

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

**Peter Ketchum, Park Place resident**  
September, 2022



Few neighbors within our four-block catchment area can be described as local legends, but I believe Peter Ketchum is one of them. A resident of Park Place for fifty-four years this month, (and with continuous roots on that strip of island to the north of us since before it was called New York), Peter and his wife, Robin (another local legend – but for another story), had never set foot in Brooklyn when they first ventured over to go house shopping for a friend moving east from CA. The friend ended up in Vermont, but Peter and Robin saw this as a better choice than Scarsdale for their growing family, so with the help of Peter’s company, *“Cuz we had, like, thirteen dollars in the bank,”* they bought their house. *“And our family thought it was a terrible decision – I mean, our parents were beside themselves...just beside themselves.”* Peter has a lot of anecdotes about the way things were on the block at that time, but something I had never heard before was his description of *“the mother-in-law route – where you would get your parents to go up Flatbush and around Grand Army and then down*

*Vanderbilt so they wouldn't see some of the...well...anything that was past Prospect Place was just...awful.*" In spite of the economic challenges that made many areas of Brooklyn less safe in those days. Peter is quick to remember it fondly. *"From the very beginning, everybody who was here – and almost everyone was from the Caribbean – couldn't have been nicer."* Peter became especially close to their next door neighbor, Mr. Oliver, who he described as *"a gem, he was like a surrogate grandfather to our kids, no question about it."*

Peter's memories of those early days here reflected, of course, not only this place, but the time as well: the end of the 60s. *"I cut loose eventually, but in those first months here I wouldn't have thought to go out even to buy the Sunday paper without first putting on a tie and coat. And then it looked a little ridiculous here."* He started to laugh at this. *"It really looked ridiculous...and Robin stopped wearing gloves, too."* But he became thoughtful again as he said, *"We changed, there's no question about it...radically. But then, the country was changing too, and those of us who were a little bit more on the Bohemian side were freed, in a way."* He toggled between memories of what was not so great, *"The crack epidemic. Were you here when all the car windows were smashed?"* (no, not yet), and happier ones – which he became much more animated with: *"The block parties were 100% better because you had all that ethnic food! All the tables would be set up outside and so many people – thirty, forty houses – and the parties around the holidays that we would be invited to – well – I never felt so white in my life as I did around all that sheer joy with the dancing and singing and clapping – it was just a joyous group of people."*

I wish there was space to write more about Peter as a neighbor (Those marvelous salons he and Robin hosted in the 90s!) and the pleasure of seeing him sitting on the sunny side of the street, visited by neighbors who share his appreciation for a good stoop chat, but I'm going to segue here to Peter as an artist. Note: I do this hoping you will forgive me for skipping his successful early career with Harcourt Brace Jovanovich – which was also a very interesting part of our chat, but I'm a culture vulture and want to get to the good stuff.

With his upcoming show, "Proof of Everything and Nothing at All," opening September 17<sup>th</sup> at FiveMyles/Plus Gallery (558 St. Johns Place), Peter's lifelong work challenging both personal and societal attitudes is richly explored. *"I knew from a very young age I was an artist – I was always drawing. Of course, you were geared to do something a little more serious...but I always knew."* While at boarding school he began doing scenery for the plays and after someone from a professional theatre company came to a show, he found himself doing scene work for them. *"Boy I learned a lot that summer!"* We shared a laugh over that, as I was also a young teenager who spent summers working with a local playhouse and remember well the shock of being around that unfiltered adult world. *"Who knew?"* he exclaimed. Although Peter got into the Rhode Island School of Design *"I did that on my own; the head master wouldn't help me because it wasn't considered appropriate for us"* he instead chose Colby where he found a mentor

in Gladys Forde, an African American professor on a two-year leave from Fisk University to teach up at Colby. *“Gladys and I took to each other instantly.”*

The influence Dr. Forde had on Peter and how the friendship and education she gave him would shape his work cannot be overstated, but a visit to his website (<https://www.peterjetchum.com/>) is a good starting point for understanding and appreciating where that work has landed. *“The idea that interests me most is the longevity of intolerance.”* And on another page he writes, *“My work looks at the impermanence of individuals and the long afterlife of their prejudices and foibles.”* I love those quotes and told Peter so. *“The new stuff is still all about that.”* He reminisced on how, in spite of the big age difference – not to mention regional and cultural differences between them – he and Gladys hit it off. *“I mean, we hung around a lot...and she talked me into becoming the first white student at Fisk University.”* Wait, what?! *“Oh, I blithely was going to go until we got a call from the President’s office that August telling me I couldn’t because of all the unrest, sit-ins, and people being killed...I was so WASPy, I had no idea why a nice white boy could be in any kind of danger.”* In spite of that missed opportunity, the time they had together was well spent. *“Gladys had family in New York and was involved with a lot of influential people...just about every big name of Black people in literature and such in Manhattan at the time, so I met a lot of fascinating people.”* Some of their excursions into New York left another kind of impression on Peter as well – like the time they were denied a table at The Russian Tea Room in spite of seeing the dining room nearly empty. *“Gladys introduced me to a lot, the works of writers like Langston Hughes and such – but most importantly, she introduced me to people beyond my experience at the time – and it was that milieu that totally changed my outlook on life and goosed me into realizing there’s a lot to be done and a much wider world than the one I was living in at the time.”* They stayed in touch until her death at 95 a few years ago. Peter paused and then said, *“Anyway, she was a lot of fun but also really set me on a course that led to sentences like that [one I quoted from his website].”*

Which brings us back to the show opening this weekend. *“It’s really thanks to Robin. She was out walking [one day a few years ago] and saw a gallery on Franklin.”* Even back in 2018, when they first started to discuss a show with the gallery owner, it was so booked that the first slot available was 2024. *“And I said well if I live long enough, sure, I’ll sign a contract for that!”* Fortunately, the date got moved up before Covid hit so it has timed out perfectly for this profile series and all of us happy to be back enjoying art and culture in person. Peter’s show is in the “Plus” space at **FiveMyles/Plus Gallery, 558 St. Johns Place** in Crown Heights with an opening reception this Saturday, September 17 from 5:30-8:00. The show runs Thursdays through Saturdays (1:00-6:00) through October 16.

---

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](mailto:ppuaba.webmaster@gmail.com).