

Conversations in Newark

By Jason R. Stevenson

My Newark conversations began long before I arrived there. They started months in advance as I discussed my summer plans with college friends over dining hall tables, and continued as I convinced my parents to let me to live in a city more famous for burning its neighborhoods than for rebuilding them.

These first few conversations at college and home were always defensive—I could never adequately explain why I wanted to go to Newark. I blamed it on simple idealism, little patience with another summer of long commutes and the widening gap between what was taught to me and what I wanted to learn. Having grown-up in the famously quiet suburbs of Ohio, I needed to get away from my past—if only for a summer of teaching reading and writing to children.

I spent many hours over the summer sketching the abandoned buildings of the city's past. Many of my memorable conversations came about as I sat alone trying to resurrect Newark in pencil and paper.

I met Raymond, an un-apologetic drunk, as I sat drawing the vacant S. Klein department store on Broad Street, Newark's main avenue. Nursing a brown-bagged beer at 10:30 on a Friday morning, Raymond sat down next to me and remembered aloud how S. Klein's once anchored the vibrant string of stores along Broad in the fifties and sixties. Thinking back to those days, he praised the treatment of the "little guy" under Mayor Hugh Addonizio, the politician whose bungling and corruption led to the catastrophic 1967 riots.

"If you wanted a job back then, you go to him and you got a job," Raymond told me while leaning close enough so I could smell his breath. Pointing to where city hall stood, he attacked the current black mayor, Sharpe James: "All that guy James cares about is the suburbs and the rich folks."

I later realized Raymond's comments were driven less by his knowledge of political regimes, and more by his memories of the Newark he grew up with. As an old man, he could remember the days when Broad Street bustled with the best shopping in New Jersey. He blamed the city's current distress—sidewalks sparkling with broken

glass and grand old buildings in shambles—on the present-day political leaders, rather than unfortunate legacies from the past. He showed me that not all of Newark's past should be buried, that some should be reclaimed and restored.

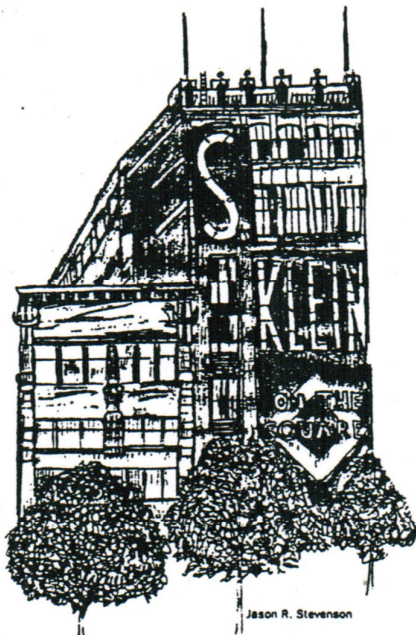
I met the antithesis of Raymond the next day in the form of a mounted Newark police officer outside the brand-new New Jersey Performing Arts Center (NJPAC). As we talked about Newark, he blamed the bad reputation of the downtown on the bands of homeless men like Raymond who roamed the streets. He shook his

ter. From out of the night appeared a shuffling group of homeless men who walked up and stood silently behind them. The out-of-towners in tuxedos and evening gowns shifted uncomfortably and looked imploringly at Eddie and the other police officers to intervene, but the police did nothing. As the walk sign blinked on, both groups stepped off the curb and went their very separate ways. Eddie felt sorry for the art patrons, but I wondered about the hundreds of homeless men and women who passed the gleaming glass and brick arts center every day to get a free meal.

My most memorable conversation occurred at an event to remember the troubled past of the city. On a sticky night in late July, I took a bus to the corner in the Central Ward where the Newark riots began 31 years before. The Rev. William Hayes housing projects once stood on this site, but now half these dead buildings have been dynamited into rubble and the rest wait to collapse. When I arrived at the 17th Avenue bus stop, a large crowd milled around preparing to march in memory of the uprising victims. Soon a youthful marching band, followed by dancers and brightly uniformed Little League teams, led off the procession as I joined a loose group of residents, activists, and curious onlookers who walked behind.

As we pushed up Irvine Turner Boulevard, past the vibrant bars and vacant lots, the charged night air began to sound with sharp rifle-like cracks and shrieking sirens. But these weren't the sounds of National Guard guns and police sirens that accompanied Newark's demise for five, hot, summer days in 1967, rather the staccato drum beats of the band were loud enough to set off blaring car alarms in the vehicles we marched beside. Heads poked out of upstairs windows and front doors opened in the public housing townhouses as people paused to watch the commotion pass in the street. Feeling the crescendo of noise and emotion, the drums beat a little louder, drowning out and then leaving behind the sounds of car alarms, as the growing crowd crested the hill and we marched out of Newark's past.

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head in disbelief when he told me the city built the \$180 million NJPAC in the midst of five homeless shelters and next door to the city's main church soup kitchen.

To illustrate this bad planning, Eddie related a story about the September 1997 grand opening of NJPAC. On duty that night, he watched as a crowd of elegantly dressed concert-goers with \$1,000 tickets waited to cross the street and enter the Cen-