

Neighbor Profiles – a series of interview-based stories about members of the PPUABA
By Patti Veconi

Jen Abrams, Park Place resident
March, 2023



I sent Jen Abrams a quick text after we met, thanking her for speaking with me and when she replied, I realized my phone had autocorrected the word “speaking” to “soaking” (insert eye-rolling emoji here). I was struck by two things: 1) That she did not mention this little gaffe was confirmation of the grace this woman extends with so much generosity toward others, and 2) My phone got it right; I did soak with her. She filled our time with candid, eloquent wisdom and shared with me as though we were old friends with years of stories between us. I’ve known Jen for nearly as long as she’s lived in the neighborhood – though I can’t remember exactly when we first met. At some point I learned she was doing a performance in her house – an immersive theatre piece she had written for herself and another woman actor when she was pregnant about eleven years ago. The audience was squeezed into her kitchen, between radiators, behind the island, some standing, a few in chairs, and it was... so good. Provocative, intimate, tender, funny – I still remember lines from that play – one of those moments when art holds up a mirror and challenges us.

It occurred to me that Jen would be a good candidate for our Neighborhood Profiles series several months ago when I got one of her emails. (If you are one of the lucky people – and there are a LOT of us – who get her emails, you already know what I mean.) This one came on June 22 with the subject line: *Yes, this primary is important.* Jen is the most politically aware person I know. Judicial Delegates, District Leaders (what do they do, anyway?), she does the homework – and with as much skill as any seasoned journalist – then she shares it. This impressively disciplined and comprehensive research is truly a service and the fact that she does it has fascinated me for years. So although I didn’t know Jen well, I had art and politics as a launch for our conversation and that’s where we began, with a question about the intersection of the two...

“They have been intersecting a lot more in the last ten years than they used to. I think, before I became a parent, my privilege allowed me to have an intellectual relationship with my politics... and it was very passionate, but I really experienced so much privilege, my politics didn’t get to the heart level that allowed them to come out in my art. However, they came out in the way that I made my art, which was at WOW Café Theatre, an all-women-and-trans collectively run theatre space. It’s a completely horizontal organization... grounded in the history of queer collectivism.” (At this point, the theatre educator in me began tripping over herself to grok what I was learning.) *“There is a system of prestige for artists that includes grants and certain kinds of venues that you get produced and curated into and that’s the currency of the art world.”* (Here I made a little, audible sound – she was again holding up that mirror – ouch.) *“WOW functions without that currency and also without money because we work on a favor exchange system.”* Jen described exactly how someone’s work comes to be performed in the space, giving a couple of examples and summarizing with, *“That’s our currency: instead of prestige we have respect and instead of cash, we have labor.”* The term “solidarity economy” was new to me and we spoke about the various ways this kind of system can work. Many of us already participate in Prospect Heights’ Buy Nothing program and other barter or exchange systems exist all over. A way that they don’t work, however, is when there is an imbalance in the give and take necessary. In Jen’s time at WOW Café Theatre, participants sometimes needed to be encouraged to ask and receive, as well as give. *“I worked a lot to help people make it a little closer to barter because when you’re working in a woman and trans-inclusive space – all of us who are not cis-males – we have been socialized to give and not to ask for what we need. Being able to identify your needs and be clear and explicit about them, that’s not something*

we're socialized to do, so just on that level it's a very radical space." Sometimes my internal voice says "aha" when it should say "duh" like when Jen articulated the essential structures of our economic system. *"Currency simplifies things in a lot of ways, but it also really dismantles our skills around relationships because currency equalizes every exchange... it takes our relationships out of the transactions and that's how I can walk into the bagel shop and be rude to the salesperson... not that I am!"*

Jen no longer works with WOW, *"[It] was my child until I had a child. It's still very active and viable, but parenting took more than I could give and still be at WOW."* But she is still very committed to solidarity economies. Her work goes back as well to an organization she co-founded in 2009 called Our Goods, which was a response to the 2008 market collapse when artists, *"who subsist on the tax breaks and excesses of the capitalist machine,"* found their revenue stream interrupted. Our Goods offered artists a way to do what WOW was already doing, making art without using any money at all. *"It was a platform for the barter of skills, spaces and objects in the artist community. Anyone who identified as a creative producer was welcome in that space."* She did that work for many years as she transitioned into being a parent, which for a time supplanted the energy and heart Jen had been giving to art making.

"I don't think it's problematic to say in this space that my child, who is quite proud of her disabled identity, is autistic." Learning about her child's neurotype, and how to navigate the way she was perceived when social situations didn't come easily for her. It took all the attention and energy Jen had. Our conversation about her journey as a parent continued to circle back to capitalism, and I can appreciate how it is impossible not to recognize that the way we move through the world is completely dependent upon how we fit into the societal roles and expectations of everything we do. *"The educational system we have, and the educational expectations we have of children, are tuned to being successful in capitalism. The [functional] definition of disability is: does not function well independently in capitalism. I mean what does disability mean? It's a category we created to define the people who we think clear a threshold of being deserving of help and even more pointedly the people who are deserving of not being required to destroy themselves in the way capitalism requires us to be. Before capitalism, people were simply able to do things or not able to do things. Disability got created as a category when we began to have these expectations of how people would function in capitalism and then needed to define the people who couldn't as less than."* Let that land, readers... For further reading on this subject, Jen recommends "Nobody's Normal" by Richard Grinker. <https://m.communitybookstore.net/book/9781324020134>

"I spent a lot of time as a parent absorbing judgment from other people of my kid – and by extension me." The kind of invisible disability her daughter has, and the concomitant societal responses to it, are now the focus of where Jen's art often takes her. *"I'm making a lot of work right now about parenting a disabled child and visible vs invisible disabilities."* At a performance of Jen's about sensory processing differences, some of her daughter's Hebrew teachers sat in the audience and later told Jen that, in spite of her daughter having a documented diagnosis with them, they hadn't understood what a sensory processing disorder feels like before watching the performance. (Again, my inner theatre educator was geeking out and I found myself wishing – really longingly – that I had known about this work of Jen's when I used to teach a unit on Applied Theatre.) One piece currently in Jen's repertory is used to facilitate restorative justice circles around neurodiversity.

Knowing that the very nature of theatre means that it exists in the ephemeral as live performance art didn't keep me from asking if her work is at all available to share. As it turns out, the pandemic produced a lot of theatre that had to be performed in a format that separated artist from audience, with the result that we now have many video recordings that otherwise we wouldn't. Lucky us! You can see Jen's performance of her one-woman short play, *Tiny Hurricane*, made during the pandemic here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JMKtj6RNDI0>

While parenting a child with a disability is one focus of Jen's performance work today, *"The other section I'm doing right now is with femme invisibility."* We were conducting this conversation on Zoom because Jen spends her days in East Harlem, so picture her making a sweeping gesture that encircles her screen face as she says, *"I look like this, which means I don't get read as queer."* (By "this" you should imagine a conventionally attractive woman with long, upswept hair wearing light makeup and jewelry.) *"If I'm with whoever my [visibly queer] partner is, or in a completely queer space, I can get read as queer, but otherwise, I'm fully invisible. Aaaand, right now, the meaning of the word femme, which originated in the context of butch/femme and was more of a Boomer term because it was a response to the construction of gender we had then... [has changed.]"* As she explained it, Millennials, and particularly Gen Zs, have a completely different relationship to gender than we had, and they're trying to find words to describe the gender identity spectrum. In doing this, femme and masc is where they have landed. On the masculine end of this spectrum, the word masc does not equal butch, (which is an identity and a way of being in the world), but the opposite, femme, has basically begun to supplant its previous meaning, which was very specific to the queer community before. *"It's really interesting to me the way male privilege is playing out in the queer community; that the butches got to keep their word, while the femmes – we had to give up our word."* Whoa, that's something! I asked about how the intergenerational conversations she's having in response to this are going. *"That's what I'm trying to do in my work, but it's very delicate, because to these young queers, gender binaries are imprisoning and have even been traumatic."* She respects – like so very much does she respect – what it has taken for people to come to the place where they are now deconstructing gender, and yet, there is an ahistoricism to it. *"So, it's very delicate to say, I have all of the love in the world for what you are asserting in the land of gender. You are the revolution and I support it completely. And please understand that there is an impact to those of us who laid the ground for you to be able to do this when you take our word."* I love all the compassion and honesty within that quote. We chatted a good while more about how the queer community has changed since we were young adults and the play that Jen was about to produce before Covid struck and where that project is now. But after a while I wanted to return to those emails and how they came to be.

False modesty should always be avoided, but I believed Jen when she said, *"I feel so complicated about that email list – it's such a responsibility – I mean, people have told me they take that email into the voting booth, and I find that terrifying."* Well... yes... I maybe have done that. But I reminded her that she once told me she did it for herself anyway. *"Yes, I do it for myself and I share my research – that's what I do."* So how did this get started? Good question and great story. I'll try to do it justice with the remaining space I have: Jen reached out to the Obama campaign asking for volunteer opportunities back in early 2007, but learned they weren't organizing in New York. (It wasn't a battleground state.) When it was taking weeks for them to get back to her, she decided to act on her own. She laughed at herself as she said, *"I've always been a little hashtag-extra in so many ways... so I thought, I know how to register voters. I can find*

an organization in Philly that needs people to do voter reg and I can bring people down there!" She found fellow volunteers by going down into subway stations, *"And people were so excited to have the chance to volunteer."* Every person she met got the promise, *"You will hear back from me tonight."* When she had collected her first sixty names, Jen organized a carpool ride for each of them to go down to Philly on a Saturday in February of that year. *"I hadn't found an organization down there yet, but I figured, BLEEP it, we'll just stand on the street. Anybody can register a voter."* (Jen interrupted her story to insist that she wouldn't do it the same way again because she understands movement organization differently now. But really, the way she did do it will be so much better in the movie version of this story.) Okay, so two days before they were set to leave, she finally got a phone call back from an Obama staffer. *"Would you like to come and register voters this weekend in Philly? And I said, yes, would you like me to bring sixty people with me?"* Eventually, Jen personally organized over ONE THOUSAND PEOPLE to carpool and take multiple-connection public transportation routes on no fewer than eight different trips to Philadelphia. *"Friends told friends, and everybody wanted to help."* A perfect cap to this story is that Jen actually got to go to one of the inaugural balls as a result of her work. *"I have a bunch of pictures with Beyonce in the background and I got to meet Michelle Obama. It was very thrilling."* Having a twenty-second audience with the First Lady wasn't an opportunity Jen was going to waste. *"She was very sweet, and it was before Marriage Equality. I shook her hand and said: Ma'am, my partner and I are trying to have a baby and that baby is going to need us to be married when they're born. Can you help us out with that?"* She did. Another thing that Jen remembers clearly is that she said, *"When you have that baby, bring them around to the White House."* She laughed as she recalled, *"I mean, there was Michelle Obama using the singular they!"*

Shortly after the 2008 election there was a referendum in New York City, but Jen thought the information about it was hard to find. She did the work of researching and finding out about it and then wanted to share that research with what she still calls her Obama list. *"I realized that I had this huge, important organizing tool in this list and what was I going to do with it? So, I went hyper-local. The locus of that tool was the trust relationship with me, personally. That's why I don't do that email as a blog. To get the email, you have to have some relationship to me – you know me and have decided that because you know me, you trust me, or you know someone who knows me. I don't want strangers on that list. You need to have a reason to think what I say is valuable, not because I have a brand, but because there's a relationship."* I met Jen after 2008 and I'm guessing that I got added to the list after a conversation we had at some point about an election. If you want to be on Jen's email list, you can sign up here:

<https://jenabrams.us7.list-manage.com/subscribe?u=841a498830ebdb4a2b0482fc8&id=f17ba35848>

There is so much more to share about this fascinating, eloquent, warm, super strong woman/neighbor/artist/parent/activist/human, but you know... editors, deadlines... If my interview with Jen were a movie pitch, I hope the producers would recognize that it deserves to be a mini-series. I'm so very grateful for our visit and that I could bring this much of her story to you.

If you have a PPUABA neighbor you would like to nominate for our Neighbor Profiles series, please send your suggestion to ppuaba.webmaster@gmail.com.