

Home for the Homilies

An alumna recalls a lesson in community.

By

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Anyone who attended Columbia in the 1980s would remember how difficult it was to find decent housing near Morningside Heights. In the spring of 1986, I was finishing my first year in the MFA program in arts administration in the School of the Arts. One evening my roommate told me that I needed to secure other housing, and I dreaded the prospect of returning to the off-campus listings at Hartley Hall.

I regularly attended Mass at the Romano-Byzantine Saint Paul's Chapel because I really enjoyed the liturgy, music, and homilies of the Catholic chaplain at Columbia, Father Paul Dinter. The spirit of the Catholic Campus Ministry reminded me of the Masses I had experienced as an undergraduate at the College of the Holy Cross, in Worcester, Massachusetts. At the end of the service one Sunday, Father Dinter invited graduate students to apply for housing at Ford Hall, a double brownstone on West 114th Street between Broadway and Riverside Drive. It was named after Reverend George Barry Ford, who served as the first Catholic chaplain, from 1929 to 1946.

Initially I was hesitant because I didn't want to wear my religion on my sleeve. But my meeting with Father Dinter went well, and I warmed to the prospect of living with a community of graduate students from all of the schools at Columbia. Father Dinter explained that we were required to cook for our 15 fellow housemates once every three weeks, perform a weekly household chore, and complete about 5 to 10 hours of community service per week. Three meals and a room with a private bathroom cost \$425 per month. This included all amenities — heat, food, and shelter — and I didn't have to buy a single roll of toilet paper for the four years I lived there.

I worked with Community Impact's programs — the Food Pantry, the men's shelter at St. John the Divine, and the Friday meal for the homeless at Broadway Presbyterian Church at 114th Street. I volunteered my Thursday evenings to bake brownies or chocolate cake in the ancient oven in the basement of Broadway Presbyterian. The Catholic Campus Ministry was in charge of the Friday lunch, and the director of the program bragged that it was known on the street as the best one because it served a three-course meal: salad, entrée, and always a nice dessert.

One's attitude toward the chore of cooking at Ford Hall made it a joy or an inconvenience. Every meal began with grace, usually offered by the person who had cooked. I normally prepared a casserole the night before, and I'd triple every recipe to make enough for 16. There were times when schedules prevented people from cooking a decent meal. One night I came home and found the dining room tables set beautifully, but in every bowl was an unopened can of Progresso soup. On the other hand, one of the residents was a gourmet cook and when it was her turn, we could expect cuisine that was as good as any in New York's finest restaurants.

One of my chores was to be the super of Ford Hall, which meant I would be on-site for visits from maintenance contractors, like Vinnie, our exterminator. He whacked a huge rat that turned up in Father Dinter's bathroom one morning. Every time Vinnie visited the house, he would retell to new residents the story of how he cornered the rat in the shower, forced him into a bag, and killed him with a mighty blow from his baseball bat.

My time at Ford Hall moved quickly because every year offered new people and new experiences. I shared my home with graduate students in programs at Columbia, Teachers College, and Union Theological Seminary studying literature, business, law, fine arts, architecture, social work, and special education. We were a truly diverse group.

I graduated in June 1988 in one of the worst monsoons in Columbia commencement history — 20 minutes of driving rain. Our light blue robes turned a soggy dark blue by the time President Michael Sovern pronounced all 10,000 students graduated. It was as though I had been baptized into the world.

Afterward, I, like so many others, spent most of my days sending out résumés. I eventually landed a job working on Garrison Keillor's new radio program, American Radio Company, broadcast from the Brooklyn Academy of Music. When a producer left the show, his apartment in Chelsea became available and I was offered the

lease. I went from living with 15 others at Ford Hall in Morningside Heights to living on my own in a beautiful one-bedroom on 17th Street.

I now live far from New York City, but the values of living my life for others, and with others, have never left me. I remain close to many of my friends from the house. Living in a community teaches you that you are never alone, and many of these former housemates will always be in my heart. Dorothy Day was right when she wrote in *The Long Loneliness*, “We have all known the long loneliness and we have learned that the only solution is love and that love comes with community.”

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