on Avenue D on the Lower East Side. The Student House provided me with furnished low-cost housing and a sense of community, which were essential.

My stay at Judson House during the next nine months was less dramatic than during the summer project, but still it provided plenty of excitement. Of the students who lived there year-round, five or six were foreign, another four or five were Jewish; very few were Protestant. Since I worked in the afternoons and evenings, I was given a house responsibility that I could complete in the morning: I distributed the weekly clean linen to each room. Since it was necessary for me to enter every room, I could not help noticing that on the whole the men's rooms were neater than those of the women students. There were also a number of families in residence: Bud and Gisela Scott, Betty and Dick Murphy, Joe and Judy Pickle, and a musician with a wife and child in the apartment next to the kitchen with the name of Peress. Betty Murphy, the house parent of the Student House, was crucial to its success and touched the lives of a lot of people in a very positive way.

Though there must have been various programs for the students, I don't recall much that happened during the academic year. An exception is the meeting led by the anthropologist Margaret Mead. I also remember a Sikh wedding. There was no television. Life revolved around the kitchen, which also served as our dining room. The cook was a major player in our lives. She regularly played the numbers and once won more than \$600 on the combination "237."

I left the Student House in the fall of 1960 when I accepted another position with the Mission Society, this time as director of the East Harlem Youth Employment Service, located on Second Avenue and 112th Street. I remained an active member of Judson Memorial Church until June 1965, when I left for an overseas assignment.

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