
Donald H. Birt

Donald Birt was a participant in the 1960 Church in Urban Life Project, was the program's director for the next two years, and acted as associate minister of Judson Memorial Church from 1961 to 1963.

My memories of almost forty years ago of Judson House are inextricably linked to those of Greenwich Village at that time. It is hard to separate them.

I first came to Judson as a student in the summer of 1960 to be part of the Church and Urban Life Project. About twenty students, mostly undergraduate, took part in this program. Joe Pickle, a theology student at the Chicago Theological Seminary, was the director. The men lived on the top floor of Judson House, the women on the second. There were a number of holdover residents on the first floor, some of whom were working in New York or going to summer school. One incident that stands out to this day is somewhat Dantean. A bunch of us had gone to Jones Beach on the Fourth of July and gotten bad sunburns. When we returned to the Village by subway, someone said a good remedy for sunburn was to bathe in vinegar. That night the heat was in the lower nineties, and Bertolotti's, the strip joint around the corner on West Third, was going full blast. The Italian kids on Thompson Street were throwing firecrackers from the rooftops and we were burning up. It took us several days to recover.

Betty Murphy was house manager at the time. She lived with her husband, Dick, and their girls in the apartment on the second floor. She did meal planning and food purchasing. We had a black cook, Willie Mae Wallace, who did a pretty fair job of cooking for us. She liked to play the numbers, and "her man" would come by the kitchen door for collections or payoffs—more of the former than the latter.

One of the students that summer was a young woman from Indiana University. At the end of the summer, she returned to IU for her senior year. I returned to Andover Newton Theological Seminary for

my last year. Sometime that fall, Howard Moody asked me to direct the study project for the summer of 1961 and to come on staff as an associate on an interim basis. So I made several trips during that academic year to sort applications and plan the program.

When I returned in June 1961, I was issued the small apartment off the kitchen, which at that time had an exit door to the street as well as to the backyard. We always had security problems, but in the summer the students sometimes left the kitchen door wide open. One day I returned to my apartment through the kitchen and heard a frantic scrambling, as an intruder clambered over stacks of boxes to escape through the back door. The bed had been slept on, but I lost nothing more than two pairs of cufflinks.

By late summer, after the Urban Life students had returned home, I stayed on as an interim associate. My first job was to go through the applications from students who wanted to live in Judson House during the academic year. The house had been run on a cooperative basis in previous years, but by the fall of 1961 students would rather pay additional monies to have food prepared and housecleaning done by someone else. However, the kitchen still saw a lot of activity, especially when some of the foreign students did some specialty cooking. I did some preaching at Judson and participated in the rotation of worship.

Some of my memories from this period are very mundane. I remember having to step over alcoholic men asleep on the landing outside the apartment. There was a mouse that ran across the tops of my books. But that was nothing compared to the rats we got in the house after New York University began excavation for the student union building across from Thompson Street or the vermin we inherited when Bertolotti's closed for a period.

Greenwich Village was a safe place to live in and walk about later in the evening. The folk singing on a Sunday afternoon in Washington Square Park was always great, particularly when Mary Travis showed up to join in. At night you could hear an up-and-coming comedian named Bill Cosby for the price of a cappuccino.

Pretty soon it was time to process applications for the Church and Urban Life Project for 1962 as well as for the 1962-1963 academic year for year-round students. Most of the latter attended New York University or Cooper Union, with a few others from the New School and other schools in the metropolitan area.

Then the young woman from IU came back into the picture. In 1962 Shirley Cantrell became Howard's secretary and we got better acquainted. We were married at Judson in April 1963.

By 1963 the drug scene was beginning to get worse. Marijuana, LSD, amphetamines, mescaline, and peyote became more commonplace along with the harder drugs such as cocaine. The Judson Poets Theater was breaking ground as well, so there was a lot going on. The gay community was visibly present, and Christopher Street was the place to see flaming queens. But we also had occasion to counsel young men from the hinterlands of the United States who experienced ambivalence about their sexual orientation.

The students of the 1960 Urban Life Project formed a strong bond, and some of us are still in touch. Virginia Seaton now lives in Weston, Massachusetts; Larry Keeter teaches in Boone, North Carolina; Donna Jordan lives in New York City; and Beverly Bach Cassell lives in Los Angeles.

I have a lot of good memories of my time at Judson, but the best is of meeting and marrying Shirley Cantrell.

DONALD AND SHIRLEY BIRT

live in Holly Springs, North Carolina.