

VISTA in NYC 1969. I started my training in August or so of 1968 in Chicago at the Democratic National Convention. There was tear gas and National Guard with rifles and Daley's thug cops and Dick Gregory etc. VISTA said I was going to Detroit, but they had promised me CA -- there were riots and wholesale burning in Detroit, so I refused. Then they called and said how about going for a Masters at NYU law and being based in the City for two years. Home I went.

I was based with two tough black guys and two hippy-type, white California VISTA guys in an apartment around 105th just east of Manhattan Avenue, a block where people killed each other. I dated a woman from Harlem, and one of my roommates wanted to kill me because as a black man he couldn't tolerate my dating a black woman. She told him no, you can't kill him. The other guy in the apartment stabbed my would-be killer with an ice pick after I left and asked me to defend him. I declined.

I was based across from the Museum of Natural History on CPW around 70th. I did landlord tenant problems, which was hard in those days, given the control landlords had over the courts, and I also represented the Welfare Rights Organization, which became pretty famous. More babies, more welfare was their slogan.

Notwithstanding my commitment the day I turned 26, I told Norman Redlich, our supervisor and the former NYC Counsel, that I was leaving. In retribution, all my NYU professors gave me an F instead of incomplete or withdrew. I had to explain that to the Florida Bar and got a lecture on morality and commitment. The NYU Dean was right, but I said screw it, I did what I had to do. I'm not proud of it but I'm ok with it. Norm Williams and Chuck Stark were in VISTA and finished their commitments, but I don't know how long. Norm is younger than me.

I knew and know nothing of a VISTA upheaval. I'm not sure I was against the war then; I just knew that I didn't want to get killed. It was an unfair and rigged game, and I took advantage of it.

So, in short, I did legal work. I saw poverty, rodents, roaches (I could hear them click as they were on my bedroom wall at night), hate, despair.

My mother lived at Park and 76th. I'd take the bus across 110th and down Fifth and see the buildings with different eyes! I got somewhat used to living like a poor person, yet I wasn't. My roommates were in a movie that would end only at death. I could walk out of the movie anytime I wanted to. It was a transformative year. I hope.

Mike Smith and I did the same kind of work. Welfare rights and landlord tenant. I would go to court with 20 or 30 residents of a building who would testify that they hadn't had heat all winter. The courts refused to take that testimony, saying that the

only reliable testimony was a building inspector who put an actual thermometer on a radiator and held it there for a long period of time, meaning several hours. I did finally get a landlord put in jail for a while, but it was my only victory.

It was really upsetting. The things that I saw in buildings, water dripping out of ceilings and with every drop a roach fell to the floor, so walking across the floor was crunchy crunchy critter time. As for welfare rights, Jeanette Washington, who was the head of the welfare rights organization in the city, as I remember, kept urging everybody to have more babies, since welfare was based on the number of children that her mother had. It was difficult to listen to.

We then went on rent strikes with single room occupancies on the west side, where people bought buildings and then paid bums to piss and poop in the halls and scream at night, All in an attempt to drive out the elderly who were there in single rooms with their electric heat plates used for cooking.

In one case the landlord won, and I wound up, if I didn't already tell you, with an anxiety attack in which I thought I was dying, with all these elderly people standing over me and saying too bad, he was such a nice young man.