
Mei-Mei Hull

Mei-Mei Hull did not spend much time at Judson House when she lived there and did when she didn't.

It was Memorial Day weekend of 1962. I dumped my bag of clothes and guitar in my new room on the first floor of the Judson Student House. The room was hot; the window stretched from floor to ceiling about the width of the narrow room. I had no time to unpack because I had to rush to my first meeting with George Younger, the minister of Mariner's Temple Baptist Church, where I would be spending my intern year of seminary. I hiked in my Indian sandals down through the Bowery, past little Italy and Chinatown, until I reached Chatham Square. I was to spend the next twelve months learning how to be a minister in a church modeled on the style of the East Harlem Protestant Parish.

When I arrived at the "Temple," Margaret Zipse, the director of children's programs, and Leonard Chapman, the new assistant minister, were already waiting for me. I was breathless and excited. I had just come from the quiet, neat campus of Yale Divinity School, and this was the first year of my life that I would not be going to school!

As soon as the meeting was over, I took a more leisurely walk through Chinatown and the Village back to 237 Thompson Street. The Village Outdoor Art Show was being mounted on the fence just below my bedroom window. It was noisy and the air was swelteringly hot. I was thrilled. I loved being in my room with the bottom of my window opening virtually at eye level to the passers-by. I could see the backs of the paintings through the mesh screen protecting my room from invasion by robbers and other evil-doers.

I was living in the Student House as part of an arrangement between Mariner's Temple and the Baptist City Society, which was the confederation of Baptist churches in New York City, Long Island, and Westchester County. I say I was living there, but that first summer I really only slept there. I spent every waking hour working in the day camp with fourth graders, teaching Sunday School to eighth graders, and running activities with teenage girls in the evenings.

The majority of the kids lived in the Smith Housing Project and were poor, black or Puerto Rican. There was a middle class apartment building on the block next to the Temple. One of my first duties was to survey every apartment to find out who lived there and to inform them of our wonderful Temple. This was an attempt to serve a more representative population of the community. We were also trying to assess the needs of the residents. What programs could we offer that were lacking in their lives?

Mariner's Temple was truly a wonderful church. Although the building was in need of refurbishing, the members and the staff were eager and vibrant. We all met weekly and planned our strategies for outreach. We felt we could solve some of the problems of our area of the Lower East Side.

Two people I met at the Temple made a strong impression on me. I idolized George Younger and was amazed at his dedication. He could have entered any professional arena but chose to give his life working in an almost defunct church. Margaret "Zip" Zipse was the hardest working staff member. Margaret knew everyone, knew where everything was kept, and handled all the crises. She was close to everyone: staff, church members, and neighborhood professionals. She made all of us recently transplanted staff feel welcome and essential.

Then there was the Student House. Although initially I was hardly there, I did attend Howard Moody's orientation meeting. Howard warned us about city living. The summer residents were largely from the Midwest and were very naive about the city. Howard told us never to look strangers in the eye: "Sitting in the sun in Washington Square Park reading a book isn't just enjoying the air. To New Yorkers, it's an invitation." I nodded and couldn't wait to saunter out and discover what kind of invitation I would find.

When fall came, the children of the Temple were in school. Now I had a chance to snooze all morning, scrounge up my breakfast in the kitchen, and smoke a few dozen cigarettes in the lounge. The lounge! That was where I met the most interesting people. And those interesting people met each other. There were at least a few marriages and dozens of friendships, and perhaps a few feuds, all begun in the lounge. I met many musicians there, some in person and some on records.

The lounge had a piano and a record player. Everyone played their favorite albums. Al Carmines lived in the room next to mine. He would sit in the lounge playing Bessie Smith on the record player while smoking his Gauloises. He usually did not show up until the afternoon but he could be found there any hour of the night. I was intimidated by his intelligence and all his accomplishments. Usually, we nodded and puffed up a smokescreen between us, listening to Bessie or Billie Holiday. Sometimes Al would give me a benevolent, distracted smile. Once in a great while he would sit down and play some of his own songs on the upright in the corner. When there was a party, everyone would beg him to play and sing, and sometimes he would.

I also met Larry Kornfeld in the lounge. You could find him reading or fixing a snack in the kitchen. He and Al were collaborating on the Judson Poets Theater productions. I admired their work. Larry chose plays that were unusual and opened up the world of theater to many of us in the Student House and the church.

That's how he met my supervisor, "Zip," whom he later married. Larry used to say that I was the only person who lived with both him and Margaret before they got together. It was true. I nominally lived at the Student House, but I spent most of my waking hours with Margaret at the Temple. It was only after their marriage that we stopped calling Margaret "Zip." She was a director of Christian Education; he was a director of Theater. Everyone who knew them was astounded that they got together, but then began to understand what a creative marriage it was. When their daughter, Sarah, was born, I was lucky to be her first babysitter. When Sarah was eight years old, she used to come over to play with my infant daughter Melanie.

In the lounge I also met the amazing Carman Moore. Carman introduced me to John Lee Hooker and "Big black snake suckin' my rider's tongue..." (whatever that meant). Carman was very easy to talk to. He had grown up in Lorraine, Ohio, and was familiar with my alma mater, Oberlin. We knew people in common. He was writing a choral piece, and I felt honored when he asked me to sing in the choir performance. It was difficult but beautiful music. He moved out of the Student House soon after that and married Susan Stern, another Judson House resident.

Susan Stern had moved into the house from an NYU student dorm, a victim of the dreaded curfew, administered so harshly until the early 1960s. Judson had no curfew. Ergo, Susan applied. That was lucky for me, since it was the beginning of a very close friendship. I considered Susan and Carman's son Martin my "first baby." I loved to play with him. Carman called me "Martin's only living aunt." Living close by, that is. Martin had aunts aplenty in Ohio and upstate New York. Martin later babysat with Melanie.

Lou Marsh was another face that could on occasion be seen in the lounge. He had moved out of the Student House to Macdougall Street before I got there. He worked with a gang of Puerto Rican boys in an attempt to stop the violent "rumbles," as gang fights were called then. He was killed by some of the boys he was working with. I went with Howard Moody and others who knew Lou well to the funeral in Philadelphia, where his family lived. It was one of the first times I heard Howard preach. One of the members of the little Baptist church in North Philadelphia was incensed at the boys who killed Lou. Howard struck a plea for mercy for these boys and powerfully turned the mood of the service toward sorrow servicing love instead of revenge. I grieved a great deal for Lou Marsh. A few years before I had briefly been very smitten by him. Lou was the first person I really knew who had died in such an abrupt and tragic way.

The following summer I met Reathel Bean in the lounge. He was raving about this new singer, Bob Dylan. I professed not to care for him. But soon I was teaching "Blowin' in the Wind" to my day camp group. Reathel let me know that Bob Dylan was great and that he would be playing with Pete Seeger at the new Loeb Student Center at NYU. When Pete Seeger introduced Bob Dylan to the audience, Dylan was wearing his harmonica on his shoulder stand. I was won over, like the rest of the audience and the generation. I became involved in folk music myself and began playing in the lounge for the first time.

One other interesting thing happened in my family about that time. My father, Angus Hull, who was a minister and for eight years had been the executive secretary of the Cleveland Baptist City Society, was being considered for the same position in the New York City Society. He landed the job! This was thrilling to me, since I knew it had been a job he had always hoped to have. Now my parents were moving to the city that I had decided to live in. And I got

there first! He became the administrator who oversaw Mariner's Temple, Judson Memorial Church, and Judson Student House.

In the summer of 1963, my internship at the Temple was over and I had to move out of the Student House. Marjorie Saunders, a fellow resident, also had to move on. We got an apartment together—an illegal sublet (“People do this all the time!”). The apartment was on Bleecker Street between Sullivan and Macdougall. I felt amazed at my good luck. A real apartment of my own ... finally! And in the heart of Greenwich Village!

The day after we moved in, Marjorie and I came home to find a padlock on our door. We were horrified. I had never been locked out of my home before. We called the lessee. He was nowhere to be found. I called my father. He was in Europe. I called a lawyer who was on the board of the Baptist City Society. Everyone said the landlord had the “law on his side.” The lawyer helped us get our stuff out of the apartment. We had no money and no place to go. But we did have the Student House lounge. I don't remember if Marjorie slept there, but I spent the rest of the summer on one of those short hard sofas in the student lounge. It was ironic that I spent more time in the Student House after I no longer officially lived there.

Living in the lounge, I got to see everyone who came and went. I don't think I slept very much. I was content, though, and stayed until I went back to Yale Divinity School in the fall for my last year toward a bachelor of divinity degree.

Judson made New York my new home. I moved back as soon as I got my degree in 1964. The Judson Student House had been a stepping stone for me. I met many people who became lifelong friends, people who introduced me to theater and new genres of music. Judson has continued to acquaint me with some of the most creative religious and artistic people in New York City. Under Peter Laarman's leadership Judson remains in the forefront of changing social issues.

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