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PATRICIA WATKINS: "I'm the one who makes the noise"

She's a Pentecostal minister that chases drug dealers from the streets and wins legislative victories in Springfield. She preaches a pretty mean sermon too.

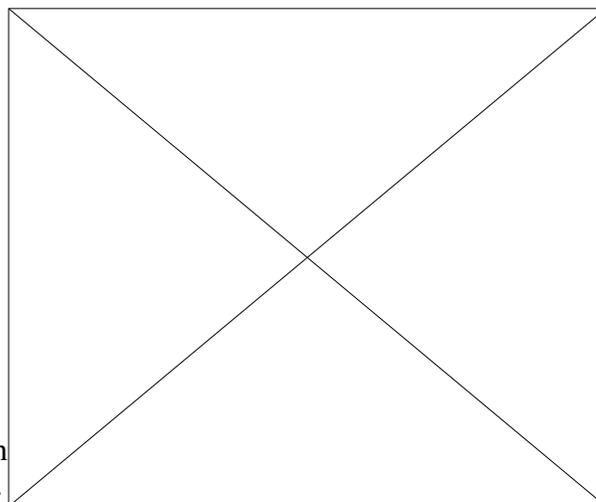
By Don Terry

Tribune staff reporter

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The Evangelist wipes a white handkerchief across her gleaming face, but it doesn't make much difference. Her cheeks continue to glisten. Tears or sweat, it's hard to tell from the back of the sanctuary at the Ambassadors for Christ World Outreach Ministries, a Pentecostal church on the South Side dedicated to salvation and struggle.

She's preaching hard. When she talks about fire and brimstone, you can feel the heat. She lowers the microphone and pauses to say a private prayer as she does anytime she speaks in public. She is asking God to make her his instrument, to give her the words and the wisdom and the courage to say what has to be said here in church and to the high and mighty wherever they may be.



She knows there are too many of God's children hungry and homeless on the streets, too much poverty and racism, too much war and suffering, too many mothers and daughters forced to sell their bodies to feed their children, too many fathers and sons returning from prison with no place to be somebody, no job to go to, no future to dream about.

She lifts the microphone back to her mouth and continues to preach.

"If we make a decision to stay in a place of despondency, we will die," she says. "We will lose ground. We will find ourselves someplace other than where we intended to be. Amen. That's why we have to encourage ourselves. Tell your neighbor to encourage yourself."

"Encourage yourself" spreads through the room.

"God wants us to encourage ourselves and speak righteously in the face of adversity," she says. "That's the only way we can be Christians."

Patricia Van Pelt Watkins is the Evangelist, a high-school dropout and former drug addict who once upon a dark and painful period of her life didn't like to eat because it took time away from getting high. Today, she is a Pentecostal minister and community organizer, saved and sober for 25 years, armed with

a fortified faith and college degrees. She calls herself, in the words of an old steel-your-spirit song, "a soldier in the Army of the Lord." Everyone else calls her Evangelist. "I'm the one who makes the noise," she explains.

Among her peers in the world of neighborhood advocacy groups and social service agencies, Watkins is hailed as one of the most effective grass-roots organizers in Chicago, a city that has often turned a cold shoulder and blind eye to its reformers and secular saints. No matter. Watkins is as stubborn as she is sanctified. Yet, she is also funny and warm, quick to laugh. "She connects with people really well," says Jim Field, program director of the Community Renewal Society, a coalition of religious and advocacy groups. "In organizing, that's very important. She's amazing."

She gracefully juggles the sacred and the secular, going from spirited church services to somber anti-violence vigils, from revival meetings to lobbying sessions with powerful state politicians. It is as though the spirits of Saul Alinsky and Martin Luther King Jr. have taken up residence in the body of this middle-aged, coffee-colored woman with oft-braided hair who speaks in tongues when moved by the Holy Ghost and allows neither cigarettes nor alcohol to touch her lips. Or bread, either-she's on the low-carb diet.

In her black leather jacket, which fits a lot better now, and her white clerical collar, she shows up at demonstrations holding a bullhorn in her left hand and a Bible in her right. She once held a months-long vigil on a drug-plagued street corner and chased away a dealer.

Watkins is also a loyal citizen of the America that attends church twice a week, studies scripture and spends at least an hour a day praying to God on bended knee. She believes that every word in the Bible is literally true. Most of all, she believes that faith was the only thing that kept her from going mad with grief when her 17-year-old daughter, Sheba, was killed in an airplane collision over Lake Michigan in 1997.

A couple of weeks after Sheba died, Watkins went back to work. She sat down with Field to polish a grant proposal. "She was in a lot of pain," he remembers. "I said we can wait. She said, 'I will see my daughter again. Don't worry about it.' You seldom see faith like that. What she believes, she believes."

She does not believe the term "moral values" is a synonym for the Republican platform or Christian fundamentalism. Her concern for the country's soul goes beyond same-sex marriage and Janet Jackson's wardrobe malfunction. At the top of her list is ending poverty, fighting for racial justice and keeping troubled teenagers in school and out of prison.

She says she is simply doing "what Jesus would do if he were here."

The Evangelist will tell you herself that not even the most sanctified among us can live on faith alone. At the beginning of each day, before she can think of saving a single soul, she has to have a grande soy latte. Five pumps of vanilla. No sugar. No foam.

Ahhhhh.

Now she's ready to charge into Satan's storm.

She's sitting in her car in front of her church, Ambassadors for Christ, sipping the last drops of a vanilla soy, when a skeletal woman walks past, pockmarked face, eyes vacant.

"Drugs," Watkins says, shaking her head as the woman rounds a corner. "I feel like crying most of the

time because of the condition of my people."

Ambassadors for Christ is housed in an old showbiz palace at 79th Street and Ashland Avenue, across the street from Nick's Gyros, Danny's Beauty Supply and the blinking yellow lights of a currency exchange. The church, known as AFC, was born less than 25 years ago with just 12 souls praying and praising in Watkins' basement apartment on the West Side. It now owns the building and several others nearby, where it rents out space to as many as 50 congregations and encourages them to get involved in community issues. AFC also has churches in Indiana, Michigan, Jamaica and South Africa.

The church and its pastor, Apostle Joseph L. Stanford, have founded several not-for-profit activist organizations, including TARGET, whose mission is to help rebuild the Gresham and Englewood neighborhoods' vacant lots, crumbling buildings and sagging spirits. Stanford is the chairman of the board, "And I'm the dream manager," executive director Watkins says. "I manage his dreams."

Last November, TARGET received a \$10,000 award from the New York City-based MetLife Foundation for its partnership with police in reducing neighborhood crime. It was one of six community groups to win the award out of nearly 200 applicants. "There are so many needs," Watkins observes. "Scripture says, 'Occupy until he comes.' That's what I'm doing."

Watkins has taken on another role as co-founder of the Developing Justice Coalition, a group of 18 community organizations from across the city. The coalition played a major role in getting a bill passed in Springfield last fall that, if signed by the governor, will give ex-offenders a better chance at landing jobs by keeping low-level felony convictions for drug possession and prostitution sealed and hidden from many employers.

A criminal record, even for low-level felonies, can make it difficult for an ex-offender to get a job as a stock boy or a burger flipper, let alone employment that pays a living wage. "They are literally forced back into a life of crime," Watkins says. "We realized that more arrests weren't making our neighborhoods more safe. Our children had become the raw material for the prison industry."

Passage of the bill was a major victory for the coalition, largely made possible because Watkins and her colleagues were able to get the 20,000-member Illinois Retail Merchants Association to sign on. "She is forthright and direct in the most pleasant way," says Rob Karr, spokesman for the association. "We wound up supporting the bill because they came to us very early on, giving us plenty of time to vet it to our membership."

Watkins and 15 other community organizers also went calling on Deanne Benos, policy director for Gov. Rod Blagojevich, to pitch their agenda for reforming the state's criminal justice system. Seeing the crowd in the lobby, an assistant told Benos to watch herself; the visitors seemed "angry" and "aggressive." Benos felt a headache coming on. A big one. "I was apprehensive," she admits.

As the meeting got going in the James R. Thompson Center, Watkins pulled out a stopwatch. She had assigned each speaker three minutes to make their point about the evils of racial profiling and the necessity of developing a plan to reduce recidivism and other issues. If someone ran over their time limit, Watkins cut them off. Have to maintain discipline. Next.

The meeting lasted exactly one hour.

"While we didn't expect to be on the same page at the beginning of the meeting, we were by the end," recalls Benos, who is now assistant director of the state's Department of Corrections. "She really endeared herself when she used the stopwatch. We knew she was going to be respectful of our time."

Patricia is not only passionate, she's pragmatic."

Watkins says she prefers diplomacy over demonstrations. "I try to renovate from inside the house," she says. "I try to build relationships. It's hard to renovate from outside, throwing rocks, busting windows out."

But if need be, Watkins can blare and shout. She will march down to a politician's office with a few dozen friends and leave the stopwatch at home. "She's achieved a lot by challenging people," says Dr. Gary Slutkin, executive director of the Chicago Project for Violence Prevention and Ceasefire, which works to reduce violence in troubled neighborhoods. "She wants more from people. She expects more from people."

A few years ago, she wanted more peace in the church's Auburn Gresham neighborhood, and she wanted to learn how to apply Ceasefire's violence-reduction strategies in her own neighborhood. The street corners around AFC were crowded with 13-, 14- and 15-year-old boys acting as lookouts and runners for older dope dealers. One day a neighbor called the TARGET office. She was fed up and said she was going to kill an especially disrespectful thug-boy, shoot him down like a dog.

Watkins and several outreach workers hurried to the block. There was no bloodshed that day, but Watkins decided they needed to hold a community meeting right there on the corner of 78th Street and Hermitage Avenue. They needed to reclaim the corner by their presence and their prayers.

They soon pitched a tent, set up chairs and started talking about the problems and needs of the block. Many nights, 30 people showed up, sometimes many more. Ministers from neighborhood churches held worship services. Tutoring in reading and math was offered to children. Police and prosecutors came out and marched with the residents, who chanted: "Whose streets? Our streets!"

One day, as a tent meeting was breaking up, one of the low-level drug bosses ordered his crew back to work. The cops were gone, the preachers were leaving.

A member of the crew asked about the church folk still left. Don't worry about them, the boss said. Get to work.

That's when Watkins confronted the boss.

"Son, do you know why we're out here?"

He shrugged.

"We're out here trying to save your life," she said. "How old are you?"

"Seventeen."

"You've got to help us help you."

As they talked, Watkins says she noticed a car coming slowly down the street. The driver was nervously looking around. The teenager walked over and began talking to the driver. Realizing a drug deal was going on, Watkins grabbed a bullhorn.

"No drugs!" she said, her voice booming out of the horn. "No drugs! No drugs!"

The car sped off and the young dealer started running, followed by Watkins, a little boy, two pastors and several round women. They chased him for blocks. Neighbors on their porches laughed and applauded.

"All we could see," Watkins says, "was the bottom of his shoes."

They did not want to arrest him. They wanted to shame him. They wanted to change him. "He was our son," Watkins says.

They didn't see the boy for three months. Then one night he returned to the tent. He said he was sorry and was trying to turn his life around. He asked Watkins to pray for him.

Watkins earned her passion and pragmatism the old-fashioned way, from a life of tragedy, triumph and amazing grace. She was born 47 years ago in an apartment on North Mohawk Street. Her mother, Dee Van Pelt, was a 6th-grade dropout from Georgia who sometimes helped her husband paint houses. Joe Van Pelt, Patricia's stepfather, also drove a cab to feed his growing family.

There were five girls and two boys crowded around the dinner table. "Patricia was a little different from her sisters," her mother says. "Patricia would fight. If you hit her, she would hit back."

The family lived in a string of struggling neighborhoods and rundown apartments. "Real cold places, not enough room, basements," recalls Watkins, who kept her last name from a brief marriage in 1995.

Life started to improve when the little girl her family called "Trish" was 7. Her mother got the family into one of the row houses at the Cabrini-Green public housing development. "Then we had a bathroom with running water that worked," Watkins says. "It was heaven."

Religion did not play much of a role in the Van Pelt household. "We were not in church," the mother says. "I thought I would miss having fun if I was in church. I just didn't think I needed to go. I loved to party."

But she did occasionally send her children to the local Catholic Church where the mass was in Latin. "We couldn't understand a word they were saying," Watkins recalls. After a while she stopped going. If God didn't speak the same language as a little girl from the projects, then what good was He?

When Patricia was 10, her parents divorced. Money went from being tight to nonexistent. The family went on welfare and got groceries from food pantries. "I decided I wanted my kids to have a different life than I had," her mother says. "I didn't want them living in the ghetto. The only way I could change that was if I showed them how important an education was."

She went back to school to complete her education, starting where she left off: grammar school. Eventually she enrolled in college and earned an associate's degree. Meanwhile, little Trish began a different kind of education: At age 11, she started sneaking into her mother's liquor cabinet. When she was 12 she smoked marijuana for the first time with some of the older kids she had begun hanging out with.

She dropped out of high school at 14. When she turned 16, she lied about her age and got a job at Ingersoll Steel, becoming one of a handful of women working there. She operated a drill press and sometimes fed the furnaces. She liked working at the mill, but she also loved getting high. Thanks to her union-scale paycheck, she could afford it.

She tried cocaine for the first time when she was 17 and was soon hooked. Over the next several years,

she lived with a couple of older men who supplied her with drugs. "I wasn't using drugs, drugs were using me," she remembers. "I began to be afraid of myself. I didn't know what I might do."

She gave birth to a son when she was 20, and two years later her daughter Sheba arrived. She was still working at the steel mill, but she frequently was absent, either too strung out or too busy looking for a connection to go to work. For six months, she didn't bother to cash her paycheck. Instead, she signed it over to her drug dealer, who put it directly into his account.

As Watkins' downward spiral continued, her 13-year-old sister, Melody, was attending a Pentecostal church with their grandmother. Melody nagged her big sister, asking her to come to church for just one Sunday. "I knew God could do something for her," Melody says. "She kept promising me that she'd go and she kept changing her mind."

The truth is, Watkins thought her little sister had lost hers. From everything she heard about church folk, especially the holy rollers at her sister's storefront house of worship, they acted a fool during service, shouting and carrying on about the Holy Ghost. And outside of church they were just the opposite—deadly boring. "They couldn't drink, they couldn't smoke, they couldn't have boyfriends," Watkins says. "I had no intention of being anything like them."

Yet, she knew if she didn't do something to change her path, she would die soon, either by her hand or someone else's.

It was 1978, and she was 21.

ONE DAY, THE TELEPHONE woke her. It was Melody.

"Come on, Trish. You promised. Please come to church today. Remember, God can do anything but fail."

Her sister's plea got her out of bed, and she finally went to Liberty Tabernacle church in Englewood. She was three hours late. She had been up all night doing drugs. She hadn't combed her hair in days. She stumbled into the service in an old T-shirt and work boots.

The service was still going on. People, overcome with rapture, were fainting in the aisles. "I'd never seen anyone falling out and everybody acting like it was nothing," Patricia says. "They didn't fall out in Catholic Church."

She thought about bolting for the door. These people are nuts, she thought. But something about the music, the fiery preaching about God's mercy and the high emotions sweeping the congregation kept her in her seat.

Then the pastor asked if there was anyone who wanted to be saved. Watkins stood up and walked to the pulpit. No, it was more like a pair of invisible hands had snatched her out of her seat and pushed her down the aisle, she recalls.

She told the pastor she was a drug addict and was so, so very tired.

God won't hold it against you, sister, he told her.

Then he rolled up the sleeves of his suit coat and white shirt. She looked at his exposed arms and saw the needle tracks and the scars on his wrists from his failed suicide attempt.

He told her God had delivered him and God would deliver her.

As she stood at the pulpit, staring at the pastor's scarred arms, "It became clear to me how I had neglected my son, poured my whole life into dope, the stealing, the cheating."

She fell to the floor, wailing, "I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

Watkins says she was saved that Sunday in Englewood, but she wasn't made perfect. "We're not little gods flying around," she says. She struggled mightily to stay saved. Once, for a couple of weeks, she returned to cocaine. Mostly, though, her weakness was of the flesh. Whenever she would backslide, it seemed to be over men. "I had a problem with the brothers," she says. "Some people need several dips in the water before they are sanctified."

She threw herself into church, attending services at least twice a week. A few months later, she moved to the West Side and joined Holy Raiders Revival Church, where she met Stanford, then an associate pastor. Holy Raiders eventually was torn by internal disputes, and Stanford announced he was leaving. Watkins and 10 others said they were going with him. They urged him to start a church of his own. He said he had no place to go, and Watkins said he should use her place.

And so in 1982, Ambassadors for Christ was born in Watkins' basement apartment on the West Side. Sharrod Gordon was a little boy when his mother took him in one hand and his sister in the other and followed Stanford into the basement. "Everybody else we knew was going to church in a church," says Gordon, now 30 and a minister and organizer for the church. "And here we got this basement with a washer and dryer in the corner."

The new church stayed in Watkins' basement for a couple of months, sermons and songs bouncing off the low ceiling. Then the tiny congregation rented space in another church's building. "It wasn't too inviting," Gordon remembers. "There was a big old dog running around and it was freezing in there."

They got out of the cold and purchased a former union hall, turning it into a church. Then one day in 1990, Stanford saw that the old Highland Theater at 79th Street and Ashland Avenue was for sale. Opened in 1926, the neoclassical style theater, with its intricate terra-cotta facade, seated nearly 3,000 people. In the old days, it was a palace for vaudeville and movies. The Jehovah's Witnesses eventually bought it and turned it into a religious convention center.

Now it was up for sale again. The price was more than \$400,000. The Ambassadors for Christ had \$6,000 in the bank.

Stanford told his congregation that they "would whup this devil one dollar at a time." He had a plan: butter cookies.

They set up a 24-hour cookie factory in the church kitchen, churning out thousands of butter cookies and selling them three for a dollar. They sold them on street corners and in CTA cars during rush hour. They sold them at the laundry and after church let out down the street.

"Everybody would get out and sell," says Watkins' sister Melody. "I raised about \$12,000. I sold 300 cookies a day."

In about two months, through donations and sales of the "miracle butter cookies," the church raised \$160,000 and the congregation of about 40 adults and 44 children moved into their massive new home.

Two years later, a wealthy woman gave the church the building next door. It contained a dozen small storefronts that wrapped around the corner. The church planned to rent the stores out for retail businesses, but Joseph Stanford remembered his days in the basement. He told Watkins he wanted to turn one of the spaces into a church hall for "a little preacher" to rent for a nominal fee. He would stock the space with everything necessary for a Sunday morning of worship: an organ, a pulpit, chairs plus heat and air conditioning. Everything the AFC did not have when it was getting started.

Before AFC finished transforming the storefront there was a waiting list to rent it. "Preachers started coming from everywhere," Stanford says. So, he turned one more store into a church hall. More preachers came. Finally, a dozen storefronts were converted, each named after a book in the Bible, including Judges, Joshua and Nehemiah.

The halls are rented in three-hour time blocks for as little as \$120 per service. Some of the halls host three different churches on Sunday, with music and prayers pouring into the street from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. A cleanup crew sweeps the halls between each service.

The AFC calls the setup "a church incubator." Percy Bromby calls it a blessing. He is the pastor of New Beginning Apostolic Faith Ministry and has rented Deuteronomy Hall for more than a year. AFC "doesn't discriminate against any denomination," he says. "Their arms are wide open."

One of the smallest churches growing in the incubator is True Holiness, which has 25 members. The largest congregation is Crusaders, with more than 2,000. The pastor of True Holiness, Gloria Gardner, brings a portable CD player to accompany the songs. The Crusaders have a stage filled with musicians, praise dancers, lights, ribbons, whistles and a high-tech sound board.

The AFC encourages its church tenants to get involved in the life and issues of the neighborhood, to join them in anti-violence marches, lobbying trips to Springfield and City Hall and other organizing efforts. "It inspires us to do more," says one of the renters, Apostle Ann Poplous of True Worship Outreach Ministry. "They're definitely a catalyst for this city."

Catalysts don't get much rest. In the last few weeks, Watkins has been constantly on the go. With Stanford, she has driven to Springfield to lobby Senate President Emil Jones about supporting the bill to seal low-level felony records. She has traveled to Mississippi for a conference on neighborhood groups and spoke to a class at the University of Chicago about "developing and executing public policy in the real world."

She has attended at least a dozen meetings about Ceasefire, ex-offenders returning home and other issues. She has led two anti-violence marches to pray for peace and the souls of three young people gunned down in the street. "We've got the power," she chanted into her bullhorn on a blustery Saturday as she walked down a tree-lined street haunted by violence. "Let's save our sons. Let's save our daughters. Let's do it right now."

No matter where she goes, her road always leads back to one place. That's where she is on this Wednesday night, her face wet and shiny, her voice going from roar to whisper as she paces the floor in front of the pulpit at the Ambassadors for Christ.

"How many know it's time for some changes?" she asks.

"How can I be a Christian and sit there and smile and shake my head like everything is OK?"

"If the righteous be silent, woe is the world."

And before the Evangelist can call for a response, somebody shouts Amen.

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