

by BOB SMIETANA

# PREPARING *for a* BRIGHTER TOMORROW

**W**illa Simmons didn't plan on marrying a minister. In fact, she was trying as hard as she could to stay away from church people.

For weeks, several women in her apartment building in Gary, Indiana, had been hounding her to attend their Bible study. She finally figured out how to get them off her back.

"I thought I'd go up there and say something so they could leave me alone," she said. "I went to the Bible study that day, fully in mind to just throw them off with some questions I thought they couldn't answer."

Willa went to the Bible study, asked her questions, and got no answers. After the meeting, she went back to her apartment, certain that her neighbors would leave her alone.

She was wrong. A few minutes later, they showed up at her door with a guest in tow.

"They knocked on the door asked to come in," Willa recalls. "They said, 'We got somebody to answer those questions you were asking up there, because you didn't get an answer.'"

"I said, 'No, I didn't get an answer,



**Willa Simmons, cofounder of Youth, Family, Community Renewal (YFCR)**

and I'm not coming back,'" Willa says, laughing.

She did, however, let the women and their guest in. The guest was Bennie Simmons, and she says that he had answers for her questions. At the end of the evening, Bennie invited Willa to go to a Bible study at Moody Memorial Church in Chicago. They became friends, then fell in love. In 1973, a year after that first meeting, they were married.

Twenty-seven years later, Willa and Bennie are still happily married. Together they helped start Church of Gary

Covenant Church, where Bennie served as pastor for eighteen years. They also started Youth, Family, Community Renewal (YFCR), a non-profit organization that assists families in Gary. Bennie, who resigned as pastor in 1998, serves as president, while Willa, a retired public school teacher, serves as program director.

Willa says YFCR started with a vision that Bennie had to take the ministry of the church outside the four walls of their building and into the community. "It's all about compassion, and mercy, and people being treated right, and coming to know the Lord in the process," she says.

The centerpiece of that ministry is the Learning Center, housed in the former Stephen Douglas public school building. The center started in 1989, when Willa began tutoring young people from the Church of Gary. She and several volunteers taught high-level math and other skills to prepare students for the SAT college entrance exam.

The program began to grow in 1992, after a visit from Tom Skinner, a noted preacher. Willa and Bennie talked with Skinner about their hopes for YFCR. Bennie says Skinner outlined four areas to focus on.

"Number one, he told me to concentrate on spiritual and moral values," Bennie recalls. "After that, everything hangs on economic development. He said, 'you can have a town with good kids, no crime, no teen pregnancy, but without economic development, it will be a ghost town.' Third is educational excellence. Last is political involvement and accountability."

Willa says that they began to model their learning center after Skinner's center in Newark, New Jersey. The program began to attract so many children that they moved from the church: first to the basement of Willa's brother-in-law's real estate office, and then to an office building in downtown Gary, where they took over the entire second floor.

They also started reaching younger and younger children. Willa says that she was reluctant to expand the program to children who were younger than third grade.

"The task is so great and they are so young," says Willa. "So I had to really pray about that." Eventually, the learning center added kindergarten through second-grade students, and then preschool students and toddlers in their new facility.

In 1997, YFCR had a chance to bid on the Douglas school, which had been closed for several years. The city offered to sell the building for a dollar to a non-profit organization. Several groups submitted proposals, and in June 1997 the building was awarded to another non-profit. Four months later, Bennie got a call from the city, saying, "the school is yours." The other organization had lost its funding.

"With the help of the Covenant Church," says Bennie, "especially Compassion, Mercy, and Justice Ministries, we were able to put the school together. We opened the school on March 30, 1998."

The Learning Center is now open from 6 a.m. to 7 p.m. Monday through Friday. From 6 a.m. to 3 p.m., 180 toddlers, preschoolers, and kindergartners attend the center. At 3:30, the after-school program serves another 180 students, from kindergarten through twelfth-grade.

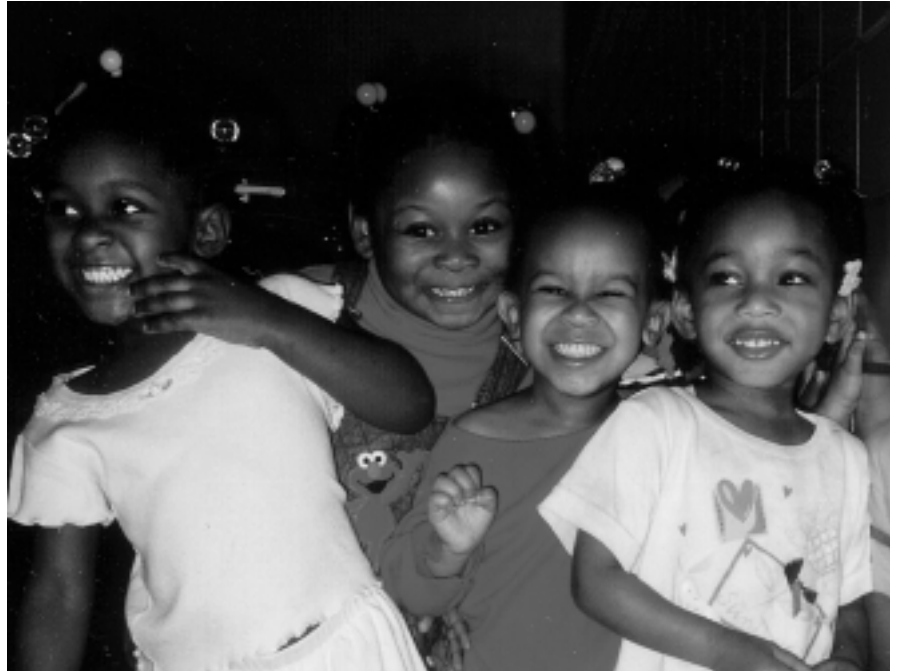
This past year, only four out of the 180 students in the after-school program had to attend summer school. When

school is out for the summer, the after-school program becomes a full day program, featuring field trips and recreational activities like soccer, tennis, and basketball. The students also start working on the subjects they will study in the fall.

The center is funded by a variety of

"We try and take them where they can see and experience and just have an opportunity because what they saw piqued their interest," she says. "What I see on these kid faces is uncertainty about their futures, and we try and alleviate some of that.

Many of the kids that YFCR works



**The Learning Center began as a tutoring program for high-school students and now includes children of all ages.**

sources, including Covenant Ministries of Benevolence, the Central Conference of the Covenant Church, Compassion International, individual donors, and several government programs.

Besides focusing on their academic and spiritual development, Willa and the staff teach kids about career options even at a very young age. Willa says that it is important to expose the children to as many possibilities as possible.

For the kids at YFCR, this might mean a behind the scenes look at the Post Office, or a trip to the NASA's Marshall Space Flight Center in Huntsville, Alabama, where a group of them traveled last summer. It may also mean a trip to Gary's famed steel mills.

Many of the students did not want to go to the steel mills, Willa says, because they didn't want to end up working there. But Willa wanted them to see what went on behind the scenes in the offices, because "those are the jobs they will not be qualified for if they are not prepared."

with face an uncertain future. Gary has been in a state of decline since the seventies. The city has lost almost 70,000 residents, or almost 40 percent of its residents since 1970. In 1997, the city was named the worst place for children in the United States (see sidebar).

Elba Lopez-Nowlin works for the Gary Ten Point Coalition, a non-profit that has its offices in the YFCR building. She talks about a conversation she had with one of the young girls at the center a few weeks earlier. When asked what she wanted to be when she grew up, the girl replied, "A pediatrician. And a dope pusher, because I need the money."

YFCR and the Ten Point Coalition have started a new program this spring to reach kids who have been suspended from school. According to YFCR, more than 5,100 students were suspended from Gary schools in 1997-98, an average of

---

*Bob Smietana is associate editor of The Covenant Companion.*

twenty-four students per day.

The suspension program allows those students, many of who have been suspended for up to ten days, to continue to focus on their academics. The YFCR staff helps them work on self-esteem and anger management. The YFCR staff also works closely with the students' parents.

"When parents register their children," Willa says, "We give them the letter that says this is not just a drop-off place where we will baby-sit and send them back to school the same way they came in there. We are talking about a being a change agent, and we hope that this is going to happen, and we can't do it without you."

Willa doesn't talk about much about her own accomplishments—like the four Gary Reading Council awards she received, or how she was honored by the City of Gary for her community service. What she will talk about is her love for teaching.

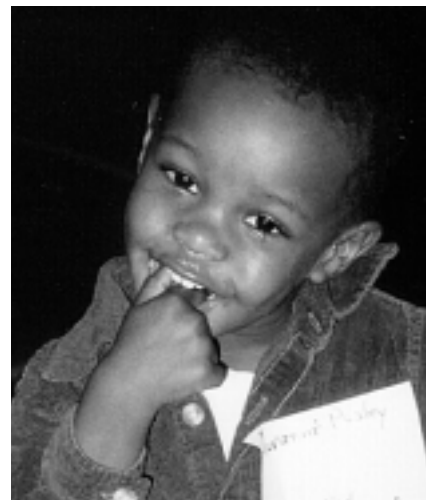
She knew that she wanted to be a teacher while she was second grade student in East Liverpool, Ohio. The oldest of eight, her parents told her they could not afford to send her to college. But she got scholarship from the steel mill where her father worked, and

worked her way through college, attending Ohio University and then Central State University in Wilberforce, Ohio. She eventually earned a master's degree from Purdue.

She came to Gary in 1964 and taught for thirty-six years in the public school system. She retired last June, though she says that retirement "didn't mean stop." "I am not retired," she says. "I just could not do both anymore. I was teaching all day and then coming here. But I don't want to get in a rocking chair."

She says that her favorite part of teaching is seeing children learn, despite their circumstances. She helps the staff at YFCR use the lessons she learned in those years as a teacher. "Number one is believing that students can learn and expecting them to," she says. "I also worked closely with the parents. When the kid sees the parent and the teacher as a team, then you have a complete circle there and they know that we are supportive of each other and we both care about them."

Many staff members came to YFCR because of their relationships with Willa. Alyone Priest, one of the kindergarten teachers, was student of Willa's in the second grade. William Walls, who teaches computers and serves as Willa's assis-



**The YFCR program serves kids from 2 to 17.**

tant, came to the work at the center after seeing the impact that the program had on his children. Before coming to YFCR, he worked as a manager in a nearby casino. "The pay was great," he says, "but I wanted to do something with a purpose."

Helen Ford, who monitors the state paperwork for YFCR, first met Willa when her son was in Willa's kindergarten class thirty year ago. She eventually became her teacher's aide, then went back to college and earned her bachelor's and her master's in education. She taught from 1974 to 1994, and then

## The First and the Last

How two churches broke down the barriers between them

IN AUGUST 1997, the *Chicago Tribune* reported that Naperville, Illinois had been named "America's most kid-friendly city," in a nationwide survey of 219 cities. Gary, Indiana was named least kid-friendly city.

Several months later, Jerome Nelson, a member of Church of Gary Covenant Church, and Kevin Colbert, member of Naperville Covenant Church, traveled together to a Promise Keepers event in Washington, D.C. The two became friends during the trip. As their friendship grew, Joanne Nelson and Sue Colbert, their wives, started talking about ways to build relationships between the two congregations.

"It was difficult," Sue says, "because of the distance and because people are so busy."

Then Sue had an idea. She had participated for several years in a triathlon held in Naperville. She thought that perhaps the women's groups could get together and take part in the triathlon as a way to build relationship.

On Saturday, July 24, twenty-seven women (twelve from

Gary, fifteen from Naperville), took part in the Naperville Triathlon. They were divided into teams of three—one swimmer, one biker, and one walker. Team members ranged in age from ten to fifty-seven years old.

"When I first heard about the triathlon, I thought it was great," says Joanne, "though I wish it wasn't so much work." Joanne biked twelve miles as part of a team called "the Oreo Cookie." Her teammates were Willa Simmons (walker) and Sue Colbert (swimmer).

Many of the members of the Church of Gary traveled to Naperville for the event and stayed overnight in the homes of members of Naperville Covenant. The two churches held a "carb-loading" pasta dinner on Saturday evening, followed by a community worship service.

"It's a chance to get to know each other better and break down some of the walls," says Joanne, "I plan on keeping up with people on my team—I am going to make a concerted effort to build those relationships."

retired at sixty-five.

She fell out of touch with Willa, and then ran into her at the learning center, where her grandchildren were enrolled. "She asked me to come and work with her," says Ford, who is seventy-two. "And I told her that I didn't want to work every day, and she said 'just come in when you can.' And so now, I come in every day."

Bennie says that he and Willa see the children at the learning center as part of their family. God placed us in a special position and called us to this position to work with other people's kids—since we don't have any children of our own. We love them and they know that we love them."

The children in the suspension program get special attention from Bennie. The number of student varies each day—during my visit, there are two boys who look about ten years old. Once they finish their homework, Bennie tells them that they can spend a few minutes in the gym, shooting baskets. As they wait for the younger children to finish up in the gym, he hands the boys some math flash cards and starts to quiz them. When he finds that one of the boys doesn't know his multiplication tables, he hands the boy the flash cards.

"I'm going to give them to you," he says, "and you are going to take them home and you are going to work on them. Before you leave, you are going to know the times tables just like he does."

Bennie says that the only way that he and Willa are able to accomplish all the projects they are involved in is to recruit help and then stay out of the way.

"We both know how to delegate. We give people responsibility and let them mess up. Then we never criticize the person—just the work, and we never do it in public."

When asked how she keeps up, Willa has a simpler answer.

"I tell the young people—ask the Lord to give you a job that you like. That's the difference. I don't hate to get up and come here so when I go home I am not like 'whew, I am out of that place.' Our problem is that we like what we do so well so that we have to plan not working—we don't so that very well." □

# Stock your church library and save 20%!

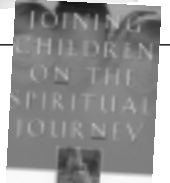
## Leading Teens to Freedom in Christ

by Neil T. Anderson and Rich Miller (Regal) Every hour of every day, 228 teenagers in the U.S. attempt to take their own lives. Many Christian youth, too, are trapped in the "Less" Mess-feeling useless, worthless, helpless, purposeless, and hopeless. *Leading Teens to Freedom in Christ* provides you with a biblical blueprint for counseling young people ages 13-21. Regular price \$12.99 **Your price \$10.39**



## Joining Children on the Spiritual Journey

by Catherine Stonehouse (Baker) This book shows how the spiritual life of a child develops and how caring parents and teachers can enhance this development. Regular price \$15.99 **Your price \$12.79**



## Purpose Driven Youth Ministry

by Doug Fields (Zondervan) An indispensable guide to creating and maintaining youth ministry for the long run. It will help you create a solid team that builds the foundations of the Christian faith into the hearts and lives of young people. Forged around the fundamental purposes of evangelism, discipleship, fellowship, ministry, and worship. *Purpose Driven Youth Ministry* illustrates what a healthy youth ministry can be. Regular price \$14.97 **Your price \$11.98**



## The Child Friendly Church

by Boyce A. Bowdon (Abingdon) This book examines 150 models of ministries that are transforming the lives of people and churches. The book examines models that help churches attract children and their families to enabling churches to minister to their communities and with the poor. Regular price \$10.00 **Your price \$8.00**



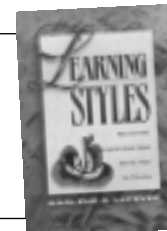
## Young Children and Worship

by Sonja M. Stewart and Jerome W. Berryman (Westminster/John Knox) Stewart and Berryman have taken the needs of children into account and devised a way to introduce 3-7 year-olds to the wonder of worship. The methods described here help children to understand and participate in worship. Children will be led to experience God, using all their senses. Activities are developed around the order of worship commonly used in Reformed churches: assemble in God's name; proclaim God's Word; give thanks to God; go in God's name. Regular price \$24.95 **Your price \$19.96**



## Learning Styles

by Marlene D. LeFever (David C. Cook) This book looks at the four learning styles: imaginative, analytic, common sense, and dynamic. By understanding these styles teachers or parents can adjust to those styles of learning. Regular price \$21.99 **Your price \$17.59**



# COVENANT BOOKSTORE

Call 800-621-1290 to order today.