
Larry G. Keeter

Larry Keeter was a participant in the Church in Urban Life Project in 1960.

Just how I learned about Judson's Urban Life Project I no longer remember. Somehow, as a senior at Berea College in Kentucky, I heard about it, applied for it, and was accepted. Maybe the program seemed like a good first entry into the big city in preparation for attending Columbia University in the fall of 1960 on a Woodrow Wilson Fellowship in philosophy. Whatever the reason, the time spent in Judson House was a life-changing experience for a small-town boy from southern Appalachia.

In June 20, 1960, my train from Spartanburg, South Carolina, to New York (fare: \$34) terminated at the grand old Pennsylvania Station. This crowded, fast-paced station was bewildering and confusing. To the rescue came the most helpful elderly Traveler's Aid lady, who carefully wrote down the directions for my first subway ride to the West Fourth stop. I emerged from the hot, noisy subway station onto the sunny, humid streets of Greenwich Village and carried my luggage the few short blocks to Judson House on Thompson Street. Don and Marcia Ferrell, a married couple participating in the summer project, met me just outside the house and verified that I was in the right place. Joe and Judy Pickle, the resident directors of the program that year, assisted me in settling into my sparsely furnished room on the top floor.

GIRLIE SHOWS

My first night at Judson House was a bit of a culture shock. I got little sleep because diagonally across the street behind Judson House was a girlie show with loud bump-and-grind music playing late into the night. In those days there were three or four strip joints on West Third between Thompson Street and Sixth Avenue. Eventually the coffee shops would put these clubs out of business. Howard Moody enjoyed telling us about the mystified doormen to these joints who

used to peek inside the coffee shops, asking whether they had naked ladies in there to attract such good business!

I don't recall losing a whole lot of sleep because of these loud night spots, so I must have quickly gotten used to the noise level—the supporting undertone of urban life. Sadly in later years, my favorite coffee shop, the Figaro, closed to be replaced by a McDonald's.

JOB HUNTING

One of the participants' first responsibilities was to land a job to support themselves during the summer. We were on our own in this matter, seeking whatever advice we could get from our fellow project members. I learned to read the job ads in the *New York Times*, to visit the job agencies, and to deal with the constant rejections from employers since I was only looking for several months' employment.

I was so discouraged that I seriously considered returning home for the summer. I had difficulty riding the subway, I couldn't find a job, and the *New York Times* had no comics. In the end I adjusted. In fact, I became so addicted to the city that even today a week without the *New York Times* is like a week without sunshine. I continue to return to New York City at least once a year to get my fix until my next annual visit.

My first employment breakthrough came when some of the project members discovered that New York City was still hiring enumerators for the 1960 U.S. Census. My first census assignment was a section of Spanish Harlem with part of Park Avenue as compensation. My crew leader asked me to team up with a female enumerator for her protection in the crime-ridden area of Harlem to which we had both been assigned. Pearl Bosco was an attractive Italian-American who attended Hunter College and who actually became my protector and guide.

Pearl took a dim view of me and my feeble attempts at adjusting to the big city until she learned that I had earned a full scholarship to Columbia. Then she became fascinated with the idea of a Southern intellectual in Gotham City. The project members were as surprised as I was when lovely Pearl appeared at Judson House one night after supper and spent the evening talking with a skinny guy from Appalachia.

As a Census enumerator, I immediately experienced the gap between the haves and the have-nots in the city. In Spanish Harlem, I found ten or twelve people living in one room, with hallways and stairwells that were smelly, damp, dark, and narrow. But I met some warm, generous people. One Spanish-speaking family invited me to eat lunch with them. Since I had little spending money and had not yet drawn any pay, I gratefully accepted their hospitality.

Park Avenue—the haves—formed a great contrast with my Harlem experience. I entered luxurious apartments with huge windows that provided a panoramic view of the city that took your breath away. The occupants here were polite, somewhat distant, but usually considerate. On occasion, I was offered a cold drink, which I gladly received.

RC COLA AND HOMESICKNESS

A key to my gradual adjustment to life in New York City and at Judson House was the little newsstand located on the corner of Thompson and West Third. It was run by an Italian woman, from whom I would buy a 12-ounce bottle of RC Cola and the *Times*. I felt peaceful and comforted as I walked across the street in the morning, fresh from a night's sleep, to this newsstand.

What I did not fully understand then, but do now, is that this simple morning ritual connected me with the folks back home, thereby soothing my homesickness. In the mill village where I grew up I used to walk across the street from my house to my Uncle Bill's Greene Grocery Store to drink an RC Cola. In later years, as a seminary student at Harvard Divinity School, I recalled that short walk from Judson House to the newsstand as a significant act of secular communion, joining me in fellowship with the Appalachian folks back home. They might have said: "As often as you cross this street to drink this RC Cola, remember us at home."

HOMELESS RATS

Donald Birt, a fellow project member, told me that New York City had a population of seven million people and eight million rats. At Judson House, we soon met some of the latter.

A building near Judson House was torn down that summer, resulting in a considerable number of suddenly homeless rats. Almost every evening one of these rats would run in from the garden through the open door into the basement lounge, circle the room along the walls, and quickly exit the same way it entered. One night, I positioned myself at the door to the lounge with a blunt instrument (it looked like a hoe with a straightened flat blade) and dropped it on the rat's head as it left the room. To our surprise I killed the rat with one sharp blow. In triumph, I held the dead rat up by its tail as high as I could (in my memory the rat was the size of a small dog). Then we heard the cheering from outside the lounge—the windows at the top of the lounge were street-level—and the Greenwich Village Saturday night crowd were looking in at this sight, sharing our small moment of victory.

A BRUSH WITH GREATNESS

One bright, sunny Saturday morning in Washington Square Park, some of us from Judson House noticed a small crowd under the Washington Arch at the foot of Fifth Avenue. They said they were gathering for a SANE march to protest the nuclear arms race and invited us to join them in their walk up Fifth Avenue to the New York Public Library at 42nd Street, where a citywide rally was to be held.

We walked at the front of the march behind a trailer from which a young man named Ed McCurdy was leading us a singing various protest songs, including one he had written: "Last night I had the strangest dream I ever had before, I dreamed the world had all agreed to put an end to war..." We had just gone a few blocks when a tall, lean man with a banjo came in from a side street to join us. He was greeted with a lot of cheers from the marchers. He walked right beside us and sang with us all the way to 42nd Street. Man, we thought, that guy can really sing and play the banjo. When we arrived at the rally in Bryant Park behind the library, a large crowd from all parts of the city was converging there to hear speeches and to sing. One speaker said, "Now the godfather of the folk music revival will lead us in singing. Please welcome Pete Seeger!" Imagine how delighted we were to discover that this was the man we had marched and sung with all the way up Fifth Avenue.

MY MADISON AVENUE JOB

When my stint with the U.S. Census Bureau ran out in July, I had to find another job. By now I had learned I could not get a job for just a month and a half, so I had to pretend I was looking for permanent employment. A mid-Manhattan job agency sent me to a law firm on Madison and 43rd. They hired me as a law clerk assistant who filed law forms all day long in a room filled with rows of filing cabinets. There were no morning or afternoon coffee breaks, but I had an hour for lunch, which I ate in the nearby Bryant Park. In those days, classical music came out of the loudspeakers at the park at noon.

Since I would not receive a paycheck for several weeks, I packed myself a peanut butter and jelly sandwich those first days and walked the forty-three blocks up Fifth Avenue to the law office. Sometimes I would meet Pearl Bosco on my way back from work. We had long conversations on the streets and in deli shops, where we would stop for a soft drink. After I received my first paycheck from the law firm, I rode the subway to work (the ride was 15 cents), sometimes had a steak at Tad's for \$1.99, and might stop for a whole-wheat doughnut (15 cents) and coffee (10 cents) at Chock Full o' Nuts. Looking back, I am glad I walked those two weeks to work. If you really want to know a city, you must walk it.

JFK AND THE 1960 NATIONAL DEMOCRATIC CONVENTION

In the basement lounge at Judson House we gathered around the television set in August to watch the 1960 National Democratic Convention nominate John F. Kennedy to run for President. I was much impressed with the Kennedy mystique. (My parents in North Carolina were FDR yellow-dog Democrats but they did not vote in 1960: They could not vote Republican and they could not vote for a Catholic.)

Just after JFK was nominated, Gail Borchers asked me to assist in the Kennedy campaign in New York City by getting the names of the people living in the high-rise apartment building at One Fifth Avenue. The strategy of the Kennedy campaign, I was told, was to get everyone out to vote on the assumption that most of them would vote Democratic and for JFK. The campaign organizers wanted the

names of the people living in this Fifth Avenue apartment to send them mailings to get out the vote.

These names were not available to the public, but someone had arranged for a resident in the building to obtain a list with names of all the residents. From this list I copied by hand the names and addresses of some 300 people. This was my small contribution to the JFK campaign in New York, and I am proud of it. Caught up in the Kennedy charisma, I heard him speak at several stops in the city and shook his hand and Jackie's. I went to JFK's inauguration on that cold, snowy day of January 20, 1961, in front of the U.S. Capitol Building.

BROADWAY PLAYS

In the 1960 Church in Urban Life Project we were encouraged to experience the urban art scene, including the theater. As a group, we attended several off-Broadway plays, such as Tennessee Williams's *Camino Real*. These plays whetted my appetite for Broadway plays uptown, but I was very shy about venturing up there at night. The shorter buildings in Greenwich Village were more on a human scale, quite comfortable to me. I would stand at night outside the front door of Judson House and look beyond the Washington Arch to the Empire State Building lit up and visible in the distance among all those skyscrapers, yearning yet resisting to go up there at night.

Mary Margaret Carlson, a project member from Dallas, Texas, encouraged me to go with her to see *My Fair Lady*, then still in its first run. For the evening, I dressed up in my best slacks and a white sport coat, the only one I had with me. To me, the theater at 51st and Broadway was a dazzling piece of architecture. You entered into a beautiful, spacious lobby with an impressive ceiling and with ascending stairways on either side to the balcony. *My Fair Lady* must be the ideal first musical to attend. Every song was memorable and well written. I was transported to another time, place, and culture. I was stage-struck. After the play, Mary Margaret and I enjoyed cheesecake at the original Lindy's restaurant. It was a rich, delicious way to top off a most wonderful evening at the theater.

"PSYCHO" AND THE END OF SUMMER

As the Urban Life project came to an end in late August, the members of the group began to leave for their different destinations. I was one of the last people to leave, so to while away the time Gail Borchers and some others and I went to see "Psycho" at a nearby theater. We had the almost universal experience of movie goers then—"Psycho" was a first-rate scary film. After our walk back to Judson House, my bare feet in their rubber flipflops were sooty-black from the grimy streets. I had the classic reaction to "Psycho": I hesitated to shower even in the daylight to wash away the dirt.

RETURN, ALWAYS, TO JUDSON HOUSE

Through the years, I have found myself, like other Judson residents I have talked to, returning to Judson House. That first fall, after my summer residence, I came back to Judson House to visit the cook. I attended worship services at Judson throughout my years at Columbia. I visited other summer institutes at Judson.

When I decided to go to seminary, I came to Judson House to talk with Al Carmines, assistant minister at Judson, and with Howard Moody. Over lunch in a restaurant on Eighth Street, we discussed the schools that had accepted me: Union Theological Seminary, Yale Divinity School, and Harvard Divinity School. Howard and Al shared thoughtful advice with me, being careful not to tell me which seminary to select. Once again Judson House played a crucial role in one of my life-changing experiences.

Over the years since I have returned many times: with my wife, with a class of students, with a youth group, with my son, always back to Judson House.

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