

Percy Julian, Jr.
1940 – 2008

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On the night of June 12th, 1951, in the genteel Chicago suburb of the Village of Oak Park, someone threw a lit stick of dynamite at the home of a man named Percy Julian. The attack was notable for two reasons: Julian was a chemist of some renown, who had recently synthesized the hormone progesterone, and had been named Chicagoan of the Year in 1949. Also, he was black. In late 1950, when he, his wife, and their two young children moved into Oak Park, a tidy grid of stately houses, hardwoods, and expansive lawns, they became its first African-American residents that weren't servants or laborers.

As it happened, Julian and his wife Anna were away from home on June 12th, attending the funeral of his father in Baltimore, and had left their children, Percy, Jr., 11, and Faith, 7, behind with a sitter. At the time of the attack the children were asleep in their bedrooms on the second floor. There was a guard keeping watch on a porch, whom the Julians had hired after their house had been the target of arson the year before.

In middle of the night, reported the watchman, the explosive was lobbed from a passing car, detonating in a bed of flowers (Julian was an avid gardener) about six feet from the house. Faith, whose bedroom windows overlooked the front lawn, says she remembers a man running away down the long front sidewalk. In wealthy, insular Oak Park, the incident caused a stir. The police came, as did the press; the papers published a picture of Percy, Jr., in the front yard, squinting in the bright sun, obligingly pointing to the remains of the landscaping where the explosive had hit.

For Percy, Jr., a shy and introverted boy who seldom spent time with his driven and largely absent father—"I hardly remember a weekend when he didn't work," he said, in a 2007 documentary about Julian—the event brought a sort of windfall of paternal company. He and his father began keeping nightly vigils over their property from a tree in their yard, his father holding a shotgun and engaging the youngster in discussions about who would do such a thing, and why.

Such questions went unanswered. No one was ever charged in the attack; Kathy Julian, Percy, Jr.'s daughter from his first marriage, says that attempts by the family to increase police presence in the neighborhood were met with resistance by the local force. And in the period following the attack the Julians received handwritten death threats. But in that community they had also made friends, who circulated a petition supporting the Julians and denouncing the violence; it was signed by more than 200 people.

Both the Julians were accomplished academics, and their lives had largely been shaped by their ambition and a persistent fortitude in the face of racism. "They were simply not

intimidatable,” recalled Percy, Jr., in the documentary. For them, the decision was clear enough: They stayed.

It was their children, coming of age in the segregated, often hostile community, who in some ways carried the weight of this decision. “It does something to you,” says Faith. “You go into your own world, especially when you’re that age... When I was really upset I would go and play with my dolls, and tell them my problems and troubles, and they would talk back to me.” She does not recall talking about it with her brother; the boy she remembers from those days was “a very private, closed-off person.”

Like Faith, Percy, Jr., disappeared into a world of his own making. He had been given a Brownie camera a couple years before, and he photographed his family obsessively; in high school, he built himself an entire darkroom, including the electrical and plumbing systems, in the basement of their house, where he spent hours developing his prints. He also developed a penchant for folk music and taught himself to play the guitar, and at school he threw himself into a variety of pursuits; he was a member of the debate team, and, too small for the football team, their waterboy. But he was never allowed to fit in completely. The white girl he asked to the senior prom, who accepted, was told by school officials that she would be expelled if they attended together. Upon graduating, Percy, Jr., left home for Oberlin College. “Except for holidays and things,” says Faith, “he never really came back here.”

In the early sixties, he joined the burgeoning civil rights movement, traveling to Nashville to participate in demonstrations there, to the dismay, he later recalled, of his father, who fretted for his safety. Also to the profound dismay of his father, who had been determined he would become a chemist and take over Julian Laboratories, he went to law school. Some of his hardest fought cases, as a civil rights lawyer, were school integration and fair housing.

But if the bomb that was thrown in 1951 at the house on East Avenue drove him abruptly outward, into the violent reality of the age, and forced him to find his place there, it also drove him inward. “I think,” says Kathy Julian, “that without any family pressures, he might have gone on to become an artist.” His teenage obsession for photography only intensified throughout his life, and in his later years he taught photography and traveled extensively, with his family and with university students, to Peru, Africa, China, Jamaica, taking thousands of pictures.

Although he spent a lifetime litigating, and, in his later years, teaching, the old shyness never left him. “When it came to sitting face to face with somebody,” recalls his stepson, Kevin Blackmon, “talking to them, telling them how he felt—he had problems with that.” But the camera gave him something that, since his childhood in Oak Park, had often eluded him: a way to connect.

By the time he died in February, of a stroke, his house was full of pictures. “And every picture,” says Blackmon, “...was of people.”