
Beverly Bach Cassell

I grew up in central Alabama. In the mid-1950s, the ugliness of southern racism worked like a sickness in my teenage soul. My love of my southern homeland and the demons of racism were in an intimate wrestling match.

In the spring of 1960, my last year of graduate school at the University of Georgia, I was invited one evening to the home of a university chaplain who liked the drawings he had seen in a show of my work and who wanted to buy a piece. I took a portfolio of work for him to look over. In the course of the evening he asked me what I was going to do when I graduated. I said I did not know; I only knew that I wanted to leave the South, leave academia, and paint. After a moment he said, "Would you like to go to New York City?"

I had never thought of going to New York. I had only once been out of the South. The chaplain rang someone in New York and handed me the phone. At the other end of the line was Howard Moody. Howard explained the Urban Institute project at Judson Memorial Church, in which, for a small fee, approximately thirty students from all over the country came together during the summer to study social and theological issues and visit different places in the city. Would I like to attend? As I held the phone, I realized that it meant missing my MFA graduation. "Yes," I said.

Standing in a train station in Montgomery, Alabama, my father's face twisted and flushed with emotion as he and my mother watched me leave, I launched the journey from which I would never return, except for brief visits.

During my first taxi ride in Manhattan I tried to hide my drawl among the Yankees. The surprising refreshment of the air of that taxi ride from Grand Central Station down Fifth Avenue to Washington Square still lives with me, and I can still see the variety of faces along the way.

I rang the bell at the funky door of the Judson Student House on Thompson Street. Willie Mae, the cook, stuck her head out the kitchen window at the basement level and told me to come on down.

Next to the kitchen, Allan Kaprow was installing something called a Happening. After dinner I went over to see what he was doing. The Judson Gallery was being turned into a sort of maze that was filled with wadded newspapers and fresh Red Delicious apples that smelled good and apple-ish as we kicked them around amid the rustle of the newspapers during the night of the opening.

In the next few days I met a concentration of genius unlike anything I have ever encountered since. Willie Mae's kitchen was the place everyone drifted into. Chuck Gordone read and reread to whoever was listening his play-in-progress, *No Place to Be Somebody*, which in 1970 won the Pulitzer Prize for drama. The play's feisty digs of fun and anger woke that kitchen up to a fresh black take on Shakespearean brilliance. At the time, Chuck was acting in Jean Genet's *The Blacks*, the first real breakthrough for black theater. The astonishing cast in the little East Side theater included James Earl Jones and Cicely Tyson.

Carman Moore wandered regularly through the kitchen and the make-do lounge. At that time, he was holding forth at the information desk of the New York Public Library on Fifth Avenue, writing poems and composing music in between passing out library information. Like the rest of us, Carman lived on very spare fare. A party at his apartment on the Lower East Side was an experience that expanded beyond a sense of well-being. Listening to tapes of his prolific compositions was a journey of sweet wildness, a gift from the freedom of a gracious spirit. Carman went on to become a well-known composer, receiving commissions from the New York Symphony Orchestra and the San Francisco Symphony, among others.

After the summer project ended I got a job-job and created a variety of studio/apartment combinations over the seven years I stayed in New York, painting. My first place was actually in Judson House. It was the apartment that, later, Al Carmines occupied and, later still, was used by Howard and Lorry Moody. I shared the space with Juell Krauter from Texas and Margaret Underwood from North Carolina. That old brown linoleum floor was great for dancing the twist, and we had some noisy parties. The building was so decrepit that when we danced we all kept sliding over to one corner of the room. One night I woke up with the weird sensation that I was standing up. I then realized that the floor was so slanted that I had slid out of my bed till my feet were flat on the wall.

The old Judson House is steeped with memories for me—rich, warm, and sweet memories of the time I left the suffocating cocoon of segregated whiteness and talked, argued, laughed, and danced with people who came from worlds different from my own. I loved the people; I loved the context. It was a genuine community.

Like an exciting irritant, the edgy avant-garde surrounded me on all sides. I'd stop in the Judson Church Meeting Room to peek in on whatever was happening as I came home late at night. Merce Cunningham offshoots danced mock formalities, stark naked, for straggly audiences. Jim Dine and others, whose names are well known by now, held forth as painters and poets on pieces of crumpled paper attached higgledy-piggledy to the walls of the Hall of Issues. Al Carmines banged away on the piano, playing rinky-tink tunes with show biz/gospel pizzazz and soul into the wee hours of the night.

But it was with Chuck and Carman that I identified as an artist. To me, these two still embody the archetypes of spirit, fire, and genius. Judson was a place of profound bonding as I flailed about to find form in paint to express the presences that welled up endlessly within me. Judson held us in a context vaster than school, nuttier than church, grounded in the history that began with the waves of immigrants for whom the original Judson Church was a mission. We, the members of the Judson community, brought forth our own history. We grappled with the Western tradition of the sacred in the secular context of the sixties. Our sacred path as artists lay in a search from somewhere else than the church as we had known it.

We were community, a circle of motley folk who stood together long enough to feel and absorb the glow and warmth of the creative fires in each of us. Like my childhood, these fires warm me still.

BEVERLY CASSELL

lives in Los Angeles.