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In the Shadows of New York

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**Student social work—a letter from Nancy Merchant . . .**

**In the shadows of New York**

HERE I AM IN NEW YORK CITY where I’m spending the summer at St. Augustine’s Chapel in the lower east side. Two blocks down the street is Chinatown and then the Bowery, the avenue where men stumble along and sleep in doorways.

I’m working with seven other college students directing a playschool, Bible school and working with the clubs of the St. Augustine parish. Only a mile away is Wall Street and Trinity Episcopal Church. St. Augustine is one of the eight chapels of Trinity.

Everyday I see rows of tenement houses, a maze of fire-escapes running down the front of each building and garbage cans hugging the front walls. The area is a melting pot for the poorest people of New York, who are predominately of Negro or Spanish origin.

Down the street is St. Christopher’s Chapel where I live. Everyday the eight-block walk up Henry Street to St. Augustine’s is a new experience. The street is a play-yard, and I’ve seen the smallest children express their artistic urge—carving in the tar with knives.

Over 150 of the neighborhood children have registered for playschool. About 75 show up. Every morning except Tuesday is filled with playground activity. Tuesday is special trip day when we take a subway to the beach, the Museum of Natural History, Central Park or the Bronx Zoo.

**Home visits**

Afternoons, we summer staffers call at the apartment-homes of the children who come to the playschool. As soon as we say we’re from St. Augustine’s the door is opened wide.

Once I called on a Spanish family and since I don’t speak Spanish and the woman didn’t know English, we carried on a sign-language conversation!

We spend some evenings at open-houses for various age groups. These open-houses are held in the basement of the chapel where the crowd gathers for ping-pong, pool, dancing or a skit on the stage.

One open house with the teen-agers was quite an experience. I was at St. Christopher’s where the dances are on the fenced-in-roof. Scanning the dance floor, I noticed huddles of boys wearing jackets with “Little
Gents,” “Centurians,” and “Noble Counts”, church club names, scrolled across their backs. One girl asked, “Say, Jim what’s happening?” “Dig, baby, it’s like this. The athletic director booted Phillip out after finding him wandering around the chapel a little high from beer so’s we told Joe, ‘If you kick him out we go with him.’ He turned yella and let him stay, but we’re not taking that treatment from him or nobody, ya’ hear? And rumble, clash, fight whatever you name it, we’re going to do it. Los Bemos.”

The Spanish-speaking fellows and the negro boys did have a fight that night, but not in front of the chapel, because Father Daveys pushed the gang leader into the chapel for a cooling off period. For a while the friction was gone, but the fight wasn’t prevented. No weapons were used in the fight on Market Street... just rocks.

Slave galleries

St. Augustine’s church buildings date back to 1824. Old slave galleries still remain at the rear of the chapel and the story is told that when Boss Tweed, hoodlum of the 1900’s, tried to escape an indictment he attended his mother’s funeral by hiding in the slave galleries.

St. Augustine’s is a home to these people and the priests are true friends. The priests may be asked to “spare a nickel for a cup of coffee”; to help a man believe in God or to tell a fellow how he can get off dope.

The heart of the mission program is the altar and the path to the altar includes material and social ministry as well as the spiritual.

With all day Wednesday off, I can meet some Iowa State friends who are working in New York and New Jersey. We’ve seen some stage plays, taken a trip to the top of the Empire State Building, visited the U. N. and have seen the Rockettes at Radio City Music Hall. And I took the five cent ferry out to see the Statue of Liberty.

See you soon,
NANCY MERCHANT