



Tribune photo by Milbert Orlando Brown

Pearl Willis is turning an old two-flat into an ad-hoc community center with a day-care center.

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The making of an angel

Pearl Willis

answered a call from on high, and a whole South Side neighborhood is better for it

By Ron Grossman

Pearl Willis didn't know what to make of it when God spoke to her in a print shop on South Ashland Avenue.

It's not the kind of neighborhood where the divine hand is immediately evident—unless you take seriously the biblical verse about the meek and humble inheriting the Earth. Willis' slice of Chicago is an outdoor museum of human misery.

In fact, as she recalls, those bleak streets were precisely what the Almighty had in mind the morning he told her to quit her job.

"I looked around, thinking it must be one of the other employees," Willis recalled. "But I'd come in early. Nobody else was in the shop."

Willis is a devout Christian. So, having eliminated the possibility of a co-worker pulling her leg, she listened carefully while a voice explained that she shouldn't be wasting time on mundane affairs like earning a paycheck.

In her off hours, Willis had been working with the children of her Far South Side community. She taught Bible-study classes and ran tutoring sessions. She would pile the children into her battered car for weekend outings, showing

them there is more to life than the run down ghetto where they live.

Now she was being told to devote herself to that ministry full time. It wasn't welcome advice. Willis has three children of her own but no husband to help feed and clothe them.

"I said: 'Lord, how can I do what you're asking of me?'" Willis, 33, recalled. "I battled him for weeks."

As a believer, though, she finally had to chuck her job. A year and a half later, Willis is fashioning an ad-hoc community center out of a two-flat that long stood empty and boarded up, like all too many buildings in the Roseland neighborhood. Upstairs there will be living quarters for her family plus the friendless strangers Willis is always taking in.

The first floor is being fixed up as a day-care center so welfare mothers can leave their children in Willis' care while they go back to school to learn skills to make them employable.

Like President Clinton and other Washington savants, Willis is convinced that the first step out of poverty is to break the cycle of welfare dependency. Any resemblance between her plans and a government program ends there.

Willis' project is being realized not with federal funds and bu-

reaucratic mandates, but with the help of a few friends and a lot of faith. An ex-lover came by to install door locks. A member of Willis' church went over to a home-remodeling store and bought her bathroom fixtures. Someone else showed up with a stove and a refrigerator.

There are no blueprints, and nothing goes according to schedule. Sometimes Willis doesn't know where her next meal is coming from, let alone how she's going to get enough cots for the kids' naps. But on good days and bad, Willis goes at life with a boundless energy and faith that amaze even her pastor, Bishop Emery Lindsay, of the nearby Christ Temple Cathedral Church.

"At a meeting of my board of deacons I said, 'Those of us in this room have too much common sense to do what Pearl is trying to do,'" Lindsay recalled. "So it won't get done by people like us."

A visitor to Willis' two-flat, where chaos and hope exist side by side, can't help thinking this must be what it looked like when another dreamer, Mother Teresa, first took on the suffering of another continent's outcasts.

But she didn't preface her min-

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Willis

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istry as Willis did, hustling tricks for a dozen years to support a drug habit. Rather than hide that background, Willis makes use of it at the weekly sessions of the women's group she runs, sharing her horror stories to encourage participants to acknowledge their problems.

"I never came out about using drugs until I sat at the round table in Pearl's kitchen," said Dietra Lee, 32. "She took me away from that life. I've been clean for two years."

At those Monday night rap sessions, Willis will recall that when she was 15 she "went on the stroll," as street-corner prostitutes refer to her calling. It wasn't that she came from a bad or broken home.

Her parents were hard-working, church-going folk. After his shift at the Ford Motor Co.'s South Side plant, her father held down a second job as a janitor to support his 13 children.

But with so many brothers and sisters vying for their parents' attention, Willis often felt neglected, even unloved. Besides, her father was a gentleman of the old school to whom showing affection didn't come easy.

Pregnant at 16

Unfortunately, a seeming remedy for her adolescent loneliness was being offered for sale just outside her parents' Southwest Side home. Drugs had invaded Chicago's ghettoes, and Willis began smoking marijuana and peppin

gills her first year in high school. She didn't get to be a sophomore. At 16 she was pregnant. Two years later, she had a second child.

"I think I wanted to prove to my parents that I could give a baby all the love they weren't giving me," Willis said.

In fact, she was so deeply involved with narcotics that she could scarcely attend to her children. Having graduated at cocaine, she would park them at a friend or relative's house while she went searching for drug-induced happiness.

"I'd leave my babies almost anywhere, saying I had to run to the store real quick," Willis said. "I'd be gone for a week, sometimes two."

The welfare system provided support for her children, and Willis had discovered she could trade her body to pay for her narcotics habit. When she was 15, a friend she met through drug-user circles took her to a party where Willis was the door prize.

"Seven guys raped me," she said. "My friend was a girl of the streets. She set me up for that one, claiming she didn't know it was going to be that kind of a party. Afterwards, she showed me the ropes. How to hustle, how to pick pockets."

Looking for 'quickies'

It wasn't a bad living, if calculated in terms of gross income. Flagging down passing cars for "quickies," Willis could earn \$50 for each furtive encounter. Working more upscale locations was more profitable still.

If she picked up a customer at the Amtrak station, Willis recalled, he might well take her out to dinner first, then pay \$100 or \$150

for her services. But whatever she'd earn, she'd quickly blow on drugs. Then she'd go right out to find more customers, sometimes 10 or 15 a day.

"If you go to where some mornings I'd wake up not knowing who he was lying next to me or where we were," she said.

Willis was caught in a vicious cycle: She needed to work as a prostitute to support her drug habit. But she needed drugs to stomach the working conditions of

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—Dietra Lee

a hooker, ensuring that the money went just as fast as it came in.

"I stayed high most of the time because you feel so nasty, like someone had dumped something dirty on you," Willis said. "I'd scrub myself in the bathtub with steel wool. I didn't know it wasn't something on the outside."

Some customers, she said, seemingly needed to mistreat her physically to get their jollies. Others liked playing psychological games and would refuse to pay. She grabbed one such deadbeat's wallet and leaped out of a hotel window.

Through all those years, her parents never gave up on her. Her

father would periodically track her down, bringing a few dollars or some food for his grandchildren. Her mother was more direct. One day she scooped up Willis' daughter and, by that time, two sons, placing them with a member of her church who had agreed to act as a foster mother.

The epiphany

Then about four years ago, the party ended for Willis. Hearing that her father was fatally ill, she went to see him, and the two reconciled. She returned to his hospital room to read to him virtually every day until he died.

"By then, the liquor didn't taste good anymore, and I'd gone from X, to Y, to Z among drugs, believing each would be the one to take away the pain," Willis said. "Finally I said, 'Jesus, if you're real, as they say, you are, please take my pain away.'"

Willis' getting religion didn't make her friends happy. When word got around that she'd taken a job and was making a home for her children, her old street-life associates came calling.

"They'd come to my door with drugs, which all of a sudden were free," she said. "In that life, they don't want you to find your way out of the darkness."

Knowing the kind of trouble kids can find in the streets, Willis didn't allow her children to be out of the house after school. But she did allow them to bring friends home, which taught Willis she had an innate warmth that attracted children. Soon half the kids in the neighborhood were spending their after-school hours in Willis' apartment.

"Pearl would have 35 to 40 kids in her little flat. She was even keeping some overnight because

their parents just weren't interested in them," said Joan Little, 58, an old friend of Willis' parents and a member of the nearby Christ Temple Cathedral Church.

Little asked pastor Lindsay if Willis could use the church's basement, and no sooner was permission given than Willis was filling it Saturday mornings and Wednesday evenings with upwards of 130 Bible-study students.

Free monthly paper

For outings, Willis' car was replaced with an equally beatup van, bought with donations to a chicken-dinner benefit. Soon Willis was publishing her own neighborhood newspaper, The Good News, sending her young followers out to distribute its free monthly editions through the community.

Willis notes that the only time Roseland gets space in the downtown papers is when someone kills or maims a neighbor. So her newspaper headlines kids with good report cards and families who plant flowers in their yards.

"It was like Pearl had to make up for lost time," said Little, who retired from her job to assist in Willis' thousand-and-one projects. "If kids had only dirty clothes, Pearl would wash them before taking them to church on Sunday, so her little friends wouldn't be embarrassed."

After a while, Willis was bringing some of her parents, too—to the pleasant surprise of Lindsay. His congregation is predominantly middle-class, having been established in Roseland during the neighborhood's better days. Until Willis began her ministry, the less-fortunate members of the community didn't have much to do with the church.

"My kids went to her Bible school," said Lee, who had been fighting a losing battle to her drug habit.

"They were always taking about Pearl, like she was too good to be true. I went to church to see for myself, and it was like she was a guardian angel the Lord sent to watch over me."

Late last year, Willis spotted a sign on an abandoned two-flat saying the building was to be auctioned by the federal government. She took her last \$500 in savings to put down as earnest money and bid \$13,000 on the property, hoping to rehab it into a community center.

"I prayed to Jesus," Willis said, "and started packing."

When they heard what she had done, four members of Christ Temple put up \$2,000 each as loans to help redeem Willis' bid. Someone else got in touch with the MidAmerica Leadership Foundation, a Chicago-based group that finds seed money for inner-city projects. Bud Iperna, its director, got a charitable foundation in Washington to provide the remaining \$5,000 to buy the building.

Iperna notes that investing in Willis was a calculated risk, based on an informed hunch that she will somehow find the way to transform her vision and energy into a project that can survive the cold reality of ledger books and hearing bills.

Terrri Hassam, whose children attend Willis' classes, said foundation officials aren't the only ones willing to put their faith in Willis. "Even the dope dealers respect her, and the car thieves, too," said Hassam, 27. "Take a look down the street. They've stolen everybody's hubcaps, but hers."

George Bush with a car come
ing his visit there in April. Ameri-
can officials said they were told at
least one of the men confessed.
The trial opened Saturday in
toward
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necessary if the embassy's move-
is reconstructed and it starts work-
keeps up contact with diplo-
colleagues (but never Iraqis; that's
against the rules).

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