

Features

Former prostitute finds hope in new life as nurse

By Rob Cullivan

Fifteen years ago, Paula Dumont had a mystical vision. In it, she now recalls, the Blessed Virgin Mary came to her with a white carnation, which Dumont then handed to Jesus. In His hands, the flower multiplied, becoming a shower of white carnations.

Years later, in the mid-1980s, Dumont was leading a spiritual exercise at a picnic for some people who worked at Assisi House on Lyell Avenue, where Dumont was director. One of those present was Melissa Jackson, who was attempting to escape her past life as a prostitute by working and praying at Assisi House. Dumont asked Jackson and the others to visualize themselves as roses. Try as she might, Jackson could only see herself as a white carnation.

"We didn't know what it meant," Jackson said of her subsequent discussion of the incident with Dumont. Yet looking through the eyes of faith, one might conclude that Jackson was the white carnation Mary handed to Dumont, for certainly the lives Jackson has touched are as multitudinous as the flowers in Christ's hands.

Today, Jackson (who asked that her real name not be used) is a licensed practical nurse at St. Ann's Home in Rochester. She works as the night nurse, caring for 46 patients on the fifth floor. The reformed prostitute has set down her roots in the field of nursing and prays that no one will hold her past against her. "I just want to keep on growing as long as no one cuts my sunshine," she said.

For awhile this year, however, Jackson thought the State of New York State would do just that. The state has yet to award her a permanent nursing license, due to concern over a felony forgery conviction and other arrests.

But last week, she was awarded a "certificate of relief from disability" by the state, which means her criminal record will not be taken into account when her application for a permanent nursing license is considered. Normally, such a record would automatically disqualify an applicant.

Jackson's 90-day nursing permit expires next week, and if she doesn't receive her license by then, she hopes to stay at St. Ann's in some other capacity, most likely as a nurse's aide. Yet those who know her are confident she will succeed in her chosen profession. "She's really truly a caring person," Terry Salamone, Jackson's supervisor at St. Ann's, said. "She uses very good judgment."

Jackson learned good judgment the hard way — through a life of suffering and poverty. It was a long and often blind road that she traveled from her birthplace in a New Mexico logging camp in 1946.

Raised by Pentecostal parents who neither drank nor smoked, she experienced happiness in her early years. Jackson still considers herself a Western American, although she has lived in Rochester since the early 1960s. "My culture's totally different from New York's," Jackson said. "I'm a cowgirl, and I'll always

be a cowgirl!"

Jackson's family moved to Truth Or Consequences, a small town in southern New Mexico. She lived there until the age of 12, when she married her first husband, who was sentenced to prison for burglary six months after their wedding. Her parents were unable to support her, so she was sent to reform school. After eight months, she left the school to live with her husband's sister.

When she was 14, she met Joe Jackson, a black blues musician. They dated and, as an interracial couple, the Jacksons were hated by both blacks and whites. They decided to move north to New York, a harrowing experience for the couple and Melissa's 16 in-laws who traveled with her.

"When we went through Oklahoma, I came through under sheets," Jackson said, because she feared white racists of that era would have killed Joe Jackson for his involvement with a white woman.

Life in Rochester, though, also proved difficult for the couple, who moved to a housing project in the Lake Avenue area. "Black women particularly hated the idea (of the relationship)," Jackson said of her neighbors, 30 of whom once beat her in a grocery store parking lot.

The couple married in 1964 and eventually had four sons. Despite her attempts to fit in with her black neighbors, Jackson never found acceptance. She would wear afro wigs and tanning lotion on her skin to look black, but such efforts only engendered more resistance. Finally, she decided to leave her husband. "I left him just to get away from that neighborhood," she recalled.

In 1970, she got a job as a waitress at a restaurant on Lake Avenue, where she worked for two years. One night, after repeated attempts, her married boss finally convinced her to go with him to a hotel room, where they initiated an eight-year affair that plunged Jackson into a hell from which she was not to emerge for several years.

Jackson said she has always had a soft spot for men, especially handsome ones with cash to spare. "Men can be just as much an addiction as drugs," she said.

She made a final split with her husband in 1972, although they have never officially divorced. She also lost her children to the Department of Social Services that year. Through the '70s, she made her living as a prostitute in the Lake Avenue area. Her lover was also her pimp, and he often beat her mercilessly only to tenderly care for her immediately thereafter.

"He came home from Vietnam, and he saw me as Vietnamese when he beat me. It's a wonder I'm not dead," she said, pointing to the numerous scars on her arms.

Prostitution, she said, is "ugly, degrading and filthy." Yet, the money to be made, and the freewheeling life that went with it eventually became hard for Jackson to give up. "I hung out with the big guys," Jackson said. "I was



Linda Dow Hayes/Courier-Journal

Just down the street from her current apartment is a street corner Melissa Jackson remembers only too well. Not long ago, she was turning tricks in an area that is considered the hub of Rochester's prostitution business.

a queen."

As the years went by, however, her lifestyle continued to nag at her conscience. Jackson said she always saw herself "as a child of God," but "I knew I was bound for hell."

Gradually, though, she began to change her life. In 1978, with the help of some of her friends, she obtained legal custody of her sons, one of whom had been shuffled through the system and had been placed in an abusive foster home. She began attending Alcoholics Anonymous meetings in 1982, the same year she was baptized as a Pentecostal Christian.

Then, in 1984, Jackson walked into Assisi House and met Paula Dumont. "Right away I liked her," Dumont said. The two formed a close, if sometimes stormy, friendship. Jackson began volunteering her time at the house and quickly distinguished herself as a tireless advocate of compassion for the poor.

Once, for example, the house was planning a Thanksgiving dinner for the needy of the area. "Everyone sat around talking about it, but Melissa got up and took a can with her out the door," recalled Nancy Litten, a volunteer tutor at Assisi House. The volunteers watched Jackson go up and down the neighborhood, collecting donations from homes. "She came back with enough money for two turkeys," Litten said.

Litten eventually set up an appointment for Jackson to take her high school equivalency exam. An avid reader all her life, Jackson passed the exam easily. "Up until then, I don't think she realized how intelligent she was," Litten said.

Father McBrien to lecture

Syndicated columnist Father Richard P. McBrien, chairman of the theology department at Notre Dame University, will present the 1988 John Henry Newman Lecture on

Jackson continued to move away from her past. She left her pimp/lover in 1985, and her work at Assisi convinced her she could fulfill her lifelong desire to become a nurse. As an Assisi volunteer, Jackson would visit sick and drunk people in the neighborhood, often doing work that others would find revolting, Litten said.

In September, 1987, Jackson enrolled in the Educational Opportunity Center's nursing program. The center, located on Andrews Street, is a branch of the State University College of New York at Brockport. Although she had no plans to convert to Catholicism, Jackson would rise and attend morning Mass at Our Lady of Victory Church on Pleasant Street before going to classes all day. She graduated in June of this year with a 97 average, winning an award for perfect attendance.

But when she applied for work at Monroe Community Hospital, she was rejected because of her felony conviction. So she went to St. Ann's seeking work, hoping the Catholic community that had already welcomed her would forgive her past mistakes. Since then she has used her talents to help heal the sick, both physically and spiritually.

Paula Dumont is optimistic about Jackson's future. "I'm not at all surprised she went into nursing," Dumont said. "She has a gift for touching the human body." Melissa Jackson now plans to use her gift of touch — which she once sold for the satisfaction of others — to satisfy the spirit that is finally free in her heart.

Monday, Oct. 3, at 8 p.m. in the University of Rochester's Interfaith Chapel. The free lecture is sponsored by the UR Newman Community. Call (716)275-4322 for information.

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