

ASSERTING A RIGHT TO THE CITY:  
THE YOUNG LORDS, THE PEOPLE'S CHURCH & THE POOR PEOPLE'S  
COALITION

Michael R. Gonzales  
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## ABBREVIATIONS

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| BPP   | Black Panther Party                         |
| DUR   | Department of Urban Renewal                 |
| GNRP  | General Neighborhood Renewal Plan           |
| LPCA  | Lincoln Park Conservation Association       |
| LPCCC | Lincoln Park Conservation Community Council |
| NSCM  | North Side Cooperative Ministry             |
| PCHC  | People's Cooperative Housing Corporation    |
| PPC   | Poor People's Coalition                     |
| YLO   | Young Lords Organization                    |

For the last 15 years, Lincoln Park has been on the urban planners' maps as an ideal spot to create a middle-class enclave, a suburb in the heart of the inner city. Entire blocks on Armitage, Halsted and Larrabee streets now lie bare where Urban Renewal has leveled the homes of Puerto Ricans and poor whites.

—Frank Browning, “From Rumble to Revolution: The Young Lords,” *Ramparts*, October 1970.

### **A Right to the Church and a Right to the City**

Dusk set in as a small crowd gathered near the bustling corner of Dayton Street and Armitage Avenue in Chicago's Lincoln Park area on September 23, 2013. This was one of the last stops on a “historic walking tour” organized both to celebrate the forty-fifth anniversary of the founding of a radical social movement and to honor the lives and memories of fallen comrades. The assembled spectators looked out at an open pit (soon to be developed into a Walgreens), where until recently had stood a historic church building. Used by a variety of congregations over the years, from 1969 to 1973 this facility was known as “The People's Church” and served as the heart of a grassroots social movement led by the Young Lords Organization (YLO).

The Young Lords began as a street-gang in 1959 in the Puerto Rican areas of Lincoln Park. By the end of the next decade this street group had transformed into the Young Lords Organization (YLO), a growing national political body allied with and modeled after the Black Panther Party (BPP). YLO activists set about to construct a new world. Their revolutionary ideals were manifest through their rhetoric and actions. No longer committing petty crimes and fighting over turf with other street groups, YLO members were serving the community, calling for the independence of Puerto Rico, publishing a monthly newspaper, and engaging in militant direct-action protest.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Hilda Vasquez-Ignatin, “Young Lords Serve and Protect,” *Y.L.O.*, no. 2, May, 1969.

In late-1968 the YLO approached members of the Armitage Avenue Methodist Church and requested permission to use the facility's basement space for a number of proposed community service programs. The church housed two congregations, one consisting largely of older progressive whites, and the other made up mostly of Cuban exiles who had fled in the wake of Castro's seizure of power. While they gained the support of key church leaders, the YLO faced significant resistance from the Cuban congregation. By June 1969 YLO members had grown impatient with the intransigence of the parishioners who were blocking consensus, so they took action. Arguing that the church's basement space should serve the needs of poor people in the community rather than sit empty, the YLO seized the building. Displaying their typical panache, they called a press-conference to announce that the site was now known as the People's Church and would henceforth serve as the YLO's base of operations.<sup>2</sup>

Despite the incendiary bravado of these actions, the YLO received significant support from a number of church leaders and members. Perhaps most important was the backing of the church's young pastor, Reverend Bruce Johnson, and his wife Eugenia Johnson, who both worked to educate the congregation about the Young Lords movement. With the help of Bruce, Eugenia, and several church members, the YLO set about to serve the needs of poor and working class people in Lincoln Park. Modeling their efforts after the BPP, Young Lords activists created a number of community service programs that operated in the People's Church's basement, including a free breakfast program for children, a free community daycare center, and a free community health clinic. A new symbol—a cross bursting the chains of bondage—was displayed inside the

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<sup>2</sup> Lilia Fernandez, *Brown in the Windy City: Mexicans and Puerto Ricans in Postwar Chicago*, (The University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 2012),192; "You Can't Kill a Revolution," *Y.L.O.*, no. 4, Fall, 1969.

church. Murals, featuring the YLO logo as well as a pantheon of revolutionary heroes, were soon added to the building's exterior. A new creed appeared at the church door, in part reading: "We have a dream. This Church, led by the community, confronting the powers which limit our destiny, keeping rulers responsible, assisting man to claim his destiny and celebrating in worship the birth of that power is our dream of a People's Church."<sup>3</sup>

More than four decades later, former YLO Chairman José "Cha Cha" Jiménez stood before the fenced-off rubble that once represented the dreams of his community. "It has a lot of memories," he told the crowd. "They killed Reverend Bruce Johnson and Eugenia Johnson to try to erase this history, which we are not going to forget." He was referring to the tragic, brutal, and unsolved murder of the young pastor and his wife that occurred in late September 1969. The YLO suspected that the murders were politically motivated—retribution for support the couple had given to the Young Lords movement—writing in their newspaper shortly afterwards: "these murders show to what vicious lengths the ruling class will go to prevent the growth of our just struggle."<sup>4</sup>

His soft-spoken voice amplified by a megaphone, Jiménez recounted the extensive community service work that took place inside the People's Church. "Most of the buildings all around here were Latinos that lived here, or poor working class people," he said, gesturing toward the surrounding neighborhood, "and this was their church, this was their symbol. A lot of churches are dying. That church was very vibrant at that time."

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<sup>3</sup> "Revolutionaries Serve the People! Day Care Center," *Y.L.O.*, no. 4, Fall, 1969, 4; (José Jiménez, Young Lords in Lincoln Park Historic Walking Tour sponsored by Grand Valley State University (GVSU) and GVSU Latino Student Union, Chicago, IL, September 23, 2013); (Matthew Johnson, Young Lords Historic Walking Tour, September 23, 2013).

<sup>4</sup> "You Can't Kill a Revolution," *Y.L.O.*, no. 4, Fall, 1969, 3, YLO Collection; (José Jiménez, Young Lords Historic Walking Tour, Chicago, IL, September 23, 2013).

“This neighborhood has not seen this type of people here,” he continued, “so tomorrow they’re going to talk about it.” He was referring both to the diverse crowd of activists assembled before him, as well as to the dramatic demographic changes that had taken place in Lincoln Park over the previous four decades. Largely as a result of urban renewal projects initiated in the 1960s and 1970s, Lincoln Park’s working-class residents had been mostly forced out of the area and replaced by affluent whites. “This is what you call neo-segregation,” Jiménez said more than forty years later. As a result, he concluded, “there are no more poor people living in Lincoln Park.”<sup>5</sup>

The transformation of Lincoln Park’s working-class neighborhoods into upscale commercial and residential areas did not come without conflict. Church groups began organizing in the mid-1960s once the deleterious effects of initial renewal projects first became apparent. In 1969 these groups joined together with the YLO and a variety of other community organizations to form a multi-racial alliance known as the Poor People’s Coalition (PPC). From early 1969 until late 1970, activists in the PPC waged a brief but significant struggle to defend their communities against the disruptive forces of urban renewal. Their voices shut out of the decision making process, the PPC resorted to a variety of alternative means—including direct-action protests, building occupations, tent-cities, and the crafting of a cooperative public housing proposal—to exert pressure on decision makers.<sup>6</sup>

While ultimately unsuccessful in stopping gentrification, the Young Lords made an historical statement. They articulated a vision of community based on ideals of

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<sup>5</sup> (José Jiménez, Young Lords Historic Walking Tour, September 23, 2013).

<sup>6</sup> Patricia Devine-Reed, interview by José Jiménez, February 10, 2012, Young Lords in Lincoln Park Collection, Grand Valley State University, Grand Rapids, Michigan; (Patricia Devine-Reed, Young Lords Historic Walking Tour, September 23, 2013).

solidarity and mutual aid, contrasting sharply with the vision set forward by developers, city planners, and local politicians. Through their work both inside and outside of the People's Church, YLO activists asserted (in the words of Henri Lefebvre and others) their "right to the city." That is to say, they loudly proclaimed the right of poor and working-class people to a place in the city and the right to control the development of their neighborhoods. While their failure to stop the destructive forces of gentrification in Lincoln Park reflects the uneven balance of power in their struggle, their audacious efforts stand as a model of resistance that—with its share of flaws—highlights the revolutionary potential of united working class communities.<sup>7</sup>

### **The Fight for the City**

Urban renewal emerged somewhat later in Lincoln Park than in other areas of the city. Urban renewal projects were first used by city leaders, for a variety of purposes, beginning in the 1940s. Sometimes these projects resulted in the transformation of working-class neighborhoods into fashionable and upscale commercial, institutional, and residential areas. Urban renewal was also used as a tool by educational institutions, such as the University of Chicago and the University of Illinois at Chicago, to shape campus expansion in the 1950s-60s, and to control the partial racial integration of areas surrounding their campuses.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> The phrase "right to the city" was popularized by French Marxist sociologist and philosopher Henri Lefebvre in his 1968 book, *La Droit a la Ville*. Other scholars, such as radical geography professors David Harvey and Don Mitchell, have argued for a reclamation of this idea. Harvey described the right to the city as exerting the right "to claim some kind of shaping power over the processes of urbanization, over the ways in which our cities are made and remade, and to do so in a fundamental and radical way." Henri Lefebvre, *La Droit a la Ville* (Paris: Anthropos, 1968); David Harvey, *Rebel Cities*, (New York: Verso, 2012), 5; Don Mitchell, *The Right to the City: Social Justice and the Fight for Public Space*, (New York: The Guilford Press, 2003).

<sup>8</sup> Arnold R. Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto: Race & Housing in Chicago 1940-1960* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983); Amanda I. Seligman, *Block By Block: Neighborhoods and Public Policy on Chicago's West Side*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

Early steps toward transforming Lincoln Park were taken in the early 1950s when property owners in the wealthier eastern sections of Lincoln Park began coordinating renovation efforts through their neighborhood associations. In 1954 these groups were joined by others in establishing the Lincoln Park Conservation Association (LPCA), an organization that united members from the numerous Lincoln Park area neighborhood associations. The LPCA ultimately sought to use federal urban renewal funds to push forward “conservation” efforts in Lincoln Park that would remove large tracts of run-down tenement apartment buildings to be replaced by moderate to upper income housing or commercial space. The social costs of this plan would be borne by the poor and working class people who lived in these apartments and would be displaced from the area, replaced by a wealthier class of people.<sup>9</sup>

The LPCA approached the city’s Community Conservation Board—the predecessor of the Department of Urban Renewal (DUR)—in 1956. As a result, Lincoln Park was designated a “conservation area” and was therefore eligible for the funding of larger projects. As required by state law, the city created a Conservation Community Council to assist the DUR in the administration of urban renewal in the Lincoln Park “conservation area.” Its leadership appointed by the mayor’s office, the Lincoln Park Conservation Community Council (LPCCC) was ostensibly designed to facilitate community participation in the crafting of urban renewal projects. Over the next decade, a significant number of LPCA leaders also sat on the board of the LPCCC, a point that

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<sup>9</sup> Lilia Fernandez, *Brown in the Windy City*, 178; Department of Urban Renewal - City of Chicago, *Lincoln Park Project One: Preliminary Proposal*, 1964 (3), Digital Collections, DePaul University archives, accessed December 16, 2003, <http://digicol.lib.depaul.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/lpnc6/id/771/rec/6>; Patricia Devine-Reed, interview by José Jiménez, February 10, 2012, Young Lords in Lincoln Park Collection, Grand Valley State University, Grand Rapids, Michigan.



activists in the PPC would later point to as deeply problematic. Beginning in 1959, these two groups worked together to draft a General Neighborhood Renewal Plan (GNRP) for Lincoln Park. By early 1963 a broad framework had been agreed upon, and the GNRP was approved by the LPCCC and the DUR. The GNRP consisted of four stages that were to take place over a period of ten years. During this time a number of designated “areas of blight” were to be targeted for demolition and redevelopment. Tenement buildings (housing low-income residents) were to be torn down and replaced by more modern (and expensive) commercial and residential spaces. By the mid-1960s the initial stages of this plan were well underway and its effects on the neighborhood were becoming apparent.<sup>10</sup>

“There were some obvious changes that had started to take place in the neighborhood,” community activist and former Lincoln Park resident Patricia Devine-Reed recounted in an oral history interview conducted in 2012. As she explained, a number of area residents were taken by surprise in the mid-1960s when they began noticing the dramatic effects of urban renewal programs on the social and urban landscapes of their communities. “The eastern part of the neighborhood was growing more and more wealthy,” she recalled, “and many of the people who had lived there before no longer could afford to own their homes.” She also began noticing the demolition of several large tenement buildings on some of the main avenues. “But it

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<sup>10</sup> Lilia Fernandez, *Brown in the Windy City*, 179; Department of Urban Renewal - City of Chicago, *Lincoln Park Project One: Preliminary Proposal*, 1964 (4), Digital Collections, DePaul University archives, accessed December 16, 2003, <http://digicol.lib.depaul.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/lpnc6/id/771/rec/6>; Lincoln Park Conservation Community Council Meeting Minutes, May 14, 1969, Folder: Minutes, Organizational, Box 1, Lincoln Park Conservation Community Council Collection, DePaul University Archives, Chicago; Patricia Devine-Reed, interview by José Jiménez, February 10, 2012, Young Lords in Lincoln Park Collection, Grand Valley State University, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

wasn't always clear what was happening," she said, and so she wasn't immediately alarmed.<sup>11</sup>

Devine-Reed first learned of Lincoln Park's urban renewal plans in the winter of 1966-67 when she became involved with a coalition of churches called the North Side Cooperative Ministry (NSCM). "The pastors of the churches had become very concerned about what was happening," she remembered. They were worried that as Lincoln Park became more gentrified, the racially and ethnically diverse working-class communities that lived in the area would be forced to leave. They were also bothered by the recent experiences of the largely Italian-American and African-American residents who had been displaced from the Near West Side to make room for the construction of a new University of Illinois at Chicago campus. From the perspective of leaders in the NSCM, Devine-Reed explained, urban renewal meant "development to the advantage of institutions and the city, and not to the large numbers of people that lived in the city."<sup>12</sup>

A new organization called the Concerned Citizens of Lincoln Park was formed in early 1967 to coordinate the efforts of church activists who wanted to influence the shape of future renewal projects in the area. Devine-Reed became one of its principal organizers. To her dismay she found that recasting urban renewal would be much more difficult than she had initially imagined. "It became clear that Concerned Citizens and the churches were a little behind the eight-ball," laughed Devine-Reed more than four decades later. "The plan had pretty much already been set by the Lincoln Park

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<sup>11</sup> Patricia Devine-Reed, interview by José Jiménez, February 10, 2012, Young Lords in Lincoln Park Collection, Grand Valley State University, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

<sup>12</sup> Patricia Devine-Reed, interview by José Jiménez, February 10, 2012, Young Lords in Lincoln Park Collection, Grand Valley State University, Grand Rapids, Michigan; "Neighborhood Program of Concerned Citizens Survival Front," *The Lincoln Park Press*, vol. 2, no. 2, March 1969, 5.

Conservation Association and the city of Chicago.” The LPCA was “not representing all homeowners...not the working class,” she asserted. Its members saw urban renewal as a way to “upgrade the financial level of the community,” and “not as a way to improve housing for the people living there.” Leaders in the Concerned Citizens cast themselves as an opposition to the LPCA. “The main goal,” Devine-Reed said, “was to represent the common people who were not being represented by the Lincoln Park Conservation Association.” To aid their efforts the Concerned Citizens began publishing *The Lincoln Park Press*, a bilingual monthly newspaper devoted to disseminating information about the group’s work, featuring articles written by local community members.<sup>13</sup>

One of the Concerned Citizens’ early efforts was an unsuccessful campaign in 1967 to win seats on the LPCA’s board of directors. They also mobilized community members. “For each [LPCCC] meeting,” Devine-Reed recalled, “we would organize residents to attend whose living circumstances were being considered,” including those whose homes faced imminent demolition. By bringing poor and working class families into the hearing rooms, the Concerned Citizens hoped to confront the LPCCC board members with the consequences of their plans. They also hoped to bring new ideas to the LPCCC and push its leaders to consider alternative plans. “We were organizing tenants to come and speak for themselves about improving that property rather than demolishing it,” Devine-Reed said. “We were not opposed to houses being upgraded... [but] we wanted the neighborhood to be upgraded for the people who lived here.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Patricia Devine-Reed, interview by José Jiménez, February 10, 2012, Young Lords in Lincoln Park Collection, Grand Valley State University, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

<sup>14</sup> Concerned Citizens of Lincoln Park, *An Action Platform for Lincoln Park*, 1967, Folder: Concerned Citizens of Lincoln Park, Organizational, Box 3, Lincoln Park Conservation Community Council Collection, DePaul University, Chicago; Patricia Devine-Reed, interview by José Jiménez, February 10, 2012, Young Lords in Lincoln Park Collection, Grand Valley State University, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

It was in 1968 while organizing tenants for one of these meetings that Devine-Reed and fellow Concerned Citizens organizer Richard Vission first made contact with the Young Lords. The Young Lords at that time was still in the midst of its radical transformation from a street group into a revolutionary political organization. While curious about the efforts of the Concerned Citizens, Young Lords leaders were cautiously skeptical. “We were making posters out on the sidewalks...out in front of the buildings,” Devine-Reed remembered, “and there were these young guys who were hanging at a hot dog stand on the corner...I met a young man named ‘Cha Cha’ Jiménez—he was very very sharp, very bright—and he challenged what we were saying.” Jiménez questioned Devine-Reed as to why the Young Lords should care about residents who he thought were working against them. Devine-Reed responding presciently: “people in the buildings want you to help them, but they’re afraid of you. And you’re afraid of them, because, as you say, they don’t want you on the corner. You need to join together.”<sup>15</sup>

By early 1969 both the Young Lords and the Concerned Citizens had transformed in fundamental ways. Now referring to themselves as the Young Lords Organization, the YLO had embraced radical leftist politics and had committed themselves to joining the struggle against urban renewal in Lincoln Park. Similarly, the Concerned Citizens had changed its name to the Concerned Citizens Survival Front of Lincoln Park, and were proclaiming on the front page of their newspaper that, “We Stand For Power To The People!” Through their cooperative efforts these two groups

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<sup>15</sup> Patricia Devine-Reed, interview by José Jiménez, February 10, 2012, Young Lords in Lincoln Park Collection, Grand Valley State University, Grand Rapids, Michigan; (Patricia Devine-Reed, Young Lords Historic Walking Tour, September 23, 2013).

had profoundly affected the development of each other. As the Concerned Citizens' organizers helped the YLO leaders to focus their youthful and rebellious energy, the YLO invigorated and helped radicalize the resistance movement in Lincoln Park.

José “Cha Cha” Jiménez credited Concerned Citizens organizers Richard Vission and Patricia Devine-Reed with first introducing him to the ideas of the BPP, which altered his perspective and inspired him to begin the process of transforming the Young Lords into a militant revolutionary group. “They...gave me books to read including the Black Panther Newspaper—that did it!” Jiménez wrote in a 1970 YLO newspaper article. “I had to create an organization of that kind for the Puerto Rican Community.” As Jiménez later recalled in a 2012 oral history interview, Devine-Reed and Vission also helped convince him that the only way to secure a future for the Puerto Rican community in Lincoln Park was by joining the fight to stop urban renewal. Working with the YLO also helped push the Concerned Citizens in a more radical direction. In addition to changing their name, the Concerned Citizens were now calling for “militant action in defense against urban renewal, realtors, and institutions which work against poor and working people.” Lincoln Park, they argued, should be “a place where poor and working people of all races, cultures, and family size can live cheaply and well.”<sup>16</sup>

The YLO's first action in protest of urban renewal occurred in January 1969, when Jiménez and dozens of YLO members marched from the Armitage Avenue Methodist Church (not yet known as the People's Church) to a public LPCCC meeting

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<sup>16</sup> “Cha Cha: Guilty or Innocent?,” *Pitirre*, No. 7, Summer 1970, 2; Patricia Devine-Reed, interview by José Jiménez, February 10, 2012, Young Lords in Lincoln Park Collection, Grand Valley State University, Grand Rapids, Michigan; “Concerned Citizens of Lincoln Park Has a New Name!,” *The Lincoln Park Press*, vol. 2, no. 2, March 1969, 1; “Neighborhood Program,” *The Lincoln Park Press*, vol. 2, no. 2, March 1969, 5.

at the DUR's Lincoln Park office. Jiménez later wrote in the YLO newspaper of his shock as he entered the meeting and saw the plans that were laid out. After noticing that a model display of Lincoln Park featured mostly empty spaces in the Latino sections, Jiménez wrote, "all of us started saying 'look at my block, there is no building on it.'" The meeting was packed with community members, and tensions had been running high, when suddenly the room exploded. "At some point in the meeting," Devine-Reed recalled, "I believe it was just after the vote by the Conservation Community Council to support the demolition of the property... [the Young Lords] got up and started throwing chairs." The melee escalated as YLO activists proceeded to break several windows and attempted to damage other parts of the facility. While perhaps dangerously impulsive, these actions definitely made an impression.<sup>17</sup>

As Devine-Reed later jokingly recalled, the Young Lords' actions that evening were "something that all the 'civilized' people were very surprised at." More importantly, she said "it woke folks up," and served as a warning that poor and working class people in Lincoln Park were no longer "going to let somebody else speak for them and plan their lives for them." Devine-Reed credited this event as being a crucial spark that infused much needed explosive energy into the movement. "We had been demonstrating very nicely," up to that point, "and everybody acted very proper because the churches were behind the opposition movement," she remembered. "Now we had these young people, and their whole style of operating was much different than the churches." While this style was perhaps abrasive and shocking to some, Devine-Reed

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<sup>17</sup> "Cha Cha: Guilty or Innocent?," *Pitirre*, no. 7, Summer 1970, 2; Patricia Devine-Reed, interview by José Jiménez, February 10, 2012, Young Lords in Lincoln Park Collection, Grand Valley State University, Grand Rapids, Michigan; (Luis "Tony" Baez, Young Lords Historic Walking Tour, September 23, 2013).

recalled that most church activists “were happy...that there were additional voices that were coming to participate.” More significantly, Devine-Reed asserted, the Young Lords actions that night “set in motion a very important liberation struggle for the community.”<sup>18</sup>

The Young Lords’ actions also got the attention of city leaders and LPCCC board members who scrambled to find a solution to the crisis. One of the YLO’s principal complaints that night was that the urban renewal planning process lacked adequate representation from poor and minority voices. This problem was exacerbated by the resignation of Felix Silva from the LPCCC board. On February 20, 1969, Silva wrote in an open letter (published in the YLO newspaper): “Personally, I too feel that there is not adequate representation of the poor in the Lincoln Park Conservation Community Council.” Noting that he was “the only Latin” on a “board of 15 members,” Silva concluded: “I cannot in conscience, be a part of what my people feel to be a conspiracy against them.” At its subsequent meeting, the LPCCC unanimously passed a resolution asking Mayor Daley to appoint additional members to the board to “give the Council broader ethnic and economic representation,” pledging that “the Council would not meet again until such appointments were made.”<sup>19</sup>

In early 1969 the YLO formalized their partnership with the Concerned Citizens by joining them, along with a diverse mix of organizations, in forming the Poor People’s Coalition (PPC). The PPC also included groups such as Black Active and Determined, a group from the Cabrini-Green housing projects; the Welfare and Working Mothers of

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<sup>18</sup> Patricia Devine-Reed, interview by José Jiménez, February 10, 2012, Young Lords in Lincoln Park Collection, Grand Valley State University, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

<sup>19</sup> Lincoln Park Conservation Community Council Minutes, February 25, 1969, Folder: Minutes, Organizational, Box 1, Lincoln Park Conservation Community Council Collection, DePaul University Archives, Chicago; “Latin Resigns from C.C.C.,” *Y.L.O.*, vol.1, no. 1, March 19, 1969, 10.

Wicker Park; the Latin American Defense Organization; and the Young Patriots Organization, a group of mostly Appalachian migrant youth living in the Uptown neighborhood. Under the banner of the PPC, these groups coordinated their anti-urban renewal activities.<sup>20</sup>

Perhaps the boldest action organized through the PPC was the takeover and nearly week-long occupation of the main administration building on the McCormick Theological Seminary campus (a building that is today part of DePaul University and is slated for demolition), located just a few blocks to the north of the People's Church. Public pressure, along with a threat by the YLO to burn down the McCormick library, finally forced McCormick leaders to negotiate a settlement after five days of occupation. In the end McCormick met almost all of the PPC's demands; they pledged nearly \$700,000 (and institutional support) for the creation of a low-income housing development, a children's center, and a Puerto Rican cultural center.<sup>21</sup>

The occupation began late on Wednesday, May 14th, 1969. Just before midnight a multi-racial group of activists, numbering roughly a dozen, set out from the Concerned Citizens offices and walked three blocks to the McCormick campus. After forcing entry into the main administration building, they secured the doors shut with bicycle chains and padlocks. Dimly lit by a streetlamp, Jiménez stood before the same building more than four decades later. Addressing the spectators gathered at the last stop on a historic walking tour, he spoke of the support that they received from McCormick students and

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<sup>20</sup> "McCormick Take-Over," *Y.L.O.*, vol. 1, no. 1, May 1969, 4; Patricia Devine-Reed, interview by José Jiménez, February 10, 2012, Young Lords in Lincoln Park Collection, Grand Valley State University, Grand Rapids, Michigan; (José Jiménez, Young Lords Historic Walking Tour, Chicago, IL, September 23, 2013); Lilia Fernandez, *Brown in the Windy City*, 191.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*



community members. He made particular note of the contributions of women from the Latino community who brought their children to the occupation after hearing rumors that the police planned to raid the facility. “We didn’t ask them to do that,” Jiménez assured the crowd, “but it also prevented the police from entering the building.” Many of these women, Jiménez explained, stayed for extended periods of time throughout the week to participate in a variety of cultural events hosted inside.<sup>22</sup>

The YLO reported in the May 1969 issue of their newspaper that the PPC chose to target McCormick because of its role in instigating and supporting “an urban renewal program in the community which is designed to remove poor people and replace them with middle and upper income residents.” The PPC could have said the same thing about other institutions—including DePaul University and the Children’s Memorial Hospital, both of which were larger and more powerful than McCormick. As Devine-Reed and Jiménez admitted in a 2012 oral history interview, the decision to occupy McCormick was strategic. PPC activists reasoned that McCormick’s avowed social mission and numerous institutional connections with progressive church communities would make its leaders more susceptible to public pressure and less likely to call upon the police. By forcing McCormick to make concessions, they also hoped to set a precedent that would aid them in future campaigns against larger institutions.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> “McCormick Take-Over,” *Y.L.O.*, vol. 1, no. 1, May 1969, 4.; Patricia Devine-Reed, interview by José Jiménez, February 10, 2012, Young Lords in Lincoln Park Collection, Grand Valley State University, Grand Rapids, Michigan; (José Jiménez, Young Lords Historic Walking Tour, Chicago, IL, September 23, 2013); Lilia Fernandez, *Brown in the Windy City*, 191.

<sup>23</sup> Patricia Devine-Reed, interview by José Jiménez, February 10, 2012, Young Lords in Lincoln Park Collection, Grand Valley State University, Grand Rapids, Michigan; (José Jiménez, Young Lords Historic Walking Tour, Chicago, IL, September 23, 2013); “McCormick Take-Over,” *Y.L.O.*, vol. 1, no. 1, May 1969, 4.

The Concerned Citizens continued mobilizing residents to attend LPCCC meetings over the next couple years. At times these meetings were chaotic affairs, which the addition of opposition members to the LPCCC board did nothing to quell. A meeting on July 30, 1969 was particularly rowdy. It began with a verbal altercation between protestors and police, and ended in a confusing on-stage fracas. LPCCC board member (and opposition leader) Richard Brown and Young Comancheros Organization member Richard Colon were later arrested and charged with “mob action and battery.” They were accused of physically attacking LPCCC chairman (and LPCA board member) Lyle Mayer, a charge they denied. Subsequent meetings continued to draw large crowds, but whether due to the increased presence of police or greater restraint by protestors, there were no further physical altercations.<sup>24</sup>

These same activists were also moving beyond simply making demands of others, and were working to make their own vision of the city a reality. Using funds obtained from the McCormick settlement, the PPC formed the People’s Cooperative Housing Corporation (PCHC), a non-profit controlled by PPC leaders. The PCHC hired a young architect named Howard Alan to draft plans for a cooperative housing facility for low-income residents. Alan’s plans were submitted to the LPCCC in December 1969 as a bid proposal for urban renewal funding.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> (clipping) Urban Affairs Bureau, “Disrupter Given 5 Years’ Probation,” *Lerner Newspapers*, October 1969, Folder: Reactions to the Disruption at the July LPCCC Meeting, Box 1, Lincoln Park Conservation Community Council Collection, DePaul University Archives, Chicago; Diane Taylor, “Confrontation at LPCCC: Sequence of Events,” *LPCA News*, 1969, 3-5, Folder: Reactions to the Disruption at the July LPCCC Meeting, Box 1, Lincoln Park Conservation Community Council Collection, DePaul University Archives, Chicago.

<sup>25</sup> (José Jiménez, Young Lords Historic Walking Tour, Chicago, IL, September 23, 2013); (Howard Alan, Young Lords Historic Walking Tour, Chicago, IL, September 23, 2013); (Patricia Devine-Reed, Young Lords Historic Walking Tour, Chicago, IL, September 23, 2013); Pat Devine, “City Says No to Poor People’s Housing,” *The Lincoln Park Press*, vol. 3, no. 2, February 1970, Box 1, Lincoln Park Press Collection, DePaul University Archives, Chicago.

Perhaps due in part to the strain of two years of sustained pressure, members of the LPCCC overwhelmingly supported this proposal. The LPCCC voted to recommend funding of the PCHC's cooperative low-income housing plan, over three other proposals for the same piece of land, at a January 14, 1970 meeting. Officials at the DUR had the final say, however, and were unwilling to accede to public pressure, even from the PPC's wealthy new benefactors. When the DUR signaled in early February that it would overrule the LPCCC's recommendation, McCormick president Arthur McKay met with Lewis Hill, Commissioner of Urban Renewal, in an unsuccessful bid to convince him to support the PCHC's proposal. At a raucous public meeting on February 11, 1970, the DUR Board of Urban Renewal finalized their decision to reject the cooperative housing proposal in favor of a for-profit development.<sup>26</sup>

While this defeat did not the end their movement, it certainly deflated the hopes of PPC activists. It also portended the continued losses the movement would face. Within a year the YLO would be severely crippled by state repression. Coupled with the continued displacement of working class people in Lincoln Park, this grassroots movement could not survive.

### **Requiem for the People's Church**

Reverend Matthew Johnson raised the megaphone to his mouth as organizers of the historical walking tour passed out candles. Johnson began by testifying to the character and conviction of his slain friends Bruce and Eugenia: "When he met you, he'd look you in the eye and he'd say, 'where you do place yourself in the world?' Now

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<sup>26</sup> (Patricia Devine-Reed, Young Lords Historic Walking Tour, Chicago, IL, September 23, 2013); Pat Devine, "City Says No to Poor People's Housing," *The Lincoln Park Press*, vol. 3, no. 2, February 1970, Box 1, Lincoln Park Press Collection, DePaul University Archives, Chicago.

he placed himself with the poor and the oppressed, because he was convinced that God had a preference for the poor and the oppressed.” YLO leaders had said as much more than four decades earlier, writing in the YLO newspaper that “Bruce and Eugenia were friends and partners in the struggle...in the process of becoming revolutionaries. They had dedicated themselves to the struggles of the poor, especially poor Latins.”<sup>27</sup>

“The day that Bruce and Genie’s bodies were found,” Matthew Johnson continued, “he was supposed to be down at the Daley Center at court, on some of the charges that were being made against the health care center and daycare center.” City building inspectors had earlier visited the People’s Church facilities and inspected the basement space that housed its community daycare program. Bruce Johnson and YLO leaders were threatened with fines and ordered to complete major renovations to bring the space up to code. The YLO responded in its newspaper, writing: “We were violations to the system the day we were born. The idea of poor people running and benefiting by their own day care center is a violation of city purpose and policy.” A year later the city Board of Health attempted to shut down the YLO’s free community health clinic. YLO Minister of Health Alberto Chavira charged in the YLO newspaper: “This attempt to close down our health program is another example of how the fascist Daley machine responds to any program which truly serves and educates the people.”<sup>28</sup>

The deaths of Bruce and Eugenia Johnson in September 1969 devastated church members and YLO activists. Still they continued their work both inside and

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<sup>27</sup> (Matthew Johnson, Young Lords Historic Walking Tour, September 23, 2013); “You Can’t Kill a Revolution,” *Y.L.O.*, no. 4, Fall, 1969, 3.

<sup>28</sup> (Matthew Johnson, Young Lords Historic Walking Tour, September 23, 2013); “You Can’t Kill a Revolution,” *Y.L.O.*, no. 4, Fall, 1969, 3; “Revolutionaries Serve the People: Day Care Center,” *Y.L.O.*, no. 4, Fall, 1969, 4; Alberto Chavira, “City Attacks Our Health Center,” *Pitirre*, no. 7, Summer 1970, 4.

outside of the church. They faced another crisis, however, at the end of the next year when Jiménez and a number of YLO leaders went “underground” to avoid continued police repression. Jiménez was certainly no stranger to police harassment. Yet by late 1970 he was facing an extended prison sentence that had resulted from charges that he had stolen lumber from a Lincoln Park urban renewal site (to complete renovations to the church basement). Over the next two years Jiménez was joined by a number of other YLO leaders in clandestine organizing. Those leaders who remained in Lincoln Park soon found that they lacked the resources to effectively mobilize the movement’s rapidly dwindling base.<sup>29</sup>

By early 1971 the Young Lords movement was no longer a major force in Lincoln Park. Nevertheless, a number of activists involved with the YLO and the People’s Church’s continued their service. “The daycare center continued for a while, the pantry continued for a while, and the feedings continued for a while,” Matthew Johnson explained, as people held their lit candles. The displacement of poor and working class residents in Lincoln Park also continued, undermining the need for these programs in Lincoln Park. Johnson concluded:

The covenant that the cadre [People’s Church activists] had made with the Young Lords was to try to hold the church open and available for as long as possible. And they hung in there for four years. Early in 1973, they concluded that someday there will be a People’s Church, somewhere, but it wasn’t going to happen on this corner. And so they decided to sell the building... and they decided that it was time to die.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Lilia Fernandez, *Brown in the Windy City*, 201; “Cha Cha Busted: Charged With Burglary,” *The Black Panther*, July 26, 1969, 19; Les Bridges, “Cha Cha Jimenez: The Gang Leader on the Lam is Now the Politician on the Stump,” *The Reader*, vol. 4, no. 18, February 7, 1975; Omar López, interview by Michael Gonzales, April 12, 2013; Luis “Tony” Baez, interview by Michael Gonzales, April 2, 2013; Omar López, interview by José Jiménez, February 2, 2012, Young Lords in Lincoln Park Collection, Grand Valley State University, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

<sup>30</sup> (Matthew Johnson, Young Lords Historic Walking Tour, September 23, 2013).