

MANNA *in The wilderness*

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Remember, Celebrate & Believe

by Julia Occhiogrosso

I was out on the roof when I heard a fragile yet persistent call. As we worked on rehabbing our newly acquired hospitality house, we were growing accustomed to curious visitors. I went downstairs to meet our guest. An elderly woman stood in the entrance way. Streams of daylight gave a soft glow to her brown skin. Her refined attire stood in contrast to the boarded-up windows and broken glass. She reached out to shake my hand. "My name is Carrie Christiansen. My husband and I built this house in 1933," she explained with nostalgic admiration. Still holding my hand, she continued to tell bits and pieces of the story. "We had a prayer room in this house, my husband and I, we prayed about every decision we made. We were just married and living out here on this property in a tent. This neighborhood was just desert back in those days." She continued, "I saw we needed a home. I admired these stones I spotted down at the railroad yard. We had a vision that we could use these stones to build us a home. We prayed that maybe somehow we would get the stones. Then one day I convinced my husband to go down to the railroad yard and ask if we could have them. While he was inquiring, I waited in the car. Meanwhile, a man approached me. I told him what I was waiting for. He said, 'Ma'am, if you want those stones you can have them.' I asked who should I say gave us permission. He told me his name and it turned out he was the manager of the railroad yard. Surely those stones were a gift from the Lord." She paused for a moment and I explained that this house would be used to serve the poor. With enthusiasm she responded, "I always knew this was meant to be a benevolent home ever since my husband and I adopted twin boys."

She slowly moved out into the front yard. There she pointed out all the fruits she planted in honor of her favorite scripture stories. "Over there is the pomegranate, and there are the olive trees. On the side of the house are the orange blossoms; in the back, the fig tree still stands." There was a moment of silence as her eyes wandered about the house. I

found myself wandering with her on a journey that seemed to be divinely connected to our life here at the Catholic Worker.

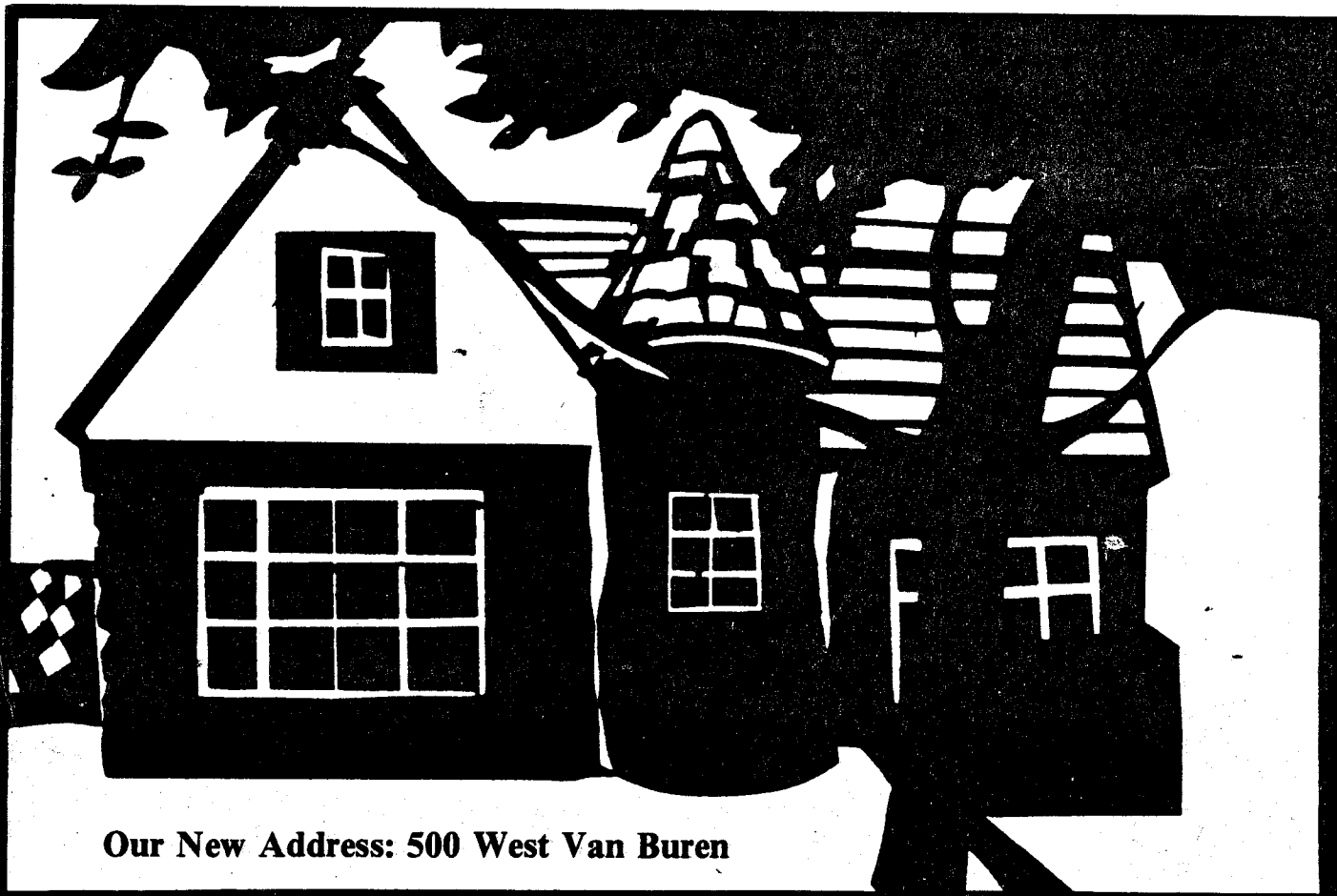
We visited for a good part of the afternoon and the next day she returned to show me her wedding picture. Her frail fingers carefully handled the photo. Gently tilting it in my direction, I had the sure sense that she was sharing a rare treasure. Yet more precious than the preserved paper image of her and her young groom was her ability and desire to remember. One could tell she drew strength and vision from this remembering. It was clear to me that even as a young bride she knew who she was, and who she would become was intimately connected to those who came before her.

Mrs. Christiansen had to sell the house in 1977; she was a widow and could not manage the upkeep alone. She lives in Kentucky and continues to visit Las Vegas. It is a privilege to live in a house built on such a legacy of faith. Indeed this house still stands tall in this poor black community. Many old timers who knew the Christiansens have commented that this was a special home, a place where they found good people and Christian love.

Today as I look out the second floor window of this house, I try to imagine this area fifty-six years ago... I see the young, confident, part-mulatto, part-Indian woman who arrived with her black Danish husband. I try to see what they saw. Before them was a vast desert landscape. They were surrounded by a stretch of earth which provided infinite possibilities. And even with life's struggles of the depression, they were able to dream.

The shatter of broken glass interrupts my reverie. I find myself abruptly brought back to 1989. This same area now is covered with boarded-up buildings and burnt-out homes. It has been economically deprived for so long by a wealthy city that has not learned to share. It seems to be lingering on its last breath. Old time community members work hard to hold small businesses together. The national drug crisis hits

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Our New Address: 500 West Van Buren

even harder in this community that is already on the economic margins. Parent addicts use food money to get their fix. Young children are attracted to the seemingly quick cash that dealing drugs provides. Young men fight to their death over a bad deal.

As a culture, we are steadily losing a sense of our connection to those who came before us. For the poor, who are burdened by the task of survival, reflection on the past is a luxury or a memory too painful to bear. Indeed the rise in broken families makes it difficult to trace even a portion of one's heritage. The fast lane generation is blinded to the values of faith and community that gave many of our ancestors a life of integrity. The immediate gratification mentality leaves us focused on how much and how fast we can consume in the moment. As a whole we are left with a society with a disoriented sense of self and an emptiness that breeds more and more addictions.

Our identity stands on shaky ground and it is difficult to find the proper footing to push off into a more hopeful future. Indeed, the popular culture would tell us that we should not allow ourselves to even enter a future. Instead we

should stay forever young. The elderly, symbols of our future, are devalued like an obsolete technology. Our apathy over pollution of the earth and the arms race indicates how little sense we have of our connection to the lives that will follow ours.

At the Catholic Worker, we are directly confronted with some of the tragic consequences of a culture which does not understand its place in history. More significantly, it is a culture which does not recognize God moving with us in history toward a new creation. In this poor black community there are many who are convinced that their identity lies in embracing the values of the popular culture. Yet, if given a chance to get truly acquainted with this popular culture, they would realize just how hollow these values really are.

In our new home we will continue to minister to the poor. We will continue to prepare food for the many homeless on the streets. And in our daily witness, I can only pray that we, like Mrs. Christiansen, can share our rare treasure. We too will inspire others to remember our common heritage in Christ. And in that remembering, give this broken world the hope needed to move toward a vision of the Kingdom.

An Invitation . . .



JOIN THE CELEBRATION!

Saturday, November 18
1 - 4 pm Open House
4 pm Mass & House Blessing
followed by potluck dinner

At the NEW St. John the Baptist
House: 500 West Van Buren
(near Owens and 'E' streets)
For information call 647-0728.

SCHEDULE: Please note changes.

Come and see and help!

Monday - Saturday: Serve coffee and food. 6:30 am - 7:30 am. 'A' and Wilson Streets.

Wednesday: Dinner Meal. 5:30 pm - 7:30 pm. St. James the Apostle Catholic Church, 821 N. 'H' Street.

Friday (starting October 25): Liturgical celebration and potluck dinner to follow. 5:30 pm. St. John the Baptist House.

WE NEED DONATIONS!!

Summer has been a slow season for donations. We need your continual financial support.

WE NEED ART SUPPLIES to start an after-school program for kids:

water colors
crayons
paper
brushes
glue
blunt scissors

VOLUNTEERS: We are looking for more full time, live-in volunteers. For more information, write us or call us at (702) 647-0728.

LAS VEGAS CATHOLIC WORKER

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