
Aaron Crespi

Aaron Crespi lived in Judson House as a resident runaway. _____

I ran away from home when I was thirteen. It was 1968. Junior High School in Queens. Pissed off father ready to go over the edge with my act, get me out!

Stuffed some clothes in an army surplus knapsack and just left. I wasn't alone. Thousands of people were on the streets in 1968. Saint Mark's Place, Washington Square, Tomkins Square Park swarmed with people twenty-four hours a day.

My father's little sister was living in the Village. She was always on my side, guess she knew her brother's monsters. Man, was she cool! She had a little apartment on Prince Street with a musician boyfriend. Aunt Lee wore black skirts and sweaters and tall boots, long jet black hair under a beret, Rob in navy bell bottoms and a peacoat. We walked arm in arm downtown to parties, or dinners with their friends. Lee was in the theater then, she sang in plays by Al Carmines at the theater at Judson Memorial Church.

I guess I slept on Lee's couch for a week or two and then she sent me over to Judson House, at that time a runaway house. I don't know much about the start of the house. When I arrived, it was run by Arthur Levin (who's never left) with a "staff" of a couple of conscientious objectors. I guess the idea was to get some of the thousands of kids off the street for a few days or weeks and then contact their parents in Iowa or Wisconsin or Queens, and do what then I don't know, send them home, I suppose. It was going to take more than a little talk over coffee to get me back, and some of the kids really had nowhere to go back to.

Robbie was a tall, skinny gay kid from South Carolina, home was not an option. One black kid, I think from Harlem, I don't remember his name, would show up after electroshock "therapy," shaking and weak, stunned out of his senses. We would bring him upstairs, sit with him on his bed, man, what are they trying to burn out of you? Don't go back, stay here.

Judson House is a three-story red brick building on Thompson Street attached to Judson Church. Three steps up to a black steel

door, ring the bell, wait for the buzzer, step into another world, our place, off the street. First floor to the left was Art's office. There was an alcove with a bed, though I don't think he ever stayed there. Art came and went. When he was there, we liked being with him. I remember half a dozen of us sprawled out around his office, on the floor, couch, bed, telling him stories about whatever wildness we got into the night before on the street or in the house. He was supposed to be responsible for us, I don't think he wanted to know too much.

Lots of kids came and went, but there was a core of us, a gang, who took up semipermanent residence. We had the third floor, maybe a dozen rooms painted black or purple, posters and candles and mattresses, books, incense, hash pipes, drawing books, poetry painted on the walls.

"Home is where I hang my soul" in Jimmy Jones's room. Jimmy was my soul brother, dark in skin and spirit, brooding, devilish smile, kinky, bushy black hair, and a walk, I mean, cool. I never knew where Jimmy was from or what he was running from. Whatever it was seemed more fearful than my life. I heard he joined the merchant marine, a dream we shared, and sailed the world for many years.

When I took up residence there were no rooms left upstairs, but I wasn't going to go downstairs! So I took a hall closet about five feet square, painted it up and hung my soul. My art, candle, books. When I slept there I left the door open and my feet stuck out into the hallway. That was the first of my offbeat living quarters. I've since lived in a construction shack with a potbelly stove and lived a year in a treehouse thirty feet off the ground, now a bamboo cabin in the Jamaican mountains.

Other upstairs people I remember: Claudia "Jesse" Gray from Madison, Wisconsin. She might as well have been from another country. Strawberry hair, white skin, blue denim work shirt and jeans, boy, I dug Jesse. Michael Hurst, whose mantra when stoned was "Nothing Matters." Tina, Samantha.

Arthur Levin was the adult of the house, but Michael Parker was the spiritual center. Parker was a CO doing alternative service at Judson House. Parker *was* Judson House. I remember his face perfectly, a tall, skinny guy with a straggly goatee, shoulder-length frizzy brown hair, pock-marked face. He could not have been over twenty-four, though I think of him as a sage. The Judson House Gang spun around Parker. A bunch of ragamuffin, freaky teenagers

all sleeping with each other, running around the city, hash, grass, acid. Parker turned us on to our spirit guides, Herman Hesse, D.T. Suzuki, Gary Snyder, poetry, painting. He saw the cream of the crop, wild, free, dangerous, rebellious, misfits for all the right reasons. We would hang with Parker and talk for hours, late into the morning. Parker accepted us, encouraged us, laughed at us, and I imagine loved us. My mother and sister met him and liked and trusted him. What a wise young man he was. I do wonder about him.

There was another CO there, Bob, a vegetarian hippie from Vermont. Bob was mellow, but I think we freaked him out. He and Parker had some differences about our "upbringing."

There was a kitchen and hangout in the lower level of the building, right on Thompson Street. And the streets were alive! We'd hang out listening to music, smoking dope if there was any. When we ran out, everyone would gather up all the pipes and we'd scrape them for resin. We'd also wait and see who came in off the street that day, new freaks, drugs, or girls. The short-stay kids always spiced things up. The regular gang was always coming and going through the day, but touching base at night before hitting the street again or doing whatever we came up with.

Someone, maybe Parker or Beverly [Waite], came up with the idea to have a little store in a room that opened onto Thompson. We made beads and woven god's-eyes and paintings. I don't remember much about that except the name: On-The-Lamb (Lam?).

All this was a long time ago, thirty-two years. The chronology of my wanderings is a mess. I came and went, between Judson and Lee's, between home and the juvy joint, up to Woodstock, hitchhiking across the country, county jail in Kansas. Lots of faces come to mind of Judson kids and adults, but it's all disorder.

Judson House is an important and pivotal place/space/time in my life and consciousness. I thank everyone who was involved and had anything to do with creating and supporting Judson House. I submit only my story/view. I have always hoped to meet or hear from anyone else who was there.

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lives in northern California and designs and builds custom furniture. He sometimes hangs out in a bamboo shack in Jamaica.