
Julie Kurnitz

Julie never lived in Judson House but during the 1960s she hung out there a lot.

On the evening of November 9, 1965, as I was browsing in the Sheridan Square Bookstore, the lights went out and did not come back on. It wasn't just the bookstore lights that had gone out, I realized, stepping outside into a strange, dark village with no street lights, no traffic lights, no glowing store or apartment windows. It quickly became clear it was not just the Village either. There was no lit Empire State Building! New York was dark! It was the first of the big blackouts. This was an amazing event, and I was part of it. What should I do? Where should I go? The answer came immediately: Judson House, of course.

Walking east on West Fourth Street in a New York City without lights was like a dream—a place I had been hundreds of times, still the same but completely different. Above me in the night sky you could see the stars. At the Student House, lit by candles and flashlights, there were people to share this magical night with me.

I had discovered the Student House in the summer of 1964. A friend from the University of Wisconsin was a resident for the summer, and from the first time I visited the Student House, it became my second home. I had just moved to the Village, to a little apartment on Grove Street—my first time living alone. I was loving it, but I had no community. The Student House became my community.

I was not quite twenty-three that summer. Many of the residents were younger than I was, fresh-faced infants from the Midwest. Many others were “grownups.” Not that they necessarily acted like any grownups I had ever met, but hey, they were in their thirties. The infants and the grownups came from everywhere—any number of states and several countries. I remember that Canada, Israel, India, and Pakistan were represented.

Some of the friends I made are still in my life today. I made discoveries that shaped my life and my future. Hearing me sing and play the guitar in the kitchen late one night, Al Carmines asked if I

would like to be in a show at the Judson Poets Theater. More than thirty years later I am still singing in shows.

Beverly Waite, a wonderful, strong woman who ran the Student House, became a good friend. She offered me another career path. Willie Mae Wallace, the cook and also a wonderful, strong woman, had either quit or been fired under circumstances I no longer remember. "Why don't I hire you as the cook," Beverly said to me, "you are here all the time anyway." True enough.

My cooking skills were, and are, minimal. My stove often was, and is, dusty from disuse. But as usual I was game for just about anything. So I said OK.

My time as cook was short and disastrous. I have blocked most of it, but I do remember the scalloped potatoes. First came the fun part. I would get whoever was passing through the kitchen to help peel and slice the potatoes while we talked and laughed. Then came the cooking part. I swear I followed Beverly's recipe exactly, but somehow the potatoes managed to be burned and raw at the same time, swimming in an unattractive liquid that never quite turned into the promised creamy sauce.

Willie Mae was quickly reinstated as cook, and I went back to hanging around the kitchen singing and screaming with laughter. Late at night we would talk about our dreams, our passions, and the meaning of life.

Inevitably, in a house in Greenwich Village with lots of young people and lots of bedrooms, early in that brief magical time after the pill and before AIDS, when promiscuity carried no retribution, there were constant and endless romantic and sexual encounters. The morning after one wild party, I remember waking up early in someone's room and, through some trick of the light and the Venetian blind, seeing the cars passing on Thompson Street refracted or reflected onto the strip of ceiling over the window. Later, having breakfast in the kitchen, I told someone about this strange phenomenon of physics, not realizing I was also giving away what I had been doing, where, and with whom. Julie, can't you ever keep your mouth shut?

Oh, those parties! They were everywhere—in the kitchen, in people's rooms, in the garden. I remember dancing madly, in the lounge that looked onto the garden, with Robert E. Lee Smith, to Peggy Lee singing "Fever," the room packed with gyrating bodies.

But the real parties were at Al Carmines's place. Who could forget the deadly punch, the crowded room, the laughter, the fights, the wonderful singing around Al's pitifully mistreated piano, the glory of Al singing the blues, the strange bedfellows, the resulting hang-over, remorse, and gossip?

Judson House opened doors that led me to a career in the theater, to new ideas, to dear friends—some now lost, some dead, some still close and constant. For a few wonderful years it was my playground, my school, my family. When the lights go out in Judson House for the last time, they will continue to shine in my memory and in my life.

JULIE KURNITZ

lives in Greenwich Village.