

Jariland Spence: The Mother of West Broadway

Woman turns North Side storefront into Prayer Center

By Emily Kaiser Wednesday, June 9, 2010

Jariland Spence's storefront on West Broadway is never quiet. By the time one person has come and gone from her Prayer Center, the front door creaks open and the door chimes echo again.

On one recent afternoon, a young man dressed in a Little Caesars uniform and carrying a giant pizza sign came in from the bustling street outside. Spence smiled and waved him back to the couches. "I just wanted to come here and thank you for that prayer when I came in here," he said. "That prayer helped me a lot. I've got two jobs now." "Wow, all right!" Spence said with a big grin. "Very good. I'm glad you thought enough to come back. I'm proud of you."

The man thanked her again and went back across the street to the pizza joint. Spence leaned back in the worn couch, still beaming. "That's encouraging," she said. "He was feeling suicidal and felt like he wanted to give up. He had filled out application after application. He came in here just distraught. Now to see a smile: That's what keeps me going."

Spence is known to many as the Mother of West Broadway. And it's easy to see why. Her laugh is infectious, she hugs everyone she meets, and she's sometimes brutally honest. That personality has brought grown men from the neighborhood in to volunteer after decades of troublemaking. They just call her Ma.

Spence was once almost ready to give up herself. She had started a sewing and alteration business on West Broadway between Aldrich and Bryant Avenues North in 1993. She watched the North Side's main drag turn into one of the worst streets in the city.

By 2003, her customers stopped coming in. They didn't feel safe coming to her store and crossing paths with the drug dealers and gang bangers loitering outside. A barbershop on one side of her business was a front for drugs. So was the T-shirt store on the other side. Prostitution was regularly practiced behind the building.

In November 2007, Spence arrived one morning to find bullet holes in her large storefront window. "This is enough," she told herself. "I'm sick of the neighborhood, sick of the people. It's too close to home when you get a bullet hole in your own window." But relocating wouldn't be easy. Her business was so slow she had no money to afford the move. And she realized she wasn't doing any good leaving another empty storefront on the deteriorating block. "If everyone leaves, how could it ever change?" Spence says. "I've never been the person who walks away from a problem. When you stay, you are saying you believe in the people." So Spence decided to convert her space into the Prayer Center and reopened in May 2008. She thought the block had become crime-ridden because the people living nearby had lost hope. The least she could do was provide a place to make a change. She posted a "Prayer Center" sign over the entrance and waited. It didn't take long for curious passersby to start coming in.

"I tried to give them hope that says your life can be better," Spence says. "Hope that you don't have to live like this and there can be change in your life. That's really all I have. I didn't have money for them, but I could tell them they didn't have to live like this. It was simple, but effective." There was one man she wanted to see walk through her doors more than any other. Jamie Greene, a leader in the Vice Lords gang, had been troubling her block for years, selling drugs and intimidating visitors. Greene had been wheelchair-bound after an illness, but once he recovered, he was back on the streets again.

She wanted to talk to a man who had lost so much and still chose to return to that lifestyle when he was back on his feet.

Greene finally came in to see her, but wasn't willing to hear her out. He called her "the crazy lady" and disappeared. He was making too much money selling drugs to let it go. A year later, Spence received a phone call. It was Greene. "I was baptized," he told her. "I'm going to church again." Greene started visiting Spence more often, offering to help with tasks around the Prayer Center. He started telling her about his friends who were still part of the Vice Lords and needed help. "Bring 'em up here," Spence said. "I want to meet them." One by one, more gang members walked through her door looking for someone to listen. And as they made their exits from a life of criminal activity, they came back to help her with her mission.



Ken Ehling, a friend of Spence, helped her start the Prayer Center.

After the first year, he says, the drug dealing and violence on the street disappeared. The businesses next door that sold drugs closed up and moved away. "Spence can't change the world, but she can change this one block," Ehling says. "That's her mission, and if it works, others can use her model to make change on other blocks."

But Spence knows that hope doesn't put food on the table. Late last year, Spence started renting the three other storefronts on her block to open businesses for supporters to run.

"These people need jobs," she says. "They have felonies, they are on probation, and they have been in prison. Employers don't want them."

One space is already a thrift store. The other two will be a barbershop and a beauty salon. Although Spence has gone to the city and county looking for help changing her street, she has hit roadblocks. The separation of church and state prevents politicians from giving her public funding.

"They told me if I take my Jesus sign down, I could get help, but I'm not going to do that," Spence says. "That's my belief, my grounding, my foundation. Our spiritual center is why the Prayer Center works."

Mark Stenglein, Hennepin County Second District commissioner, credits Spence for the improvements on her block of Broadway. "She's doing miraculous things," he says. "It's maybe not a grand scale, but she is touching people on an individual basis."

At the Prayer Center, the door creaks open again, followed by the welcoming sound of door chimes. The sun reflects off the stark white walls and the two visitors squint as their eyes adjust to the room.

The man has his arm wrapped around a woman. Both are dressed poorly, staggering slightly as Spence stands to greet them. "Can you pray for me and my friend?" the man asks. Spence gathers with the two in a circle, taking their hands as they bow their heads.

"I thank you, God, for bringing them in," Spence prays. "God, we ask you continue blessing them, continue going before them and making crooked places straight. Hold them close so they can get away."

"Amen!" the man yells. "Goddamn, I love that." As the visitors leave, Spence comes back to the couch.

"See, they can go on a little further now," she says. "This is my purpose. This is what I've been living for. I feel like my life is just starting."



Nick Vlcek - Jariland Spence invites gangsters to pray