The making of an angel

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 with 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 bureaucratic 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 Emyr 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-
The excitement of the day was palpable as the team gathered at the project site, eager to see the progress made in the past week. The sun shone bright in the clear blue sky, casting a warm glow on the new construction. The sound of drills and saws filled the air, a symphony of progress. The project was ahead of schedule, a testament to the hard work and dedication of the team.

"Why not a garden?" a colleague asked, "it’s a great way to bring nature into our lives while also providing a peaceful escape for our students."

"I agree," the architect replied. "A garden would not only add beauty to our school but also offer a space for students to unwind and connect with nature."

The group mused over the possibilities, brainstorming ideas for the garden design. They discussed the need for a variety of plant life, ensuring not just aesthetic appeal but also educational opportunities. The garden would serve as a living classroom, teaching students about the importance of biodiversity and sustainability.

As the day drew to a close, the team was already planning for the next phase of construction, eager to see their vision come to life. The garden would be a symbol of the school’s commitment to excellence, a place where every student could thrive.
I never came out about using drugs until I sat at the round table in Pearl's kitchen. She took me away from that life." —Dietra Lee