

'A PERFECT COMBINATION OF CHUTZPAH AND SOUL'

By Steven Waldman

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EDGAR CAHN HAS TOTALLY ABSORBED himself in the letter he's reading aloud to his bedridden wife, Jean Camper Cahn, in a Miami hospital room. The letter is from Richard Boone, an architect of Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty, and it pays tribute to Jean for working, with Edgar, to provide legal help for hundreds of thousands of the poor.

Jean is concentrating on a more formidable task. Her huge, watery eyes fix on a pink plastic cup of hot water she wants to lift from her dinner tray.

"I guess I first heard about you and Edgar when you and Edgar dreamed up the Legal Services program," Boone's letter reads. It is December 1990, and Jean has been receiving dozens of tributes like this, tributes that flash the couple's accomplishments before her eyes. This week, there was a D.C. Council resolution citing such highlights as Jean arguing Adam Clayton Powell's case before the Supreme Court and the Cahns helping to force Washington TV stations to hire black anchors, reporters and producers. A week earlier, she heard from retired Supreme Court justice Lewis Powell, a conservative southerner, who said simply, "I have known few people in my long life whom I admire as much as I do you."

Jean grasps the cup with her right hand. She lost use of her left months earlier when the cancer that started in her left breast spread to her shoulder and back, seriously compressing the nerves to her arm.

Edgar reads on. "Next in my memory is Antioch and the new idea of legal education." Jean and Edgar founded Antioch School of Law in Washington, which trained law students by having them provide real legal help to low-income clients.

Jean's cup is now halfway between the tray and her lips. The closer it gets to her mouth, the more her hand shakes, like two magnets with the same charge being forced together. Around her are flowers and a menagerie of stuffed animals, her favorites being an interracial gorilla couple -- one with black fur, the other tan, each with a gold front tooth.

Finally, cup and lips meet. Jean takes a sip and returns the water to the tray, exhausted.

Edgar nears the end of the letter, which hails Jean's "tenacity" through the years and concludes, "I know of no one . . . who has made bigger contributions to building a better society."

"Isn't that a lovely letter?" Edgar asks.

Jean Cahn -- so often described as flamboyant, angry, even violent during the battles of her lifetime -- takes an extra breath, then responds in the voice of a very shy child. "Yes, that was a lovely letter."

JEAN AND EDGAR CAHN ALWAYS LIVED WITH THE impatience of people who thought they might die soon. There was so much they were expected to accomplish, so much they needed to change. So it really should come as no surprise that, faced with a death, they found comfort in their resumes. Looking at the coarse measure Number of People Helped, it's obvious they had greater success than most people far more famous. Boone's letter did not even mention the Cahns' latest, and possibly most significant, effort: an ambitious plan to help the elderly and poor through the bartering of volunteer services. They were, in short, innovators -- as rare in political activism as in the sciences or arts. The story of how they innovated, what they departed from, tells much about the recent history of America's efforts to help the poor.

But the Cahns were an experiment within an experiment as well. A marriage between a white Jewish man and a black woman in 1957 was, as Edgar recently put it, "supreme madness and wisdom." The warnings came early: They could not marry in Jean's home town of Baltimore, not because interracial marriage was taboo, but because it was illegal. By joining together, they were committing themselves to a life of fighting -- for abstract ideas and for acceptance by their own families.

Fighting transforms fighters. The emotions and values that fuel a life of battling for causes can burden as well as uplift. It wasn't until confronted with death that Jean and Edgar fully understood the complicated psychology of the crusade. 'PART OF MY MAKEUP GOT TO BE ANGER'

"I am so upset about my son marrying your daughter," Lenore Cahn told Florine Camper, just minutes after 20-year-old Edgar Cahn married 21-year-old Jean Camper on March 22, 1957, "because it will keep him from getting appointed to the Supreme Court." Camper felt wounded. "Well," she remembers responding, "I'm afraid that marrying your son will keep Jean off the Supreme Court."

Lenore Cahn doesn't recall the incident. But clearly, both the Campers and the Cahns had expectations.

Jean's father, John Emory Toussaint Camper, was one of the most formidable men in black Baltimore. Camper ran his general medical practice for 57 years, counting as his friends people such as Thurgood Marshall, W.E.B. Du Bois, Charles Houston and Jean's godfather, Paul Robeson. When NAACP lawyers ran out of money to file the appeal for *Brown v. Board of Education*, they turned to Camper's network of doctors, some of the only blacks who had access to money. At a time when integration was won block by block, Camper was almost continuously on a picket line, often accompanied by his daughter Jean. There was Ford theater, which wouldn't hire black employees or let blacks view shows; the Calvert Bank (now the Maryland National Bank), which wouldn't hire black tellers or deposit a black's checks; the Yellow Taxicab company, which, the Campers believed, wouldn't pick up blacks. On a few occasions, Camper got together a group of men for mixed doubles -- black and white -- at the Druid Hill Park tennis courts. The game ended not when one team won three sets, but when the police arrested the players.

But J.E.T. Camper would not allow his daughter to be arrested. "All the civil rights leaders said that I was the first line, and you didn't send your first line in to be locked up and roughed up," Jean recalled last September. "If I was going to jail, I was going to jail for something really good." The sense of obligation was immense. "I was being given an education, a lot more than most of my people would ever see, {and} I was expected to do something for them."

Jean drew an almost aristocratic sense of honor from her father's heritage, which he traced to freed blacks in the 1600s. But she heard much about the violent side of black history from her mother's family. Her grandmother Idella Hall told stories about life in Georgia after the Civil War, such as the time Idella's brother-in-law had to be smuggled out of the state sewn into a mattress because he had shot a white sharecropper who tried to steal a portion of his crop. She also heard her parents recount their belief that racism had left her stepbrother John Jr. permanently disabled. The boy had developed a mastoid ear infection and Dr. Camper had brought him to Johns Hopkins Hospital, which refused for a few key nights to admit him. The infection had spread, and doctors had to cut out part of John Jr.'s brain, leaving him retarded. "They treated him like a monkey," Florine Camper says.

In 1950, a prominent black clergyman, the Rev. Howard Thurman, informed the Emma Willard School for Girls, a prestigious New York State prep school, that he would no longer speak at their assemblies until he saw a black girl's face in the audience. The school challenged him to find one, and he turned to a black physician friend who in turn recommended Jean. Emma Willard gave her a battery of academic tests, but the school's principal fear -- that she might not be able to "mix" -- was not assuaged until she was discovered helping some white girls fix their hair for a school play. In later years, when people met Jean expecting to find a rowdy black militant, they instead found a woman with regal bearing who had literally learned to walk up stairs carrying a book on her head.

But Emma Willard also brought her some of her first visceral experiences with racism. A few girls complained that they didn't want to have a room next to hers, and one told her "the only thing I was good enough for was for my mother to be able to wash the floors of her house." Jean Cahn processed the affronts through the special prism of Baltimore's black elite. "They saw me as a low-life because of my color, and I saw them as low-lives because of their manners," she said. "I wasn't used to people doing things to me. I was Daddy's little girl." Even at that age, "a good part of my makeup got to be anger." After graduating, she enrolled at Northwestern University, pushing her way into the all-white freshman dorm. One of her friends there soon enlisted Jean as a teen Cyrano de Bergerac for a long-distance romance she was conducting. "I would write the letters," Jean recalled. "She would change them into her own handwriting, and off the letters would go to Swarthmore to a boy whose last name I never knew."

At the end of the year Jean was stricken with rheumatic fever, one of numerous illnesses that would plague her throughout her life. She was forced to leave Northwestern and recuperate in Baltimore for a year. In the fall of 1953, she resumed her studies at Swarthmore College, where she tracked down the recipient of her love

letters. What the elegant, combative, Baptist Jean Camper found was a skinny, bookish Jewish boy named Edgar Cahn. 'WHAT HE NEEDED WAS DIFFICULTIES TO OVERCOME' Edgar's father, Edmond Cahn, was considered one of the most important legal philosophers of his day. He grew up in New Orleans, part of a prominent Jewish family with strong roots in both the Confederacy and Reform Judaism. Most of the men in the family were rabbis or lawyers. Edmond moved to New York immediately after graduating from Tulane in 1928, in part because he hated racial segregation, and began practicing and teaching law. In 1949, the New York Times Book Review hailed his first major book, *A Sense of Injustice*, as "the most impelling discussion since Aristotle on the subject of justice." He believed that philosophical concepts like injustice could only be understood by studying the practical effects on individuals, "the consumers of law."

While the Camper household attracted the era's greatest black leaders, Edmond Cahn's friends included men like Supreme Court Justices Hugo Black, Earl Warren, William O. Douglas and William Brennan. His writings were highly moralistic, his mind rigorous and merciless in a way that could impress and terrify a young boy.

"Edmond Cahn was quite sure of what is right and wrong," says Guido Calabresi, dean of Yale's law school, who studied the works of Edmond Cahn and taught Jean and Edgar as law students. "He had an influence on Edgar having a sense of injustice and also a little in squashing him. There is a somewhat ethereal quality of mind that comes from having a rather judgmental father." Edgar himself says, "I always sensed I was being evaluated and that maybe I was okay for my age but not quite what he was hoping for."

Edgar also experienced some of the typical fears of a boy who might, in today's parlance, be described as a nerd. Lenore Cahn remembers getting letters from her son at Boy Scout camp about how miserable he was in the company of his raucous, athletic peers. Only when he was put in with a cluster of black boys did things improve. "In a weird kind of way they sort of took me like a mascot," Edgar recalls. "I was protected and I wasn't made to feel inadequate."

Edgar had an uncanny ability to be a troublemaker and a very good boy at the same time. At one point his father decided to impose a kind of sibling rivalry tax, charging Edgar a nickel every time he hit or tickled his twin sister, Mary. Edgar saved up more than a month's worth of allowance and one day unleashed a torrent of prepaid punches and merciless tickles against Mary.

Jean loved Edgar for his sensitivity, moralism and artistic talents. "I loved making jewelry with him," Jean recalled. "We had the very strange ability to talk without talking. I'd say, 'I see an egg, but it's not quite an egg,' and Edgar could create what I had in my head." She also was attracted to his Judaism, explaining, "It's the music that makes sense to me." By the end of college, she became a Jew herself.

Edgar loved Jean for her physical beauty, her sense of mission and her pugnaciousness. But he also loved how her presence brought him attention. And her race enabled him to meet his father's high moralistic standards - and rebel against him at the same time. "He could say, 'You never did this,' " Lenore Cahn says. Joining with

Jean would assure him of the one thing that seemed to most assuage his insecurities: defining himself as an underdog and winning a fight.

To whatever extent they entered into an interracial relationship with a subconscious desire to bring on all comers, it worked. Officials at Swarthmore College -- a Quaker school Edgar says he attended in part because of its liberal tradition -- began writing letters to the Cahns informing them about the disturbing progress of this relationship. It was bad enough that they were together at all, but did they have to create such trouble? Jean had helped integrate a local barbershop -- which had claimed that its barbers didn't know how to deal with black people's hair -- by pointing out that her hair was straight and fine and demanding it be cut. She soon found an enormous cross burning on the front lawn of her dormitory. Traumatic though it was, Edgar seems to relish recounting how he barged in to demand redress from the dean, only to be threatened with physical expulsion from his office.

Jean brought Edgar home to Baltimore regularly. On one trip a policeman approached them, brought out a pair of handcuffs, told them they had committed a moral offense by being together and said they would have to go to the station. J.E.T. Camper, who was walking nearby, intervened and stopped the arrest.

Camper had fears about this relationship, but according to family members they had less to do with Edgar's race than with his social and economic status. Jean's father imagined his daughter living in squalid conditions on a professor's salary, having children at a young age and abandoning her chances for higher education. But Jean pursued a law degree despite having two children, and her family came to admire not only Edgar's ambitions to change the world but his incredible appetite for Camper cooking.

The Cahns, meanwhile, did not welcome Edgar's connection to Jean. Edmond Cahn had written eloquently about the moral justness of racial integration, and had also argued that such abstractions were meaningless until "the concept becomes relevant to the homely experiences of individual human beings." Yet when the abstraction of racial integration became practically "relevant" in his own family, he could not embrace it. Lenore Cahn says that this wasn't racism so much as parental fear for a son who was marrying at such a young age a woman who represented extra obstacles. "I wanted him to marry some nice Jewish intellectual girl," she says now. "I wanted him to have an easy time. I wasn't smart enough to know that what he needed was difficulties to overcome."

Lenore says she and Edmond were also self-absorbed at the time because he was suffering from tuberculosis, so she told Jean and Edgar to "stay away from the house." Edgar, however, says it was his marriage that made him persona non grata. And this reinforced his preexisting sense that his father didn't accept him.

After the wedding, Jean entered Yale Law School and Edgar the graduate program in literature. After their son Jonathan was born, they went to Cambridge, England, for a year, where both continued their studies and they had their second son, Reuben. Then it was back to New Haven. Jean finished her law degree, Edgar started law school himself -- and the Cahns started meeting expectations. REVOLUTION FROM WITHIN The

War on Poverty, it is sometimes forgotten, was conceived largely in ignorance. Little was known about the nature of persistent poverty or what the federal government could do about it. Lyndon Johnson's anti-poverty efforts were conceptually based on a few thinkers and experiments, one of the most important being the Ford Foundation's Gray Areas program. Its goal was to address poverty in a handful of cities through decentralized centers staffed with social workers, consumer education specialists, health care professionals and other service providers.

In 1962, Paul Ylvisaker, a former Swarthmore professor who ran the program for the Ford Foundation, asked his former students Jean and Edgar Cahn for advice on structuring anti-poverty efforts in New Haven. They agreed on the value of providing legal services for the poor, and Ylvisaker hired Jean as a staff attorney to implement the idea at the Dixwell neighborhood office.

It is hard, in retrospect, to believe how little access the poor had to the legal system in 1962. The Supreme Court had not yet even established the constitutional right to legal counsel for criminal cases. In New Haven, there was just one public defender. Virtually no help was available in civil matters such as apartment evictions, custody disputes and conflicts over government benefits. Legal aid societies had existed since the late 1800s and as a nationally organized movement supported by bar associations since the 1920s. But their offices were downtown, far from the clients they were serving, and provided, in effect, just 10 cents of legal aid per poor person annually.

Legal aid lawyers were forever putting out that day's fires. They might help a tenant keep from getting evicted but would rarely do anything to shut down notorious slumlords. From the 1800s through 1965, legal aid societies brought not a single civil case to the U.S. Supreme Court and just a handful to appeals courts.

The legal services operation set up by Community Progress Inc. in New Haven was based in the ghetto and geared toward more sweeping legal advocacy for the poor. For example, it challenged a local hospital's policy of not releasing dead infants for burial until parents had paid bills. The approach posed inherent political problems: Legal services lawyers inevitably ended up attacking city hall, a key source of support in New Haven for the anti-poverty effort.

Jean Cahn quickly showed she had a flair for the incendiary, agreeing to defend one of three black men accused of brutally assaulting and raping a white nurse. Mitchell Sviridoff, who was running the CPI program, feared white backlash would jeopardize the rest of New Haven's anti-poverty efforts and burn Mayor Richard Lee, who had gone out on a limb to support them. "I didn't want this blowing up the whole program," he recalls. "I called her in and said this has got to stop." Jean refused, believing that the victim had consented and that CPI had to be willing to take on even ugly cases, just as a family lawyer would defend a wealthy man accused of an atrocious act. The case went to trial, the man was convicted, and the controversy subsided.

Meanwhile, liberal policy makers in Washington were independently starting to think that a legal services program should be part of the national attack on poverty. In 1963 the Cahns got jobs in Washington, she as an

attorney with the African desk of the State Department and he as speechwriter for Atty. Gen. Robert Kennedy. Jean showed her boss, Abram Chayes, a copy of an article entitled "A War on Poverty: A Civilian Perspective" that she and Edgar had written for the Yale Law Review. The well-connected Chayes was intrigued and started showing it around policy circles. Edgar promoted the idea by writing speeches for Kennedy, Supreme Court Justice Arthur Goldberg and, later, Atty. Gen. Nicholas Katzenbach calling for better legal representation for the poor. But the key player was Sargent Shriver, the Kennedy brother-in-law who headed the Office of Economic Opportunity, headquarters for the War on Poverty.

One day in 1964, Shriver's top aide, Adam Yarmolinsky, suggested that he read this Yale Law Review essay that had been making the rounds. "I was deeply impressed by it, almost overjoyed, and I asked him to get hold of the author," Shriver recalls. "It was rather fascinating to see him and hear him talk. It was like Columbus discovering America, an exciting thing for me to discover someone who's written something that captures my mind and imagination. That's the genesis of legal services -- it's really pretty simple."

The article described how the poor lost out every day by not knowing or asserting their rights. It proposed that the government fund neighborhood law firms -- not tied to local political machines -- to help poor individuals through case-by-case advocacy and attack poverty generally through community organizing and litigation. The theme of local "empowerment" dovetailed perfectly with the other pieces of Shriver's program, which emphasized not large government bureaucracies but "community action" to resolve problems of poverty.

Ironically, many of the criticisms that 1980s conservatives made of 1970s liberalism were actually first voiced by 1960s liberals like the Cahns. They mocked social workers for "perpetuating dependency rather than terminating it" and lamented the psychological effect of help on those being helped. The beauty of legal services, the Cahns argued, was removing the stigma of anti-poverty efforts. "While lawyers are often distrusted as shysters and sophists," they wrote, "there is no self-demeaning implication or taint of helplessness and internal confusion in requesting the services of an attorney." Empowerment meant "nothing less than vesting in the citizenry the means and the effective power wherewith to criticize, to shape and even to challenge the actions or proposed actions of officials."

The plan grew out of the couple's New Haven experiences, but on another level revealed that the merger of Jean Camper and Edgar Cahn was not just one of race but of two different liberal heritages. Edmond Cahn believed in moral suasion, using the law and the legal system to right wrongs. J.E.T. Camper's liberalism grew out of street protests, with direct action and confrontation seen as the key. Legal services was a perfect amalgam: working within the system to revolutionize it.

Edgar went to work full time on Shriver's staff, and Jean was hired to set up a legal services program. One question loomed: What should they do about the conservative American Bar Association, which could, if it chose, kill the program at birth? Elements within the ABA feared that legal services lawyers might steal business from for-profit lawyers, and legal aid attorneys objected that all this new federal money wasn't going

to them. The Cahns began lengthy negotiations with top ABA officers, including ABA President Lewis Powell. "I started out with a modicum of suspicion of whether the Cahns might have had self-serving purposes," Powell says. But "their influence on me gave me a better understanding of the needs of the poor." The Cahns, meanwhile, learned how conservative allies could promote a liberal agenda, a lesson they would apply often in future years.

In 1965, private legal aid societies spent \$5 million on the poor; today government-assisted legal services programs and private legal aid societies combined spend roughly \$550 million. More important, legal services lawyers have brought more than a million cases through the appellate system and some to the Supreme Court that have, in effect, created entirely new bodies of law on tenant, consumer and government-beneficiary rights. Several, for example, helped develop the then-novel doctrine of "implied warranty of habitability," meaning landlords have a legal obligation to provide basic services to rent-paying tenants. The program also acted as an important employer of minority lawyers and gave tens of thousands of lawyers direct exposure to problems of the poor.

Now embodied in the Legal Services Corp., the approach has come under attack fairly continuously since 1965. The Reagan administration tried to eliminate the legal services program during the 1980s, considering it a government funding trough for left-wing lawyers. In recent years, liberals (including the Cahns) have criticized the program for acting too much like the old legal aid societies, by focusing on divorces and government benefits cases. Nevertheless, legal services stands with the Head Start program as one of the most successful legacies of the War on Poverty.

Its early days were not, however, the best of times for the Cahn marriage. Jean became convinced that Shriver was abandoning the mission of legal services, and claimed she overheard him saying that he needed to appoint a white male as permanent legal services director. Shriver says "that doesn't sound like something I would have said," but adds that his foremost concern was wooing establishment lawyers and he doubted that a black woman "could sell this to a group of white upper-crust snotty men."

Jean quit in a fury, but Edgar decided to stay on as Shriver's special assistant, and she felt both men had betrayed her. On one occasion she denounced Shriver before the ABA and he assigned Edgar to write the speech in response. "Cahn Attacks Cahn as 'Bureaucrat,'" read a newspaper headline after another public exchange. "There should have been a divorce," Jean said. "There's no question that we should never have stayed married after that."

"There was no good humor about this," Edgar says today. "There was red-hot anger -- and my sense that if somebody didn't stay in there to protect the program, it was dead as a doornail. It was hell, it was just utter hell." It took years, he says, for the bitterness to subside. "THE SISTER IS THE ONE WHO KNOWS WHAT SHE'S TALKING ABOUT"

The Cahns were not just interracial. They were inter-everything. Most obvious was the contrast in style. Jean was flamboyant. In the winter she would stride into housing court carrying a white mink coat over her shoulder. Ralph Ferrara, a Washington lawyer, remembers seeing her excoriate George Washington University Law School professors for not letting the school do more to help the city's poor. "She had this red dress, and bright lipstick and nail polish and gold jewelry," he says. "Not only was the substance moving, but she did it with this wonderful splash of color. It was kind of as if Brutus had stopped off at Bergdorf's on the way to give the oration over Caesar. It was just astounding." Her appearance provoked throat-clearing and raised eyebrows from stuffy white males unaccustomed to a woman in their chambers -- let alone a woman like that -- as well as from the black activists she was helping. Jean had no interest in dressing like a "downtrodden black," she explained. "I had to send the message that I had been brought up in a certain kind of a tradition, that I would go to the ballet and do things that Middle America wanted to do. We could think these were all superficial goals, but it was not a superficial goal for Americans to be able to do what they wanted."

Jean was charismatic enough to rouse a church congregation and charming enough to captivate a conservative Republican. But mostly she was blunt, quick and confrontational. Frank Carlucci, former secretary of defense and head of the Office of Economic Opportunity under President Nixon, remembers how Jean "tore me to pieces" at a meeting on legal services. "The generals and admirals at the Pentagon were tame compared to what I faced when I took over OEO." Friends love to recall her court appearance representing the Black United Front in opposing a D.C. bus fare increase in 1969. When a judge asked her to repeat a street name she had mentioned, she responded, with an impertinent swagger, "That's M -- as in moth-er."

Edgar, meanwhile, looked to be, in the words of friend David Littlefield, "plucked right out of the Yiddish theater." Countless people have done double takes at the pair, or simply not realized they were married. "The first time you meet Edgar," says Ferrara, "you look at him and then look around and say, Is he married to her? You must be kidding!"

Their brains worked differently too. "Jean's had a directness, a force, a power. Edgar's mind was more abstract and in some ways more subtle," says Yale Law School's Calabresi. "When there's an interesting detour or side street, Edgar's likely to take it." As he moves deeper into a subject, his right lip curls up and his head starts to bob. His sentences combine the oozing solemnity of a rabbi ("She is a truly decent, caring, lovely human being") with the jargonized syntax of a social scientist ("We've structured it so there could be an upward mobility dynamic").

Most of the Cahns' articles were joint projects, with Edgar usually at the typewriter and Jean dictating. She had a habit of waking him in the middle of the night to discuss new ideas. Sometimes they even spoke publicly together, alternating paragraphs or sections. "I came to think there was this one person called Jean-and-Edgar," says Florence Roisman, a Washington housing lawyer. They often adopted a good cop-bad cop

routine: Edgar would soothe and Jean would demand. "They were a perfect combination of chutzpah and soul," says Charles Dorsey, a prominent Baltimore legal aid attorney. "Jean was the chutzpah."

For this odd couple, the second half of the 1960s was an endless stream of lawsuits, investigative reports and articles. Jean counted among her proudest moments her representation in 1967 of Rep. Adam Clayton Powell Jr. before the U.S. Supreme Court. Powell, the most powerful black official at the time, was fighting to be seated in the House of Representatives, which was investigating him for financial improprieties and refused to seat him after his reelection. The high court upheld Powell's appeal.

"She would make a point and {Powell's male lawyers} would listen respectfully, but there was a dismissive attitude," recalls Chuck Stone, a former newspaper columnist who was then Powell's chief of staff. "But when they left, Adam turned to me and said, 'The sister is the one who knows what she's talking about.' "

In 1968, Jean set up the Urban Law Institute, a public-interest law firm housed at George Washington University, which employed law students as advocates on behalf of low-income Washingtonians. She and Edgar brought suits to stop the bus fare increase and challenged the broadcast license of WMAL because it didn't employ enough blacks. Edgar, meanwhile, helped write Hunger USA, a landmark study that focused attention on deep poverty and fueled the creation of the modern food stamp program. The next year, he wrote Our Brother's Keeper, a scathing expose about the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

The constant parade of fights was thrilling -- the Cahns clearly thrived on turmoil -- but they also felt personally under attack. In 1964, they moved to a house in Glover Park. When neighbors realized the couple was interracial, they parked cars at both ends of the street so the moving van couldn't enter. The Cahns' phone was not yet connected, so they couldn't call for help. But the blockade was broken when Atty. Gen. Robert Kennedy, who had been alerted to what was happening, called their next-door neighbors and asked them to relay the urgent message that Edgar should "bring the microfiche to the Cabinet meeting." Apparently impressed, the drivers unclogged the street.

Once when Jean went to Durham, N.C., to help organize a chicken pluckers union, a bomb exploded one floor above her. Edgar was shot at by a local sheriff while counseling a meeting of Indian leaders at an Oklahoma reservation. After Jean had a devastating miscarriage while representing Powell, she began to wonder why she couldn't just raise her family and enjoy a life with creature comforts.

"Why is it," she remembered asking herself, "that my life never gets calm?" 'I'LL START MY OWN DAMN LAW SCHOOL'

The Cahns' approach to social change had one glaring weakness: It relied on lawyers. The legal services movement -- along with changes in the courts and public thinking -- had succeeded in creating new rights for the poor, but the system that was supposed to guarantee them had not fundamentally changed. Litigation, it turned out, did not always equal empowerment. Moreover, legal services lawyers had quickly become

overwhelmed. Law schools didn't help, acting primarily as training farms for corporations or the wealthy. "Legal education operates to enervate moral indignation and to inculcate intellectual and moral timidity," the Cahns wrote in 1970. "It turn{s} out lawyers ill-equipped to recognize the possibility of creating new forums, ill-fitted to serve the needs of the injured and the disenfranchised."

Jean and Edgar believed that nothing would change until there was a new type of law school, designed -- surprise! -- to produce people like the Cahns themselves. Jean's Urban Law Institute had combined legal education with public-interest practice, but GW soured on involving the law school in controversial advocacy. At a meeting in 1970, the law school faculty voted to shut down the institute, prompting Jean to declare, "Well, I'll start my own damn law school."

What Jean had in mind was something radical -- an entire law school based on the "teaching hospital" model of medical schools, where students learn by doing. That met the practical goal of giving students better training as well as the ideological objective of improving legal services for the poor: Students would get their "clinical education" by working with low-income clients. The Cahns ultimately proposed setting up a Washington-based law school affiliated with Antioch University, an alternative school in Yellow Springs, Ohio. Morris Keeton, then Antioch's provost, remembers checking with the dean of George Washington University Law School about why the Urban Institute died. The first two reasons had to do with educational philosophy, so Keeton wasn't worried. "The third reason was that the Cahns are 'uncontrollable,'" Keeton recalls.

Within a year the Cahns had a law school up and running, largely through juggling favors and grants, a skill that soon became their trademark. This was no quiet, reflective house of learning. Former Antioch students and professors describe the climate with words like "anarchy" and "madness." Orientation consisted of spending six weeks with a low-income family in the District. "So here I was, new, starting law school, knowing nothing about the law," recalls Wilbur Colom, class of '76, "and {my introduction is} sleeping in the same bed as this kid who didn't speak English." The Antioch admissions process downplayed test scores and grades, instead emphasizing interesting life experiences and the answer to the main application question: Have you ever witnessed an injustice, and if so, what did you do about it, and, in retrospect, what do you wish you had done? The first class of about 140 combined students who could have gotten into the best schools and those who couldn't have gotten into any. The average age was 32, with unusually high numbers of women and minorities. (Throughout the school's history 30 to 40 percent of the students came from minority groups, and Antioch was one of the first law schools whose student body was 50 percent women.) Since the Cahns made a point of recruiting activists, it shouldn't have come as any surprise that the first class put its exams in escrow until the Cahns agreed to use pass/fail marks instead of letter grades.

Antioch's faculty quickly polarized on the subject of Jean and Edgar. Cahn supporters viewed them as visionaries, obstructed by narrow, self-interested professors. Opponents saw them as self-righteous tyrants who used professors as movable pieces in their personal experiment. "It was always 'us versus the Cahns,' "

recalls Robert Catz, a professor who was part of the anti-Cahn faction but later became close to Edgar. "You came to think the Cahns had horns." Faculty members complained that the Cahns were shoving required courses -- taught by the Cahns -- down the students' throats. They also questioned the Cahns' judgment when they did things such as hiring the militant Blackman's Volunteer Liberation Army to guard the campus after a slew of typewriters were stolen. ("The typewriters stopped disappearing," Edgar giggles today.)

Administrative snafus abounded: Two classes found themselves in the same room; a ceiling collapsed during class; and important court notices sat unopened in the mailroom. "The Cahns couldn't run a whorehouse on a ship," professor John Sizemore exclaimed at the time.

Financial problems, some related to the mission of the school, fueled tensions. The emphasis on clinical education meant Antioch was essentially running the largest public-interest law firm in the country, at one point carrying 1,000 cases in a single year. The school had no endowment and a high percentage of students on financial aid. The faculty was expected to work 60-hour weeks, teaching classes and supervising legal teams that were bringing everything from mundane landlord-tenant cases to class-action discrimination suits. By the end of the second year, two-thirds of the faculty had quit or been fired.

The Cahns' personal styles worsened the strain. Jean at times was charming and warm, a Jewish mom who would tease faculty members about their hair or eating habits. But she could also lash out savagely. Some faculty members believed that the anger that boiled in her became particularly virulent after she had been drinking. (Though Edgar feared that her drinking could endanger her fragile health, he maintains that it didn't alter her behavior.) Edgar, meanwhile, was viewed as aloof and arrogant. Students nicknamed the two "Mumbles and Sluggo."

"They suffered extreme fools well," Colom says. "If you were the extremely downtrodden, they treated you with great compassion, but if you were well off but just a little slow they had no patience." One blowout came over a grant proposal the Cahns had written to the National Institute of Mental Health to study, among other things, racism -- among Antioch law school professors, students and administrators.

"They were masters at using race to polarize the faculty," says Michael Diamond, a Washington lawyer who was a leading Cahn opponent.

In April 1976 Jean and Edgar were on separate phone lines in their house, fighting with Antioch University's president over payment of minority contractors. Jean suddenly stopped and said, "Edgar, could you come here?" She was having a stroke. Her left side was partially paralyzed for a year, and although she fought aggressively and successfully to regain her physical strength, she never completely regained her memory. The stroke also made it harder for her to lose weight, and her self-esteem eroded.

Edgar was forced to take a more visible role at school. Both he and his critics say that by the late 1970s he began to change, becoming more approachable. "I was perceived as less arrogant, but the fact is that I'm probably less shy, less insecure," Edgar says today. All was not peaceful, to be sure: In 1977 two white Antioch

students were mugged with ice picks and given notes addressed to the Cahns saying, "This is what you get for starting a nigger-loving law school." The Cahns had to have a bodyguard at their house for several months. But the poisonous atmosphere was diffusing, the chaos becoming routine.

Yet whatever stability might have been developing began to crumble in 1979 when Antioch University went into financial crisis. The university said it would not write any checks for the law school over the summer. Since the law school's clients didn't disappear during those months, the Cahns mortgaged their house to keep the operation going. But it became clear that the university would increasingly tap into the law school's relatively healthy income stream. So that fall the law school decided not to send its money to Yellow Springs anymore -- and legal war broke out.

The university's law firm, Williams & Connolly, pursued the Cahns with a vengeance, charging them with making a raw power grab. The law school's attorneys responded that it had an obligation to keep itself solvent to protect its clients. On January 10, 1980, Superior Court Judge George H. Revercomb ruled that the university controlled the law school and its money. The Cahns were fired the next day.

They were devastated. They had known they might lose this legal struggle and have to step down as deans, but had not imagined they would be kicked off the faculty of the school they had founded. They were determined to keep fighting; that was, after all, what they knew how to do best -- mobilize troops, organize protests, contact influential politicians, whip up press coverage.

On March 1, Edgar lifted a box of files he needed for the appeal and suffered a massive heart attack. 'THEY WOULD HEAR EDGAR AND THEY WOULDN'T HEAR ME'

In some sense the experiment failed -- Antioch's doors closed in 1988. But today Edgar can look back and discuss with pride how it trained 1,500 public-interest lawyers and about 450 paralegals, and handled more than 10,000 public-interest cases. In May 1990 he attended the 15th reunion of the founding class and heard the attendees describe what they were doing: representing Medicare recipients, helping poor consumers with utility bills, bringing workplace safety cases for the Department of Labor, practicing immigration law and working at a hospital for the criminally insane in Maryland ("for which nothing quite prepared me like Antioch School of Law"). Only one had joined a major corporate law firm. Today, in part because of the Antioch experiment, every law school is required by the ABA to teach professional ethics and most now offer the option of a clinical course. Edgar also points to the D.C. School of Law, which gained its ABA accreditation this February, as an offspring of Antioch, with some of its same faculty and commitment to serving the community.

But from her hospital bed last September Jean Cahn didn't want to talk about Antioch. "It was to be the culmination of what she'd done her whole life," explains her youngest son, Reuben, now a public defender in Florida. "It really was a child for them, that they had raised. Losing it really took some of the fight out of her."

Antioch battles had left the Cahns unemployed, with new medical bills every month, and their sons' college educations left to pay for. Within a year of their firing they were \$40,000 in debt, sustained by subsidies from family and friends. Antioch gave them three weeks severance pay. Only last-minute intervention by a sympathetic Antioch trustee kept the university from putting a lien on their house. "They were," says Robert Catz, "thrown out like pieces of meat."

Edgar's regular angina attacks created in the house a panicky feeling that the family was always on the edge of collapsing. He had double bypass surgery, with a lengthy recuperation. Even when he was healthy he had trouble getting work because, he says, "We went from being very fashionable to being complete outcasts overnight." Jean did academic odd jobs here and there to pay the medical bills and keep the family together. In 1983 Edgar moved to Miami to accept a teaching position at the University of Miami Law School. Jean stayed behind in Washington, fearful of Edgar's return to academia and Miamians' attitudes toward blacks.

The Antioch fight had left her angry and wondering: What had their struggles accomplished? There was still so much wrong with the world. And what had all this struggle brought them?

To be sure, having something to fight for all those years provided glue for the relationship when love wasn't enough. They never stopped being conscious that their marriage was not just a union of individuals but an important political symbol. "We stayed together in part because we were stubborn," Edgar says. "We had enough enemies -- and we didn't want to give them the satisfaction of seeing us break up." The marriage gave him psychological bona fides for his liberalism -- he understood racial oppression through osmosis -- and the acceptance and trust of black audiences.

The Camper family's acceptance made Edgar feel big, and so did the fights themselves. "A good fight where you can be a hero is a huge ego trip," he says. "You feel noble, pure and virtuous, and the other guy {is} the bastard with no principles. If you feel at all insecure as a human being, and not necessarily particularly lovable, handsome or an athlete or desirable, being pure and noble is a good second best."

Even the feeling that his parents had rejected him faded over the years, in part as he saw their affection for Reuben and Jonathan. Edgar now recalls with pride -- and perhaps forgiveness? -- how Edmond Cahn refused to go back to Tulane University until it integrated. When Edmond finally returned there, shortly before his death in 1964, "they asked him, 'What does it feel like to have a son who's married to a colored?' And my father responded, 'Many southern gentlemen of my age and station have black grand- children, and I'm proud mine are legitimate.' "

But Jean's bitterness continued to fester over the years. She believed that she had been kicked around throughout her life and was never appreciated as much as Edgar. "We could stay in the same room and both say exactly the same thing," Jean recalled. "They would hear Edgar and they wouldn't hear me. Edgar would get the money -- they would actually fork over \$50,000 or \$75,000 -- and I would get nothing, absolutely nothing for the same ideas and the same words." Some friends believe it was Jean's sometimes abrasive

personality that lost her respect. "I don't think it had to do with her being a black woman," says Barry Passett, a local activist who has worked with the Cahns over the years. "It had to do with her being Jean Cahn."

Edgar believes race and temperament both played roles, but adds that Jean's own fear of not being taken seriously "became a self-fulfilling prophecy." As the fear and anger about not being heard grew, Jean would strike out, delivering the verbal batterings that lost her respect. "It becomes hard to break out of that mold," Edgar says.

Despite all she had won, Jean felt like a loser -- because she had failed to meet her own towering expectations. "I had to weigh the blessings all the time because somehow it seemed that I was being penalized," she said. "And it kept feeling that way." 'I NEED A PLACE TO TEST AN IDEA'

In late 1985, Passett, now president of the Greater Southeast Healthcare System in Washington, got a call from Edgar Cahn in Miami. "I need a place to test an idea and I want you to do it," Cahn said.

Passett thought twice. He'd known Edgar since the New Haven legal services days and knew that once Edgar got his teeth into something he was a "ferret." But when Passett read Edgar's paper, he said, "Son of a bitch, here he's done it again."

Edgar was proposing the creation of something called a "time dollar," a whole new currency designed to help the poor and elderly pay for services they can't now afford. The idea was startlingly simple: A person earns a "service credit" for each hour he or she volunteers to help someone in need. When that helper later needs assistance, she calls up the service credit "bank," spends her credits and receives the aid of another volunteer. Edgar reasoned that the elderly poor do not have money to pay for a housekeeper or driver but they have a huge surplus of something else -- time. They could use that asset to help others and feel more valued themselves, measured, for a change, by the good they were doing instead of the money they earned. "People society labels as problems, this system labels as resources," Edgar says. "It uses market-like incentives, but it draws on altruism, a desire to help, a need to be needed." The recipients would get the practical benefits, like help with the dishes or a ride to the supermarket, without feeling like burdens (since their helpers were getting something in return).

Edgar had begun exploring the idea when he himself had surplus time while recuperating from his heart attack. He refined it over the course of five years and then in 1986, with intense prodding from Jean, he set up the Washington program based in the Center for the Aging of the Greater Southeast Healthcare System. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation gave \$1.2 million in grants to start service credit programs in Brooklyn, San Francisco, Miami and Boston and to expand experiments in Washington and a similar effort that Missouri activists had set up on their own. Since then thousands of volunteers have worked several hundred thousand hours, and media exposure has produced more than 40,000 requests for information about service credits. Fifty-eight programs are up and running already, and an additional 24 are planned in cities and towns spanning 24 states. There are some kinks to be worked out, like what happens if too many people spend their

credits at once or when not enough people spend them to keep the system moving. But it is clearly an idea with legs, and it may, in the end, eclipse the Cahns' other accomplishments.

Social policy innovation occurs so rarely because ideology keeps analysts from seeing errors and political considerations keep activists from admitting them. The Cahns have managed to innovate successfully in part because they have incorporated their own previous failures into each succeeding plan. The time dollar is, in part, an outgrowth of the Cahns' past experiences: They saw well-meaning government bureaucracies created by fellow liberals become absorbed by their own "survival agendas." Time dollars need little help from the government. The Cahns came to distrust professional social workers and legal services attorneys because their patronizing attitudes toward the poor, in the end, encourage dependency. The service credit system relies on the poor and old to help the poor and old. And this makes it quintessentially Cahnian in another respect. Jean and Edgar have always framed their radical agenda around unobjectionable, all-American concepts like the right to a lawyer, the need for practical legal training and the warmth of volunteerism. Who can distrust the idea of little old ladies helping littler, older ladies? At the root, however, service credits seek to circumvent, even replace, the market economy.

By the mid-'80s, intellectual excitement was back in Edgar's life, and he was having fun. And by 1986, Jean's spirits were beginning to lift. She had moved down to Miami in late 1985 and helped Edgar broker a black-Hispanic alliance that launched the Miami service credits program.

In 1985, after an incident in which he thought Jean had been unusually cruel to someone, Edgar demanded that she stop drinking -- and she did.

The next year she joined a local firm and began to practice law again. And the next year Jean and Edgar successfully sued the state of Florida for giving aid to the elderly strictly according to age instead of need, a formula that effectively siphoned money from minorities in the Miami area. Around the same time, D.C. Council Member Hilda Mason asked the Cahns to come to Washington to lobby for council approval of the new D.C. School of Law, a spiritual successor to Antioch. They returned in 1988 to help select the first class.

Jean and Edgar were Jean-and-Edgar again. Then, in January 1989, a surgeon removed a small tumor, a centimeter square, from Jean's left breast. It looked as if the doctors had caught it early, and they had high hopes that radiation and hormone chemotherapy would cure it. For the next year and half Jean seemed cancer-free. But in the summer of 1990, a surgeon removed a malignant lump from her back. On her next visit, the surgeon said the cancer extended over her whole left chest and back. It was, he said, "inoperable."
'I'M NOT PERFECT, BUT THAT'S OKAY'

"I'm up against my own type of gun now," Jean said in her hospital room last September. "There's too great a chance that this is my time. Somehow I have to buck up. I know I have some kind of ability to march through bad times. I have to gather my strength.

"Certainly, I've never been happier."

How could that be? Dying of cancer, how could this woman, so driven by anger, find herself happier than ever? Was it possible that her emotional chemistry was so geared toward struggle that she was actually buoyed by the idea of another battle -- even if the enemy was disease?

But this fight wasn't like the combat she knew so well, where she could rally troops against an outside enemy. After reading books by Norman Cousins and others, listening to tapes about the link between mind and body and thinking about the possibility of dying, Jean came to believe she had to conquer her own internal tyrants.

The rage that pushed her to battle injustice, she was learning, had also eaten away at her. "She began looking at cancer as emblematic of other sicknesses that had overtaken her -- like anger," son Jonathan said.

"I accepted that Jean wasn't perfect," she explained calmly. "There were even magnificent failures. I'm not perfect, but that's okay. You accept yourself so much easier as the love comes again and again."

"She had beaten herself up over Antioch and other problems, problems with me and Jonathan," Reuben said. "Now she's learned forgiveness of herself and other people who've harmed her. She's learned just how much her family loves her."

During a second set of interviews for this story, in December, Jean's every sentence seemed a struggle. There was still some anger, at the ways the nurses treated her and at how hospitals remove every shred of privacy, but it was often leavened with deadpan humor. At one point she suffered through a humiliating half-hour in which a chirpy nurse discussed her bodily functions in front of a visitor. When a doctor came in a few minutes later, she introduced that guest by saying, "This is Steve. He's doing an article for The Washington Post Magazine about my bowels."

At times Edgar would lean over the bed to hear Jean's requests or comments, not quite sure whether she was hallucinating. Once she pointed to her nightgown and said, with the gravity of a judge issuing a momentous opinion, "Sprinkle powder on them and it will come out as butterflies and turkeys." Out in the hallway, Edgar laughed and said, "I can't tell sometimes. Even when she's hallucinating, she's so damn authoritative."

There was, in the midst of so much fear, rampant playfulness. Jean and Edgar spoke like small children about their stuffed animals, and beamed at the chance to have the gorillas exchange high-fives in front of a cameraman. "Now low-fives," Jean said; the gorillas lowered their paws and slapped.

"Only in their last months could they recapture that sense of innocence," says Jonathan. "There was a serenity and love."

On Sunday night, December 16, as Jonathan, Reuben and their wives prepared to leave the hospital room, Jean had a request -- that they stand together and celebrate Hanukkah. The scene was eerie and inspiring: All

faces except Jean's were covered in surgical masks; expressions could be read only through the eyes. They put the candles in the menorah but did not light them out of fear they might cause an explosion in the heavily oxygenated room.

Jean began the blessing over the unlit lights. "Baruch atah adonay, elohey-nu melech ha-o-lam, asher kid-sha-nu b'mits-vo-tav v'tsi-va-nu l'had-lik ner shel Hanukah. Blessed art thou, Ruler of the universe, who has sanctified us by thy commandments and commanded us to kindle the Hanukah lights." Then, her voice high in pitch and surprisingly loud, she led the singing of a favorite Jewish family hymn.

Children of the martyr-race

Whether free or fettered

Wake the echoes of the songs

Where ye may be scattered.

Yours the message cheering,

That the time is nearing

Which will see

All men free,

Tyrants disappearing.

Two weeks later, on New Year's Day, Jean Camper Cahn died at home, with the whole family around her bed. 'MADNESS AND WISDOM' Edgar has begun, in the words of close friend David Littlefield, to "reconfigure his world" since Jean's death. He has written a book about service credits called The Time Dollar, which will be published by Rodale Press in January. He moved to Dupont Circle, just a few blocks from Jonathan, and will teach at the D.C. School of Law this fall.

In the weeks following Jean's death, Edgar busied himself with the details of mourning. There was the funeral in Miami that Sunday. The surviving Cahns faxed information to newspapers preparing obituaries, determined that Jean get proper recognition. They put together two memorial services. One was at All Souls Unitarian Church in Adams-Morgan, which was filled with friends and political allies, including Ralph Nader, three D.C. Council members, former council chairman David Clark, former adversaries from Antioch's faculty, D.C. Del. Eleanor Holmes Norton and Mayor Sharon Pratt Dixon, who had taught at Antioch. One former Antioch student informed the congregation that, incredibly, the building that had housed the school burned down the day before Jean died. "She took it with her," he said.

The other service was at the Whitestone Baptist Church in Baltimore. Jonathan and Reuben talked about their pride. A gospel singer sang "My Mother Was a Soldier." A black Baptist preacher with a booming voice gave the opening prayer, a white rabbi gave the closing prayer, and an interracial congregation stood together to recite the Hebrew prayer of mourning.

Jean's husband of 33 years stood up and spoke to her in a voice choked into a higher octave. "When we first decided to get married, I was wiser than I was in subsequent years," he said. "For I knew then one thing with a certainty that sometimes lapsed in later years: that simply for us to survive, not to do anything but just to survive in the world we knew, would itself be an achievement, a triumph of unrivaled proportions. To choose that destiny before there was a *Brown v. Board of Education* was both madness and wisdom. And that wisdom still stands. We have survived. And had we only survived . . ."

He finished the sentence with the Hebrew word *dayenu*, meaning "that would have been enough."

But the gesture Jean surely would have enjoyed most came right after her death. Activating their most instinctual protective mechanisms, Edgar and Jonathan spent part of those next few days in a fight with the funeral home director over what they considered "unconscionable" contract language about the cremation. "He was saying he couldn't guarantee that it won't be someone else's ashes in the urn," Edgar recalls. "So we touched base with the Federal Trade Commission." Then they went to the state agency that licenses crematoriums. Finally, they informed the director "we wouldn't let a client sign this."

Edgar Cahn laughs as he tells this story. "It was some therapy," he says, "but it was also consistent behavior."

Steven Waldman is a Washington correspondent for Newsweek.

 **0 Comments**