

Next Left Notes

Let The People Decide

Getting Ready for the Firing Line: Organizing in Uptown in the 60's. Remembering JOIN Community Union

Posted by Michael James - September 1, 2006

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In the 1960s the conscience of America turned not only to the question of civil rights, but also to poverty in America. Michael Harrington's *The Other America* exerted a strong influence, including on some in the U.S. government, which initiated programs like the War on Poverty, Vista, and the Peace Corps. The civil rights movement in the black community took a nationalist turn, and "Black Power" became a dominant slogan of the day.

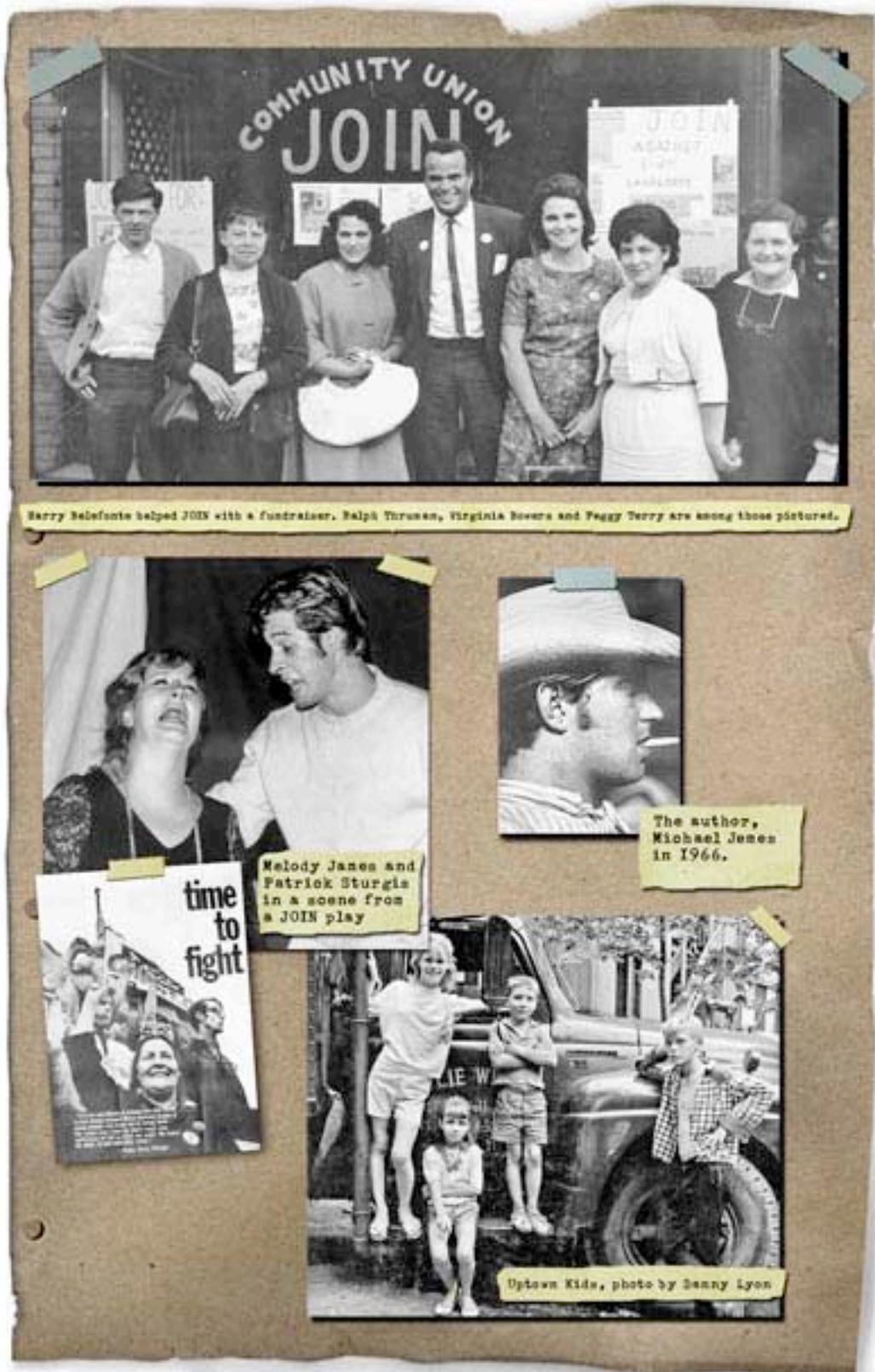
For white students who had worked in or supported the southern civil rights movement, the time had come to figure out their role in the movement. Before the rapid expansion of the student and anti-war movements, student activists talked about organizing the poor in northern cities. In its early years, Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) focused on civil rights and poverty, and set out to build an inter-racial movement of poor people.

SDS began moving small groups of former students into impoverished neighborhoods in northern cities. Chicago's Uptown was one inner city neighborhood where radical students attempted to become "one with the people." The hope was to build an organization of the poor fighting for change from the bottom up.

Beginning in the winter of 1964-65 and over the course of the next three years, these activists worked with community people they met to build an organization called JOIN Community Union. JOIN engaged and challenged both the poor people of Uptown and the forces of the status quo, be they individuals, social services, churches, businesses, or government agencies, including the police institutions which, intentionally or not, reinforced the status quo and the dependence of the poor on the dominant society.

The basic assumption of the people who started JOIN, and those who came to work there, was that the real problems of America were capitalism and racism. They believed that poor people of all races and ethnicities had a similar relationship to the dominant society, and were exploited by it. As radical organizers in a largely poor white community, they believed they could make a difference, not only in how poor whites viewed the actions and experience of black people, but in their own conditions and future as well.

I was one of those young radicals who came to Uptown and became a part of JOIN Community Union.



My first brush with Uptown came before I knew about JOIN, when I moved there in the summer of 1964 fresh out of Lake Forest College, to work as a participant observer with an anthropologist studying the migration of southern whites to Chicago. I moved into a one-room kitchenette apartment at the Villa Sarata on Kenmore just south of Montrose, and spent the

summer hanging out under the el tracks, on corners, building stoops, and back porches, and in corner restaurants. I spent time with guys drinking, bullshitting, complaining, telling stories, and playing the guitar.

The job had me fraternizing with southern guys like one-armed Penny Menser from Kentucky, who taught me how to roll cigarettes; I had my first slugs of Jim Beam, and learned country tunes. I woke up and fell asleep to summer street sounds two stories below. Neighbors taught me how to make biscuits and gravy. I'd write notes on my experiences and share them with my anthropologist boss, Mel Diamond. I came to think of Uptown as Hillbilly Harlem, and the place captured my heart and changed me forever.

Late in August I left, driving my 1957 Ford ragtop west to the University of California at Berkeley for a short new life as a sociology grad student. It would take a year and a half, but Uptown pulled me back.

Here's how it happened. At the daily Free Speech Movement demonstrations in the fall of 1964, sitting around a police car that contained activist Jack Weinberg, I found a flyer with a picture of a black man in front of Chicago's City Hall selling apples from a box that said "JOIN – Jobs Or Income Now – we want work." Inside, the words "build the interracial movement of the poor" jumped out at me.

I'd been reading conflict theory and thinking about how to break down racial and ethnic barriers and get poor people of all colors to work together for change. The flyer I'd found was a gift from the gods, and I wrote to SDS's Economic Research and Action Project (ERAP) asking how to get involved. A return letter stated it was up to me and others to build the interracial movement of the poor.

In the summer of 1965 thirteen of us took up the call and started a summer project called the Oakland Community Union Organizing Project, which focused on neighborhood and housing issues in a mostly black neighborhood near the Southern Pacific Railroad tracks in West Oakland. The project was short-lived: protests against the war in Vietnam, including attempts to stop troop trains, pulled the mostly white young organizers away from the neighborhood. In Chicago that August I visited JOIN at its office at Winthrop and Argyle, then hitchhiked with Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) organizer Casey Hayden to the Cleveland Community Union Project, and from there to the Poor People's Convention at the Newark Community Union Project.

That fall I met Stokely Carmichael at a SNCC benefit held in the Fillmore Auditorium (with entertainers like Richard Pryor, Moby Grape, Jefferson Airplane, and Quicksilver Messenger Service). I told him I was leaving graduate school to work either in Newark or Chicago's Uptown. His advice to me was to "work with whites; we've got plenty of folks working in the black community. We need allies in the white community."

So in April of 1966 I left California in the '57 Ford, this time with JOIN organizer Burt Steck, and headed back to Uptown. We arrived just in time to participate in a JOIN demonstration against a little TV shop, Price-Rite on Argyle, that had "ripped off" Mrs. Hinton, one of the JOIN welfare moms. Price-Rite was owned by some southern guys, and they eventually did right by Mrs. Hinton, as well as supporting JOIN.

JOIN had originally begun as an effort to organize the unemployed. SDS students recruited at the unemployment compensation office on Lawrence Avenue, while members of the Packing House Workers Union recruited at a Southside unemployment compensation office. By the summer of

1965 the strategy had changed from the Jobs Or Income Now effort to organize unemployed workers to that of building a community union called, appropriately, JOIN Community Union.

The idea was to build a union-like structure in a poor community. Uptown was chosen because the largest number of contacts from the early recruiting efforts lived in Uptown, a formerly upscale neighborhood which by now had apartments divided up to accommodate the largely rural southern migrants who'd arrived for factory jobs after the Second World War.

JOIN now had an office at 4431 N. Sheridan, just north of Hazel and south of Wilson Avenue, next door to a laundry. Each day at that office groups of former students and community people gathered together, for meetings small and large, for educational sessions, to receive and handle questions, and to meet the needs of people who came there. It was from that office that "JOIN people" went out into the streets of Uptown, meeting and talking with folks, knocking on doors, talking to anyone and everyone about welfare, housing, urban renewal, jobs, the police, the civil rights movement, and increasingly, the draft and the war in Vietnam. We were building The Movement.

We worked with people around jobs and unemployment, going to bat for folks who had been screwed by the exploitative practices of Uptown's day labor hiring halls. Housing was a major issue, and JOIN's work around tenants' rights, featuring rent strikes, helped spread the word that JOIN stood up for the little people. The ongoing process of "urban renewal" – we called it "people removal" – found JOIN confronting the city's early attempts to change the face of Uptown. In June of 1967 JOIN participated in a demonstration at City Hall with other organizations from the south and west sides, and members Pam Gray and Tom Malear were arrested.

JOIN women formed a group that focused on equality issues, women's rights, birth control, and abortion long before there was a Chicago Women's Liberation Union. JOIN helped people get medical attention. On one occasion I remember carrying frostbitten winos into Cook County Hospital. And JOIN helped people get food, referring them to helpful agencies, and eventually starting the JOIN Food Co-op that used the \$5 refundable membership fee to buy food at wholesale prices.

JOIN challenged the Government's War on Poverty for its emphasis on soft local issues (like where to plant a tree), rather than on the structural forces and policies that created poverty. James Osborne, a young man from Virginia who went on to start Uptown's Book Box on Broadway (now Shake, Rattle & Read), had a job at the War on Poverty office on Montrose. He lost that job when he challenged War on Poverty headman Sergeant Shriver at a meeting in Washington D.C.

Uptown was filled with what we called slum landlords, building owners who charged high rents for rundown apartments in buildings that were not kept up. JOIN stood for tenant's rights, and we challenged these landlords and their building managers. Having gas and electricity turned off was a tactic used against tenants behind in their rent payments, and we developed the skill of getting into building basements and turning the power back on. Rent strikes, the withholding of payment until repairs are made, were a major activity. JOIN actually took over and ran what was called the "Sampson Building" on the 4400 Kenmore block. A rent strike at a building on Broadway near Irving Park ended in the tenants favor hours after a few of us leafleted a certain Mr. Gutman's home in the suburbs one Sunday morning with flyers saying "your neighbor is a slumlord."

A major force in the organization was the JOIN Welfare Union, with its strong women and a few men, both black and white, like Big Dovie Thurman and Little Dovie Coleman, Mary

Hockenberry, Carl Lorig, and Virginia Bowers. The group fought for the rights of those on welfare by helping get checks released on time and demanding other services they legally deserved. The group held demonstrations and sit-ins at the Cook County Department of Public Aid. In the course of this welfare work, ties were made and joint actions held with other welfare organizations from black and Latino organizations like the Kenwood Oakland Community Organization (KOCO) on the Southside, and the Latin American Defense Organization (LADO) in Humboldt Park, and with activists in the Illinois Public Aid Workers union.

One of the most successful projects was the JOIN Theater, which my sister Melody James came to Chicago to start up. It was a crowd-pleaser at the weekly JOIN meetings, and involved creating and performing educational – and humorous – skits based on true-life stories and current events and issues. The theater covered welfare, police brutality, housing, urban renewal, the police, and the escalating war in Viet Nam. The group created skits for specific organizing issues, such as JOIN's demand for the city to build a play lot named after Hank Williams at Clifton and Sunnyside, where Truman College now stands.

Another major contingent in the organization was the young men. They were mostly young southern white guys on Wilson Avenue, who we came to know initially at a youth recreation room run by Reverend George Morey. Working on black and white unity, a meeting of street guys, both black and white, was held in a basement on Hazel. In attendance was Jesse Jackson, then a young organizer with Dr. King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), which had moved into Chicago.

The young Uptown guys formed an autonomous group, the Goodfellows, and for a while had their own hall on Wilson Avenue that was often packed with people playing guitars, getting down on their country licks, doing their own versions of Hank Williams, George Jones, and Merle Haggard tunes.

The main issue for these young bloods was the police, who in the 1960s respected almost no one's rights, and certainly not those of hillbilly teenagers. In the summer of 1966 the Goodfellows organized a march on the Summerdale Police Station (20th District) on Foster Avenue – notorious for police linked to burglaries – after the cops killed a young Kentucky man named Ronnie Williams. The march had many supporters and participants, including plenty of southern white youth, as well as some blacks and Latinos. It also had its opponents, particularly as we moved west of Uptown.

Tension with the police grew as JOIN reached out to more people, and it wasn't long until the police retaliated, planting drugs in the JOIN office, and then conducting a raid and destroying the office on September 1, 1966. This raid was an obvious attempt to punish JOIN for fighting for justice in Uptown. The raid came two weeks after the march on the police station, and after three successful JOIN-led rent strikes. My sister Melody and Richie Rothstein were busted, and the cops seriously trashed the office.

One of our responses to the police was to call for the establishment of a civilian review board, a group outside the police department that would review alleged cases of police misconduct. That evolved into an organization called Citizen Alert, which is still active today.

Over the next couple of years the JOIN organizers, both students and community people, did a lot of door-to-door work. We would knock on strangers' doors, speak with the people we met about JOIN activities, and ask about what was on their minds. We informed folks of their rights, invited them to the weekly JOIN meetings, and built block clubs and tenants groups consisting of active residents ready to take a stand. We hoped initial block clubs would evolve into a shadow precinct organization, with stewards much like union stewards or representatives in the work

place. And though it never happened, there was thought early on of the possibility of running a candidate in an aldermanic election in the 46th ward.

In 1966-67 there were a number of black rebellions in America's inner cities, including Detroit, Los Angeles, Newark, New York, and Chicago. Our concern was how poor whites would respond to black rebellion. Some JOIN organizers spent time in neighborhood bars on Wilson Avenue, positioning themselves through contact and friendship to influence reaction if and when things "came down." We discovered that attitudes flew in the face of reported southern racism. We encouraged, and found, expression of a populist spirit, and among the young guys, a positive response to black rebellion. When Dr. King and SCLC led marchers into Cicero, JOIN activists were present. It was a major life-changing event for the poor whites who marched with Dr. King and found themselves attacked by a northern white mob.

To share information about what the organization was doing, a small newsletter was started, which soon turned into a newspaper called *The Firing Line*, named after a line in a song from coal miners' labor union struggles in Appalachia: "Keep on the firing line." The paper was produced regularly out of Peggy Terry's apartment on Clifton Avenue. Peggy was a welfare mom who had been turned on to the civil rights movement while living in Birmingham, Alabama. She became well known, and many people came to see her, including two NFL football players, David Meggyesey and Rick Sortun, from the then St. Louis Cardinals, who trained at Lake Forest College. Peggy became good friends with Studs Terkel and is featured in several of his books.

Throughout JOIN's history, there was a concern for education and training: to educate members about issues, and to train others to spread the kind of organizing we were doing in Chicago around the country. On the local level, Vivian and Richie Rothstein developed the JOIN School, with wonderful primers. Community people studied the welfare system, urban renewal, the police, and the Vietnam War. A number of people learned to read while participating in these educational sessions.

Ronnie Davis, well known later as one of the Chicago Seven (arrested during the '68 Democratic Convention), worked on establishing a school of community organizers, and the JOIN experience was shared with people from other neighborhoods, including activists in KOCO and LADO. We also traveled to recruit college students with a JOIN road show that included Goodfellows, our theater, and welfare moms. We went to Washington University in St. Louis and the University of Iowa, hoping to get students to leave college to work in poor white communities around the Midwest. Those who came to Chicago were trained in sessions in the basement of the Book Box on Broadway.

In the time leading up to the '68 Democratic Convention in Chicago, energy on day-to-day organizing became diffused. Following the demonstrations and police riots of the Convention in August 1968, a number of activists gathered for a meeting on a farm outside of Valparaiso, Indiana. The Peace and Freedom Party of California intended to run black Panther Party member Eldridge Clever for president. Originally they hoped to get SDS President Carl Davidson to run for Vice President, but when SDS leadership turned that proposal down, the idea emerged that JOIN's Peggy Terry should be the candidate.

So it was that in the fall of 1968 I managed Peggy's bid to become the Vice President of the United States of America. The campaign believed we could raise the issue of poverty and encourage people beyond Chicago to organize among poor whites. We hit the trail with a collection of cars and young radicals, heading to places like Des Moines, Detroit, Columbus, Ohio, and cities in California. In Louisville, Kentucky, we were run out of a Kroger food store

parking lot by an angry mob of Ku Klux Klan members who began throwing rocks while we sang “We Shall Overcome” (as the police suddenly disappeared).

Our plan had been to bury ourselves in poor communities like Uptown, to recruit community people and build a base that would be part of the larger ongoing struggle for social, political, and economic justice. Our approach was to push for the long haul, staying in the community and going through change with people. We had some success. Certainly the young middle class white organizers, as well as a number of young neighborhood guys and welfare moms and their kids, had their lives changed.

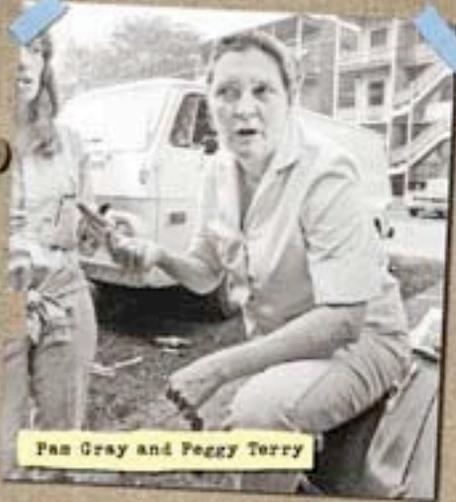
JOIN had developed and grown, but it ended rather abruptly.

The war in Vietnam and organizing to oppose it, and organizing in other areas, as well as what were called “internal contradictions” – political differences about long and short term goals arising from differences in age, gender, class, race, etc. – and our inexperience in handling them, led to the organization’s demise. The Democratic Convention had come to town, and the movement’s involvement in challenging it and the Democratic Party’s pro-war position was where the action was. Some people left JOIN to do anti-war work. Others went into labor organizing and other political work. And for a time some from the JOIN community organized a group called the National Community Union (NCU), which aimed to connect with southern, white identity and provide an alternative to George Wallace and the Ku Klux Klan for working class white southerners.

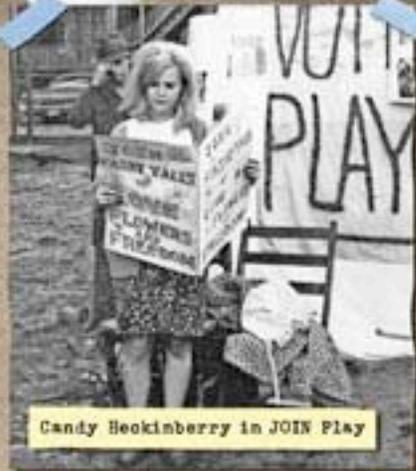
JOIN probably officially ended in the fall of 1968. Many of its organizers and active members continued to work for social and political change. The welfare activists kept working in a citywide movement. Some of the young guys ended up being involved with a new organization, the Young Patriots. Other JOIN people worked with another new group called the National Organizing Committee, trying to develop new organizing projects in places like Cincinnati and Detroit. Peggy Terry and others participated in the Poor People’s Campaign, camping out in Washington, D.C. Melody James went to San Francisco and became part of the San Francisco Mime Troupe.

Myself, Patrick Sturgis, June Bug Boykin, Bob Lawson, Diane Fager, Norie Davis, and others started an organization and newspaper called *Rising Up Angry*, which reached out to white youth throughout Chicago and worked closely with Fred Hampton, the Black Panther Party, and Cha Cha Jimenez and the Young Lords Organization. *Rising Up Angry* lived from 1969 to 1975 – but that is another history, deserving of its own story.

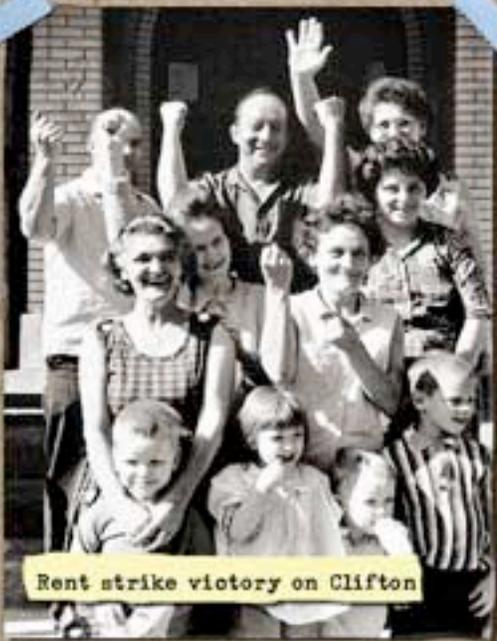
In the summer of 2004 Peggy Terry passed away. A memorial gathering was held on October 3, 2004 at the Heartland Café in Chicago. Folks involved with JOIN converged from throughout Chicago and beyond, including the south and the two coasts. We shared stories, memories, ideas, and information. We sang the old songs from the JOIN songbook, mostly reworked southern spirituals and civil rights tunes. Studs Terkel sent a tape with wonderful words about Peggy Terry. We celebrated Peggy and others now gone, as well as ourselves and our families, nearly all of whom continue to be on The Firing Line, fighting injustice and oppression, combating cynicism, and continuing to build for a better world, for a better day. The circle of love, struggle, and quest for justice that we forged together in Uptown remains unbroken.



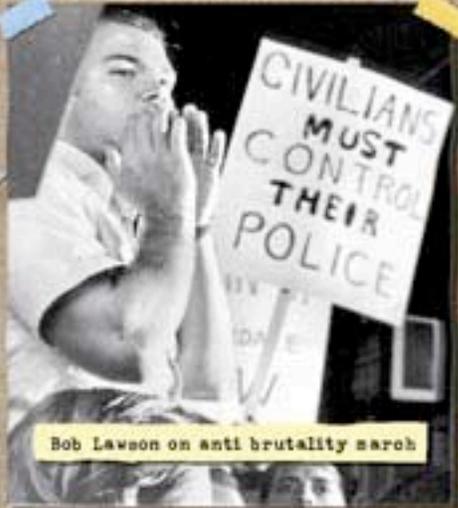
Pam Gray and Peggy Terry



Candy Heckinberry in JOIN Play



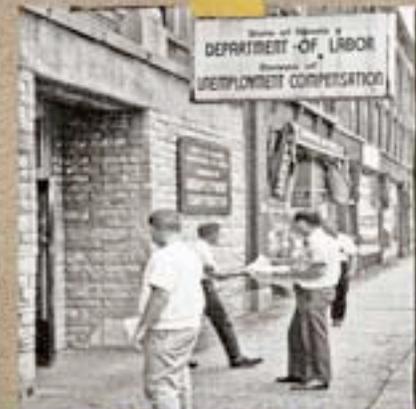
Rent strike victory on Clifton



Bob Lawson on anti brutality march



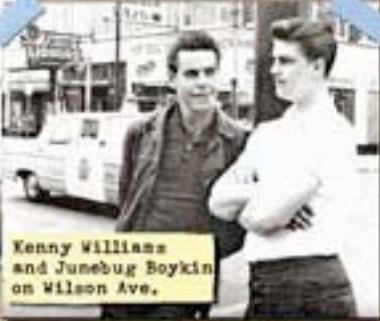
Cops at work on Wilson Ave.



Leafletting the unemployment comp office



Rally for a Hank Williams. Playground on Clifton



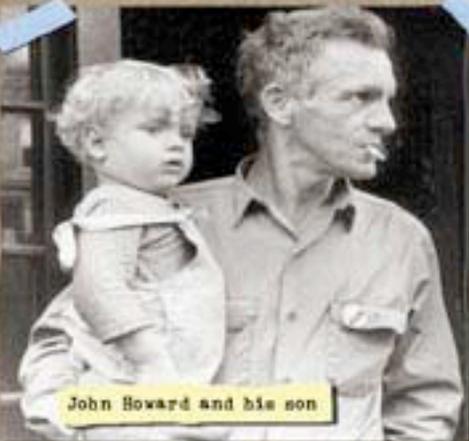
Kenny Williams and Junebug Boykin on Wilson Ave.



Building under JOIN Management



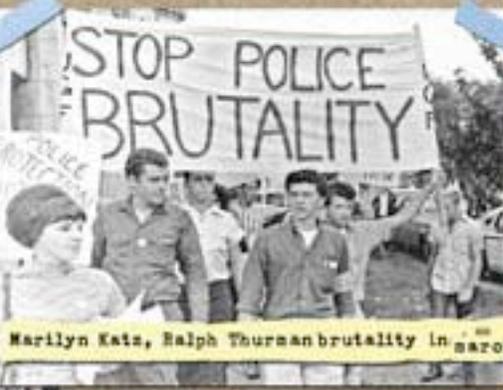
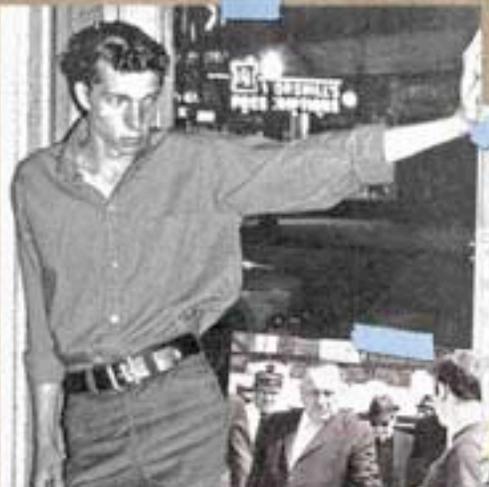
A Weekly Meeting in Join Office



John Howard and his son



Big Dovie Thurman



Marilyn Katz, Ralph Thurman brutality in march

Michael James is the co-founder and co-director of The Heartland Cafe and co-publisher of the *Heartland Journal*.

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