
The Judson House Gang: Runaways Cum Laude

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It's too early to forget that a runaway is a child who leaves home—everything that is known and familiar—to live in the liberated streets of Berkeley and the East Village. In the aftermath of the hippie flower power fad, shock waves are still being felt around the peripheries of the cultural vanguard. Although everyone in the East Village knows that hippie is long since deceased, the word has not yet spread to the sticks.

So fifteen-year-old kids from the South, Midwest, New Jersey, or even an uptown tenement are just getting hip to long hair and beads. They are just beginning to split from their homes and schools to be free—to be hippies. The trouble is that when they arrive they find themselves at least a year too late. The scene has changed; the mood has shifted. They are part of a time lag, a kind of distorted tape loop, because our culture has moved more rapidly than our communications.

Stranded, having cut themselves off from whatever kind of home situation they escaped, they have to face the grim prospect of hustling a living in lower Manhattan. For a minor (boys under 16, girls under 18) this can be a formidable project. To begin with, they can be busted by the police at any moment, detained, and sent home to their parents special delivery. Often they are returned to what have euphemistically been labeled “broken homes”; many face another euphemism, institutionalizing—junior grade concentration camps—for having committed minor drug offenses or simply because they are chronic runaways.

But even if the runaways manage to avoid the police, they will still have a hard time: too young to work legally (“you oughta be in

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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Graffiti by the runaways, still visible in 1999. Photo by Alice Garrard.

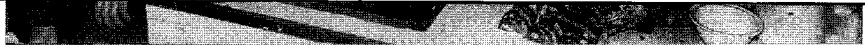
school, kid”), they face the choice of being exploited by employers who know they won’t complain, or they can panhandle.

Finding a place to live is another hassle. Most of the famous crash pads have crumbled—Linda and Groovy blew that—and a runaway is, by definition, too young to sign a lease. So they either sleep in the street, in abandoned buildings, float from one friend’s apartment to the next, or take up with someone who wants something from them.

Arriving in the city confused and scared, they start to rethink their decision about leaving home: maybe home isn’t so bad compared with what you have to go through to make it as a minor in New York, maybe they can wait another year until they’ve finished high school and can get a job, maybe dodging the police every minute isn’t the freedom they’ve been dreaming of.

Last summer when the number of runaways in the East Village reached crisis proportions, the Free Store—now defunct—was funded by the city to provide minimal facilities and act as a communications center for stranded minors. In addition, a pamphlet entitled “Fuck the System” appeared with instructions on how to survive in the dirty streets of the big city.

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Teen runaways in the basement of Judson House. Copyright © 1968 by Fred W. McDarrah. Reprinted by permission.

In June, Judson House—attached to Judson Memorial Church—initiated a crisis referral program and a runaway residence at 237 Thompson Street, near Washington Square. During the first two months it offered sixty to eighty runaways sanctuary for a few nights—“a place to get their heads together”—while they were deciding if they were going to stick it out in New York or go back home. According to Arthur Levin, director of the program, almost 90 percent of the minors who came to him eventually went home. Often, it would take days before the runaways would trust him enough to give him their last name or telephone number.

When a runaway came to Judson House—having heard about it by word of mouth—he was told that he had four or five days to decide if he wanted to go back home or not. Levin would only make the first call to his parents with the kid’s permission. Then he would try to talk with the parents about why their child had run away, try to make them understand what was happening in the child’s head, and often offer them the services of a consulting family therapist. “If a boy finally decided to go home,” Levin said, “he usually had a lot

more communication at his disposal than he did before he ran away. The kid always knows that if things start getting rough again at home he can call us—that's a safety valve he didn't have before."

While Judson House continues its crisis referral program, it has added a kind of small community of permanent runaways who live—with parental permission—at the four-story brick structure on Thompson Street. Fourteen of them are living there. The average age is fifteen, and each is a special case chosen from among those who stayed at the residence last summer—where it was decided that it would be better for them if they didn't have to return home immediately. One of them, a black girl who has been in and out of Youth House and other city agencies for years, has no real home to go back to. For her, as for another young boy who had spent a good deal of his time sleeping in abandoned houses, Judson House is the first stable community she has lived in. With three full-time staff workers, part-time helpers, a house manager, and a cook, the runaways have some choice of older people to talk with. "They aren't just confronted with a new mommy or daddy they have to get along with," Levin says, "they can choose among a number of older people with different kinds of background and experience."

The permanent runaways are fed, clothed, and housed by Judson House. All of them are either going to school or working. In addition they have become involved in an informal reaching program, "Demian" and Jung, which one of the staff members described as comparable to college courses he has taken. They hold group discussions about drugs, sex, politics, school, or anything that interests them. There are also art supplies—one of the girls turned out to be a good painter—instruments for a rock band, movies, and free tickets to the Fillmore.

From a group of fourteen isolated runaways coming from vastly different backgrounds, a remarkable community has emerged, probably unlike any other in New York. Sitting around together they discussed their former problems with candor. One girl talked about the three months she had spent on the street before coming to Judson House: "I had VD and lice when I arrived, but that's what you get for living on the street." A number of them agreed that they found it easier to talk with their parents since they had been at Judson House. A boy from the South whose father was a career officer in the military said that now he had a perspective on his home situation

that he hadn't had before: "When I left home I thought that my problems were the worst in the world. But when I came here I saw other people who had it worse than I did. Now at least I can talk with my parents and try to communicate." Most of them go home from time to time to see their parents: "Last time I went home," one of the girls said, "all my parents would talk about was whether or not I was going to come back and live with them. It wasn't until the end that we really started talking about what was going on here."

A small redheaded fifteen-year-old who had run away from his home in Brooklyn explained that he had left because he couldn't get along with his mother. The first time he ran away was in the middle of July. He arrived in New York not knowing his way around, with no friends, an extra pair of pants, a raincoat, and \$20 he had made from selling his guitar. Not willing to trust anyone who offered him a place to sleep in their apartment, he spent a month and a half sleeping outside—usually on the roof of a building in the East Village. Three times during the summer he was picked up by the police, and twice sent home, only to run away again. Now he is one of the permanent members of the Judson House community.

While I was there, a young girl came in who had just left home. Gnawing at the end of her plastic comb, she announced that she had just run away: "Everything started closing in on me—my problems with my mother, things going wrong in school—and then we busted up my mother's house. I just had to leave. I am not going back." One of the counselors tried to convince her that a call should be made to her mother so that a warrant wouldn't be issued for an arrest: "In three days they will be after you for running away and truancy."

The atmosphere in Judson House seemed permissive but far from wild. One of the kids was walking around in bare feet, another returned from school with a headband, and a fourteen-year-old lit up a Winston when he wasn't blowing on a whistle. All of them had long hair but they looked as if they cared about their appearance. Each had his own room and was allowed to decorate it and use it as he pleased. The refrigerator in the kitchen had been painted, and the whole house looked as if it were lived in by a community of people with a particular style.

"The kids help each other here," one of the staffers commented, "they talk to each other about their problems and if someone new

comes in they try to make them feel at home.” When one of the youngest boys refused to go to bed before four in the morning, others talked with him about it and he started to reform. The same boy, who has had a problem with reading, is now in the process of teaching himself by copying columns of newspaper type on a typewriter.

Money is a problem for Judson House. Although they managed to scrape up enough to get started, they don't have enough to continue much longer.