
Jim Thacker

Jim Thacker participated in the 1961 Church in Urban Life Project. _____

Although I was in the Judson Urban Life Project in 1961, the first seeds for my being there were planted four years earlier. Immediately after graduation, my high school senior class of thirty-eight, from the small town of Monon, Indiana (population: 1,500) took the train to New York for our senior class trip and spent five days and four nights in New York City—it was later that we realized Manhattan was only part of the city. I still shake my head when thinking about it, but four of us spent two nights at the Billy Graham Crusade at Madison Square Garden. On the second night we sang in the choir, along with George Beverly Shea and hundreds of others.

After the trip everyone in my class said they would be back in New York someday, but as far as I know, I am the only one who ever lived in New York.

In the summers of 1958, 1959, and 1960 I traveled with fellow students from Purdue University to the Baptist student conferences at Green Lake, Wisconsin. It was at those conferences that I first heard of Judson. Howard Moody and Harvey Cox each spoke at the conferences about their experiences in urban ministry and the city. We all crowded around Howard to hear his description of Judson Memorial Church and his ministry in Greenwich Village. After hearing Howard during the second summer, I decided that one day I would live in Manhattan and attend Howard's church.

I applied, and was accepted for, the 1960 Urban Life Project. Unfortunately, my Dad had health problems in the spring, and I needed to stay home and save more money for my last year in college than I would have been able to do in New York. The following year I applied again and was accepted for the 1961 Summer Project.

A friend and I drove from Indiana to New York and arrived a few days before the project began. You can imagine our excitement as we emerged from the Holland Tunnel and headed up the Village. After spending most of my life in a small town in the Midwest,

it was very exciting to be in the city and to know that I was part of a group that would share a unique experience. I had no idea what I would do after the summer, although I was pretty sure it would not be “plastics.”

Although my family’s lifestyle was modest—my Dad ran a Standard Oil service station and there were four of us kids—I had always lived in a house. It took some getting used to living on the third floor of an apartment building and to hear street sounds at all hours, day and night. I loved living in the Village and seeing the amazing variety of people everywhere.

The church I grew up in—the Monon Baptist Church—was theologically quite conservative and focused on personal salvation with little if any mission activities. The contrast with Judson was dramatic, and I quickly felt at home. During the summer, we read Richard Niebuhr’s *Christ and Culture*, Peter Berger’s *The Noise of Solemn Assemblies*, and one of Bob Spike’s books. We met with Bob one evening to discuss the church in the city. I began to experience the church as an exciting place and an important part of my life. It was wonderful to hear Howard Moody preach every Sunday and to understand and appreciate his role in the religious and political life of the Village. Our group went to many political meetings, during which we met then-Representative John Lindsay and Michael Harrington, among others.

Since I had just graduated from college, I had more opportunity than others in the program to get a permanent job. After several weeks in the city, I was hired as a management trainee for the General Services Administration (GSA), a U.S. government agency that manages federal buildings. I worked for the GSA for five months. I rode the subway downtown to a building on Hudson Street near where the World Trade Center now stands.

The nineteen of us in the Summer Project—nine men, ten women—worked at a variety of jobs during the day and saw plays, heard speakers, went to movies, and discussed books, politics, and everything in between at night. As I look at *The Report of the Church and Urban Life Project 1961*, I am still amazed at the roster of speakers we heard. The list included theologians Paul Lehmann, Will Herberg, and Bob Spike; Chuck Gordone from the cast of *The Blacks*; Bill Stringfellow from the East Harlem Protestant Parish; Sidney Dean of the McCann-Erickson advertising firm; Stanley Tan-

kel of the Greenwich Village Planning Association; Jim Lanigan, a district committeeman in the Village; Bill Ellis from the Manhattan District Attorney's office; and Norman Thomas, John Lindsay, and Michael Harrington, whose book *The Other America* was published that summer.

The plays we saw and discussed included *The Blacks*, *The Threepenny Opera*, *A Taste of Honey*, *The American Dream*, and *The Death of Bessie Smith*.

We had dinner and spent an evening at the Father Divine Peace Mission in Harlem and, at our first worship service at Judson, watched Pete Seeger demonstrate and play with a steel drum band.

My memories of the summer of 1961 include the wonderful Italian ice that we bought at the corner of Thompson and Bleecker, being approached each day by beggars and becoming more callous and less friendly to people I did not know, and getting to hear jazz when I could afford it.

One evening after dinner, when several of our group were in the Student House garden, I heard music coming from a club on Bleecker Street. When I went to see who was playing, I was amazed to learned it was Coleman Hawkins, one of the all-time great saxophone players. Several of us heard jazz at Birdland, on 52nd Street and Broadway. Years later I realized that I was just blocks away when Bill Evans, my favorite jazz pianist, recorded his famous "Sunday at the Village Vanguard" album on June 25, 1961, our second Sunday in New York.

I also remember spending hours in bookstores, particularly the Sheridan Square Bookstore, just a few blocks from Judson House. Although Monon, Indiana, did have a Carnegie library, there were no stores that sold books, so it was a real treat to be living near great bookstores that were open after people in Monon went to bed.

Several events of the summer, unrelated to the Summer Project or the Student House, had a major impact on my life. Jane Jacobs's book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* was published, and the combination of this book and my summer in the city convinced me to become a city planner. After reading Jacobs's book I took frequent walks to Hudson Street in the West Village to look for Jacobs and the areas she described. In 1966 I returned to New York to pursue a master's degree in city planning at Hunter College.

The second major event, by far the most significant, was the building of the Berlin Wall. In response, President John Kennedy called up many reserves, and I was notified by my draft board in Indiana that I needed to get a physical right away. I did, in the same space and building on Whitehall Street near the South Ferry subway station where Arlo Guthrie got his in "Alice's Restaurant" years later.

In late August, when the Summer Project ended, we all left the Student House, most to return to their last year of college. I recall being surprised that I really had to move, but someone pointed out that the Student House was for students, and I was no longer a student. My plans were not clear. I still had my job with the GSA, but I was making plans to enlist in either the Navy or the Air Force, since I did not want to be drafted.

I moved to a small, ground-floor room at 158 East 26th Street and ate most of my meals at Radowitz Bakery Restaurant, a small, friendly place half a block away on Third Avenue. There is now a big apartment building where the restaurant was.

In November I resigned from the GSA, made a quick trip to Indiana to store my belongings at my parents' house, and left for the Navy's Officer Candidate School in Newport, Rhode Island. I spent a little more than three years in the Navy. For two of the three years I was back in New York City in a building at 90 Church Street.

My summer of living in the Student House as part of the Judson summer project changed my life. I was fascinated by the diversity and excitement of urban life and the variety of people and experiences. During the summer of 1961 the Student House provided a home for nineteen strangers to the city who were making decisions about their futures with many shared values, questions, and concerns. Since that time, I have lived in Chicago, Los Angeles, Brooklyn, and Philadelphia and have been active in churches focused on issues of social and economic justice.

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