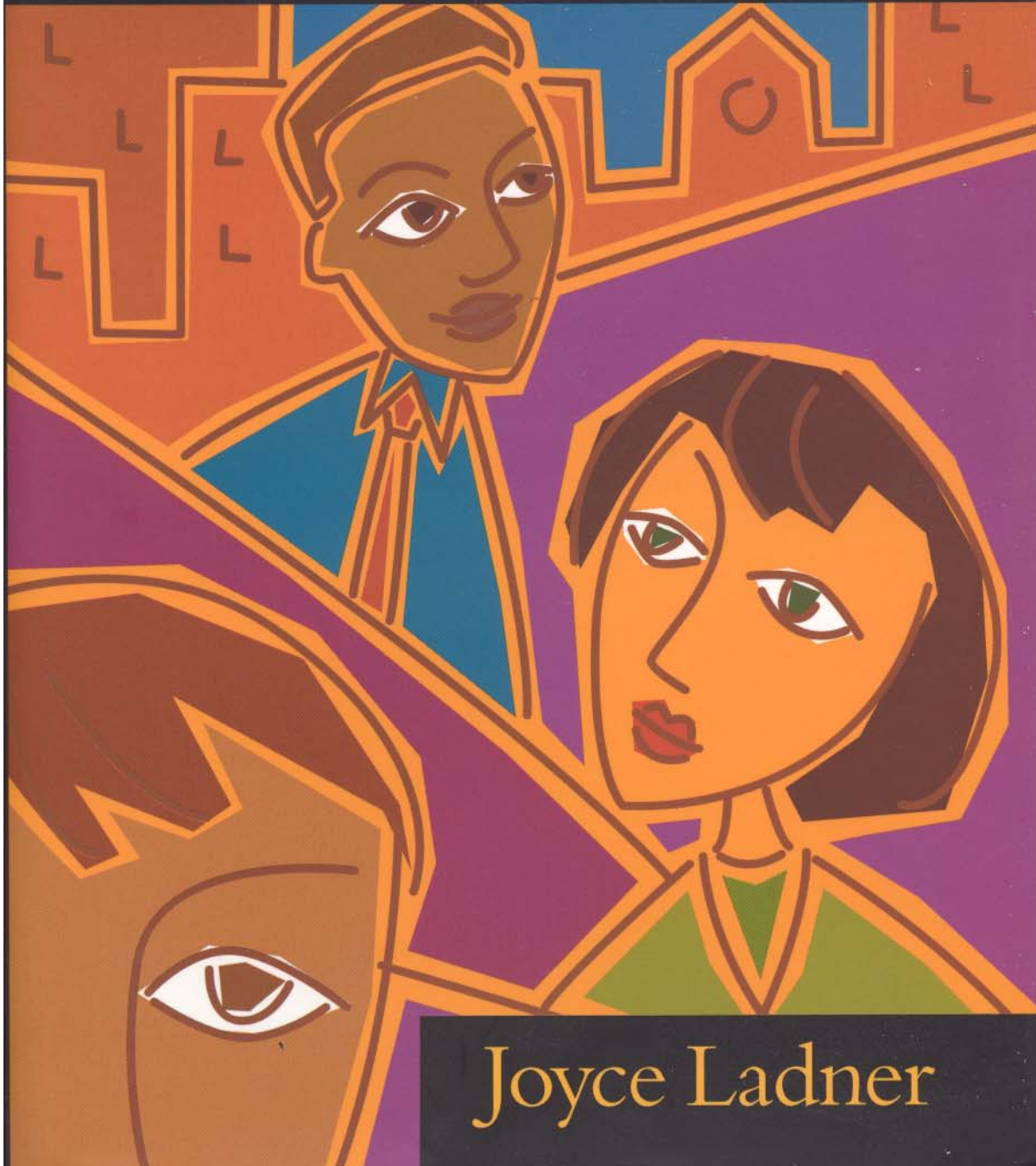


THE NEW URBAN LEADERS



Joyce Ladner

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James Capraro

James Capraro, one of the few whites in this study, is a native Chicagoan whose organization, the Greater Southwest Development Corporation, promotes economic development on Chicago's West Side.' The impetus for Capraro's social change work came early in his life:

There's a chapter in a book by Studs Turkel titled "The Park" which was an interview Turkel wrote based on a day in my life when I was sixteen years old. That after noon, Martin Luther King Jr. was marching through Marquette Park [in Chicago] and met with a horrific response from white extremists. I grew up a block and a half from Market Park and ended up in the park that day. I was not very politically aware. I had been walking around when I saw a bunch of police officers in the neighborhood, and they were all going to the park because something was happening there. I chased the police officers as a kid might chase a fire truck or an ambulance, just to see what was going on. I was kind of sorry I saw what was going on-but not really. I think I was happy I saw what was going on. That day was just so unsettling and downright ugly that it made me, as a sixteen-year-old person, become interested in something more than the White Sox and girls, which was about the total of my interest at the time. I decided that somebody had to think about neighborhood change and neighborhood deterioration and be on the side of right as opposed to the side of wrong. I saw a lot of people on the side of wrong that day.

What Capraro witnessed was Martin Luther King's early incursion into northern civil rights activity. Before King's campaigns in Chicago and Cicero, Illinois, the major protest demonstrations had been in the Deep South.

King led a demonstration through the neighborhood for open housing-this was an all-white neighborhood at the time. It was a white working-class neighborhood where lots of folks worked in factories or drove buses or worked for the postal service. They were predominantly bluecollar. He was met with violent resistance. I remember him walking down Sixty-Seventh Street with a number of protestors, and people were throwing bricks and bottles. I remember people identifying the cars of the people who were with him and setting them on fire. I remember an African American couple was surrounded by a jeering mob because they were driving through the neighborhood and got stopped at a stoplight at Sixty-Seventh and California Avenue. They were rocking the car, and a young girl jumped up on the hood and started kicking at the windshield. The people inside were totally terrorized.

That's what happened that day. At first, I couldn't sleep. I thought, gee, everything the nuns taught me in grade school is wrong. This isn't the greatest country in the world, and not everybody can grow up to be president. It just kind of shook the very foundation of what I thought being American was about. I kind of carried that with me. I was unsettled, I was confused, and I was sixteen and a junior in high school-actually the summer between my sophomore and junior years. Two years later I graduated and I ended up in night school, working in a factory during the day and going to college at night-and became an antiwar organizer.

Capraro's career as an organizer was defined by experiences that challenged his belief system. Capraro was attempting to reconcile the dissonance between Roman Catholic teachings on racial equality and the violence of the demonstrators. The essential issue Capraro wrestled with was the question of who would stand up on the side of right.