
Michael Johnson

Michael Johnson was a participant in the 1965 Church in Urban Life Project.

Opinions differ about when the last Urban Life Project took place at Judson. Some say it was 1964, others 1965. I know my participation in the Urban Life Project took place in 1965, but it is easy to see why there is confusion. Fredrik Logeval, the Vietnam War historian, uses the expression “the long 1964” as a term for the time it took America to choose war in Southeast Asia. Military observers were there in 1963. In 1964 President Lyndon B. Johnson promised not “to send American boys nine or ten thousand miles away from home to do what Asian boys should do for themselves.” In 1964 the same U.S. government was already decorating servicemen for acts of bravery in Vietnam. The free speech movement got headlines in 1964. Mario Savio and others who led demonstrations at the University of California at Berkeley were arrested en masse. There were riots over civil rights in most major cities. Martin Luther King, Jr., received the Nobel Peace Prize. By March 1965 the first troops were sent to guard the U.S. base at Da Nang, which stretched the year into the “long 1964.” America was committed body and soul to domestic and foreign war.

In January 1965 Johnson was inaugurated President. Malcolm X was assassinated. The Supreme Court ruled in favor of atypical conscientious objectors. The first combat forces were deployed in Vietnam. Antiwar protests began to spring up across the nation. The Unitarian minister James Reeb was beaten to death in Selma, Alabama. Blacks and other minorities across America suffered from gross injustices.

The big brush renders the same picture for both years.

I first heard of Judson House when Howard Moody spoke at the Baptist Student Center at the University of Arizona while he was on a short working vacation in Tucson in the winter of 1964. I was program coordinator at the center. Howard spoke to us about “religionless Christianity” and referred to books by William Hamilton, Diet-

rich Bonhoeffer, and other modern theologians. We asked him about the mission of the church in New York City and had a lively discussion about Robert Moses, heroin addiction, and Judson's arts ministry to Greenwich Village and other Judson programs. Howard made a lasting impression on us.

I applied to the Urban Life Project for 1965 and was accepted. Taking an "express" bus—it had a toilet, instant coffee, and boxed sandwiches—I arrived in New York City only to find out that Judson House was not yet ready for the summer institute participants. For a week, I lived at the McBurney Y on 23rd Street. A group of square dancers in squaw dresses and cowboy outfits also stayed there, and it was as if I had never left Arizona.

Finally, I moved into Judson House for the beginning of the program. We were told to follow all police and fire ordinances to the letter. Judson did not pay bribes to anyone, so we had to be careful not to break any rules or Judson House would be condemned. It was a drought year, and the bathrooms had signs that said "Don't Flush for Everything."

My room was on the corner of the third floor. I remember leaning out the window and watching my Italian neighbors across the intersection. Sometimes there would be hand signs to people on the street that I did not understand. What did they mean? A Judson staffer working in a neighborhood program put word out on the street for gangs to leave us alone.

On weekends it was hard to sleep until the wee hours because of live entertainment from bands in the neighborhood. Sometimes I slept on the couch in the lounge, because it was quieter. My favorite song at that time was "Bleecker Street" by Jerry Landis.

The leaders of the Urban Institute in 1965 were Les and Ellen McClain. They did a wonderful job of coordinating a fantastic schedule of activities. These fell into two categories: "make it happen" events and "let it happen" events. Among the latter was the memorial service in a midtown synagogue for the Jewish theologian Martin Buber, who had died in Israel. Two of the speakers were the sociologist David Riesman and the Protestant theologian Paul Tillich, who himself died later that year.

The "make it happen" activities ran from viewing art films such as "The Bicycle Thief," "The Red Shoes," "Breathless," and "La Strada" to a lecture by Paul Goodman, visits with Jon Hendricks

and the Judson Gallery artists, discussions with civil rights leaders, and finding out about Judson's neighborhood outreach program to young people.

My first job in the city was as a laborer at a hospital construction site in Brooklyn. The project was more than a year behind schedule. The superintendent of the site was a European Jew who hardly spoke English and would yell at us in Yiddish if he felt he did not get the respect from the young workers. Here was a cultural gap that I felt I could easily straighten out. When I jumped in to help him, the superintendent got even madder. He rolled up a sleeve and pointed to the tattooed number on his arm. What I understood from the yelling was that he had survived a concentration camp and why did I think he could not handle a couple of punk kids.

After a few weeks as a construction worker, I received a phone call from Howard saying there was a printing job at the Interchurch Center on Riverside Drive, and that is where I stayed the rest of the summer.

The Judson Garden was a cool haven for residents and staff alike. It was OK to talk in the garden, but you could tell when people just wanted to be there. One of these was Larry Kornfeld, the resident director of the Judson Poets Theater. He would stand in the garden after a shower and let his hair dry. If he stayed around after his hair was dry, you could talk to him. Larry helped me overcome my fear of asking stupid questions, so I asked him one day what the word "camp" meant. I was lucky because Larry referred me to an article that Susan Sontag had written on "camp" that year. Larry asked a couple of us to help out with a play that was going to be performed in the balcony of the church. Our role consisted in holding up big muslin flags during the performance and close them between acts.

What little contact I had with Al Carmines I will always remember. Shortly after the project started I returned from work one day to see a large delivery truck in front of Judson House, with Al talking to the driver. They were trying to figure out how to get Al's baby grand Steinway, which he had shipped from his home in Virginia, up the steps and into his apartment. With the help of too many people, we got the piano inside Al's place.

We laid it down on the floor without its legs and pedals. Pretty soon the apartment was filled with the summer residents and some

of Al's friends. Al, with a terrific smile on his face, sat down on the floor and began to play. Someone went out for beer. Al started playing Broadway tunes and then asked for requests. He ended by singing Beale Street Mama. I may have left so as to give others a chance to get in, but it was probably because I could not contain my joy.

The summer at Judson had a huge influence on the rest of my life. I finished my bachelor of fine arts degree and went on to obtain a master's of divinity. I studied Japanese and taught religion in Japan for fifteen years and was active in human rights. I have always remained a friend of Judson House, even though I have not often been back. Bertolt Brecht explains my feelings best. The lines are from the poem "The Friends," as translated by Michael Hamburger:

The war separated
Me, the writer of plays, from my friend the stage designer
The cities where we worked are no longer there
When I walk through the cities that still are
At times I say: that blue piece of washing
My friend would have placed it better.¹

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and his wife live in Chicago. He works as a technical translator in the field of electronics. He and his wife host a religious group at their house each week.

1. Brecht, Bertolt, "The Friends," translated by Michael Hamburger. In *Poems 1913-1956*, edited by John Willett and Ralph Manheim with the co-operation of Erich Fried. New York: Methuen, 1976. Reprinted by permission of the Publisher.