

Why Sister Miriam Wilson goes directly to jail

"Hey Sister Miriam," says an inmate. "I got to make an important call. I got to use your phone real soon."

"Honest, Joe?"

"Sister, would I be here if I were honest?"

Marya Smith

It could be the office of a popular high-school teacher or principal. Paper work, permission passes, Bibles, and a coffeepot designate a working desk. Pencil sketches from admirers and a burlap banner with a rainbow personalize the wall. Young men jostle for attention in their khakis and T-shirts. But the focal point is Sister Miriam Wilson, associate jail chaplain for Division 4 of the Cook County of Illinois Department of Corrections—the second largest jail in the country.

The slight woman with the gentle face and unassuming manner is at the Chicago jail, available to the inmates, six days a week. On her evenings and day away, she's likely to be speaking out at a meeting on prison conditions, rooting at the basketball game of an inmate's son, stopping by a hospital to see another inmate's mother, or attending weddings, wakes, or funerals for men who have lost the privilege to be there themselves. Every other month, she drives hundreds of miles either to the Menard or Pontiac Correctional Centers to visit prisoners on death row. As surely as the incarcerated are bound to their

prison cells, Wilson's concern and compassion for them flows without boundaries.

At committee tables and on the street, Wilson is known for quietly reaching out to the families of men in correctional facilities. "Each family is unique, but they all face hard problems," Wilson says. "It's difficult to keep up a relationship with the person in jail or prison. Often he's the family breadwinner." On her own time, in her own low-key way, she visits parents, wives, brothers, and children of inmates, often in their homes. She talks and she listens.

"My son John (not his real name) had been in jail a couple of months when my husband and I started talking to Sister Miriam," says the mother of a 19-year-old inmate. "She cared about John, but she understood our feelings too. It was hard going to visit him because we always ended up fighting. We were hurt and upset, but she kept telling us our visits mattered, that John needed to know his family was behind him.

"One of the questions we kept asking ourselves was, 'Why us, why

our family?'" She helped us to accept that God works in strange ways, that some good can come of all difficulties. But she never just said, 'Everything will be fine.' She told us the facts, about the pros and cons of raising bond money, for instance, and different trial procedures. She never whitewashed the realities.

"My son leaned on her, but we did, too. She even gave me her private phone number, and I called her at 6 a.m. once. I was overwhelmed by her personal interest. I found out she was responsible for 704 men, but she made me feel like we were the only ones."

Wilson is a Benedictine nun who lives at St. Scholastica Convent in Chicago's Rogers Park, the same neighborhood where she grew up. No prioress counseled her to leave her 25 years of teaching to care for the incarcerated. No job opening beckoned to her more than 15 years ago when she first became interested in working with prisoners. The evolution of Wilson's volunteer work with inmates to her full-time, and usually overtime, ministry to them has been a slow, steady one forged from her own faith and expe-

rience. And despite 15 years of work with outcasts of society, Wilson has managed not to become cynical.

"I've seen Miriam grow," says Ben Greer, Director of Volunteers in a Cook County Jail tutoring program. "Whereas some people become callous in this line of work, she has become even more sensitive, and wiser, over the years because her understanding of the needs of inmates has deepened. She doesn't pay lip service to what she believes but really goes out there and helps the poor and needy."

"Can't con a con"

Wilson has chosen one of the neediest groups in the prison system to devote her special attention to—those on death row. The men in the condemned units grapple with unique problems. Although no one in Illinois has been executed since 1962, the 73 men currently on death row must cope with the reality of their sentences. "These visits are emotionally and physically exhausting," says Mary Alice Rankin, Associate Director of the Illinois Coalition Against the Death Penalty. "I remember one time Miriam spent hours with a man who had just been handed the death penalty. Someone else might have said he needed to be alone, but she seems to know when she is needed."

As Wilson's involvement grew, so did her awareness of the scriptural call to aid prisoners. "In Matthew 25 our Lord tells us 'When I was in prison, you came to see me,'" Wilson says. "I love the passage in Luke 4 when Jesus quotes from Isaiah, 'He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives.' The more I worked with inmates, the stronger I felt that these are people who matter."

Wilson's official post at Cook

County Jail was created only in 1982 by the Archdiocese of Chicago. "I knew I wanted Miriam for that spot," says Father Ed Philipski, head chaplain for the archdiocese's Catholic Prison Ministry. "I had seen her work and was struck from my very first meeting with her by her immense sincerity and purpose. Her core interest is the person."

"One of the big words in a jail or prison is manipulation. The inmates are familiar with a world where people are constantly using other people. Everyone knows the expression, 'you can't con a con.' The inmates trust Miriam because she's not a user; she's a giver. And she's accepting. She is good in a world that is not so good."

According to Philipski, much of Wilson's influence comes from her continual presence. Co-worker Jim Cornwell, chaplain for the Jesus People U.S.A., concurs: "One of the most important things in this kind of work is to be consistent. But it's not a chore with Miriam. She enjoys being here, even though it can be a frustrating job."

As he talks, Wilson is visiting in the cells.

"Hey, Sister Miriam, I got to make an important call. I got to use your phone, real soon, this afternoon."

"Honest, Joe?"

"Sister, would I be here if I were honest?"

Tough and tender

The soft-spoken 58-year-old kids easily with the men as she moves from cell to cell.

"Someone ripped off my dictionary, the big one from my desk," she tells another group. "Have any of you seen it?"

"Who was there?"

She names them.

"All thugs."

Laughter surrounds all of Wilson's conversations.

Yet tension is a steady undercurrent in the jail where 5000 men are confined on any given day. "One of my main functions is to keep the men at peace with each other," says Warden Richard English, a man not renowned for bestowing compliments. "When I'm having trouble with an inmate, Sister Miriam is the first person I call. Why is she good at what she does? She believes in God and sees the good in every person. The inmates see it in the way she treats them and they give her respect. But she's not gullible and she's not naive. She never covers up for anyone."

"The men won't tolerate it if the word gets out that someone has stepped out of line with Sister Miriam," adds Lieutenant James Edwards. "A lot of people come to work here with good intentions but don't last, because they don't have that inner sense of themselves that Sister Miriam has. I know what it takes to have 300 to 700 men saying 'I want to see you.'"

Wilson is attuned to the special anxieties of the jail inmates. They are waiting for trial or bond, living with the unknown. Contact with their families is severely limited. As the days drag on to months, they are restless, bored, with few activities available to them. This is a source of frustration for Wilson. She worries about what she calls "the warehousing of human beings." One of her continuing efforts is to foster programs where inmates "can use their time productively, to learn and to build self-esteem." She's a runner for library books, a Bible-class instructor, an innovator who has brought events like a clown show to the inmates, anything to counter the deadening effect of endless, idle hours of confinement.

Success is hard to measure in Wilson's world where many inmates return time and again. Wilson feels her purpose is not to preach, but to be approachable. "Reconciliation is a recurring theme in my dealings with the men. Their guilt is often very profound, and they need to know our Lord forgives them, so they can forgive themselves, and eventually others." One evening a jailer calls her to an inmate, a child abuser, who is talking about suicide. Alone with her, he shares his horror over his actions, and after several hours, harbors a glimmer of hope for peace.

Not everyone applauds Wilson's efforts and concerns. She must, in fact, deal with a variety of negative, even hostile, attitudes. "Don't forget about the victims," is a repeated reprimand, sometimes voiced in a gentle tease in her own community, sometimes yelled out from an audience, perhaps at a debate on the death penalty.

"Of course I care about the victims, but it's important not to forget that the criminal is a person, too," Wilson answers. "We all have good and evil inside us, and our society so often fosters the negative side.

"The men here have helped me to see how we all need to become free in spirit. They are divested of the facades many of us wear in society. They have only themselves. When I read the Psalms, I feel they are practically a prisoner's prayer book. The longings, hopes, discouragements are all expressed there. These are very real people. Treating them as animals only keeps the cycle of violence going."

Even fellow toilers in the jail system sometimes don't see eye to eye with Wilson's approach. One Cook County Jail social worker says, "You have to be careful not to step out of your authority role, or the inmates

take advantage. These guys never change. If you give something to one, maybe a tube of toothpaste, all the others expect it too. You end up with more problems than you started with."

Give till it hurts

Yet Wilson's life is measured in unplanned extras. Sometimes it's something small, looking at the pictures of an inmate's two boys, promising to call another's wife, bringing someone else a bar of soap. Other extras are more tedious and time-consuming, writing character letters for inmates she believes in, attending the trials themselves which often stretch on for months, even testifying. She also keeps track of meritorious good time served, a difficult task that can make a critical difference in a man's release date.

An inmate reflects, "I didn't know she was a nun for a couple of weeks. I thought they were calling her sister because she was an all-right lady, cool. She does things you can't get your own brother to do. I've heard a lot of guys tell what she does for their families. She visits their wives, takes them shopping, or to pick up their checks. She takes their kids to Goodwill for clothes. She stays in touch after they're out, helps them find jobs. At first, I thought it must be one or two guys. But I keep hearing it from different ones."

Wilson also brings the problems of the jails and prisons to public attention. "She is an eloquent speaker, and she works on what she believes is important," says Mary Alice Rankin of the Illinois Coalition Against the Death Penalty. Unafraid of controversy, Wilson campaigned for the Pontiac Prison Support Group after the uprising

there. She met with the 17 defendants and their families, spoke at rallies, drafted reports, and helped organize a citywide prayer service. "It was not the most popular cause in the world," Wilson admits. Her concern was with poor prison conditions, especially overcrowding.

Changes are slow to come about in the correctional system and in the men locked into it. But Wilson believes "the human spirit is resilient." Her own resiliency, and patience, reflect a firm faith. She also has personal ties that strengthen her commitment. She talks weekly with her own sister, who lives with her husband and two children in a nearby suburb. And she is appreciated in her own community.

"Miriam is a really interesting combination," says Benedictine Sister Pat Crowley. "She has intense anger against the injustice of the system, yet she is tremendously gentle and sensitive to people. Even as a teacher she was open to the student who wasn't liked by others. She has a strong awareness of the whole Christian reality of what our love does to one another."

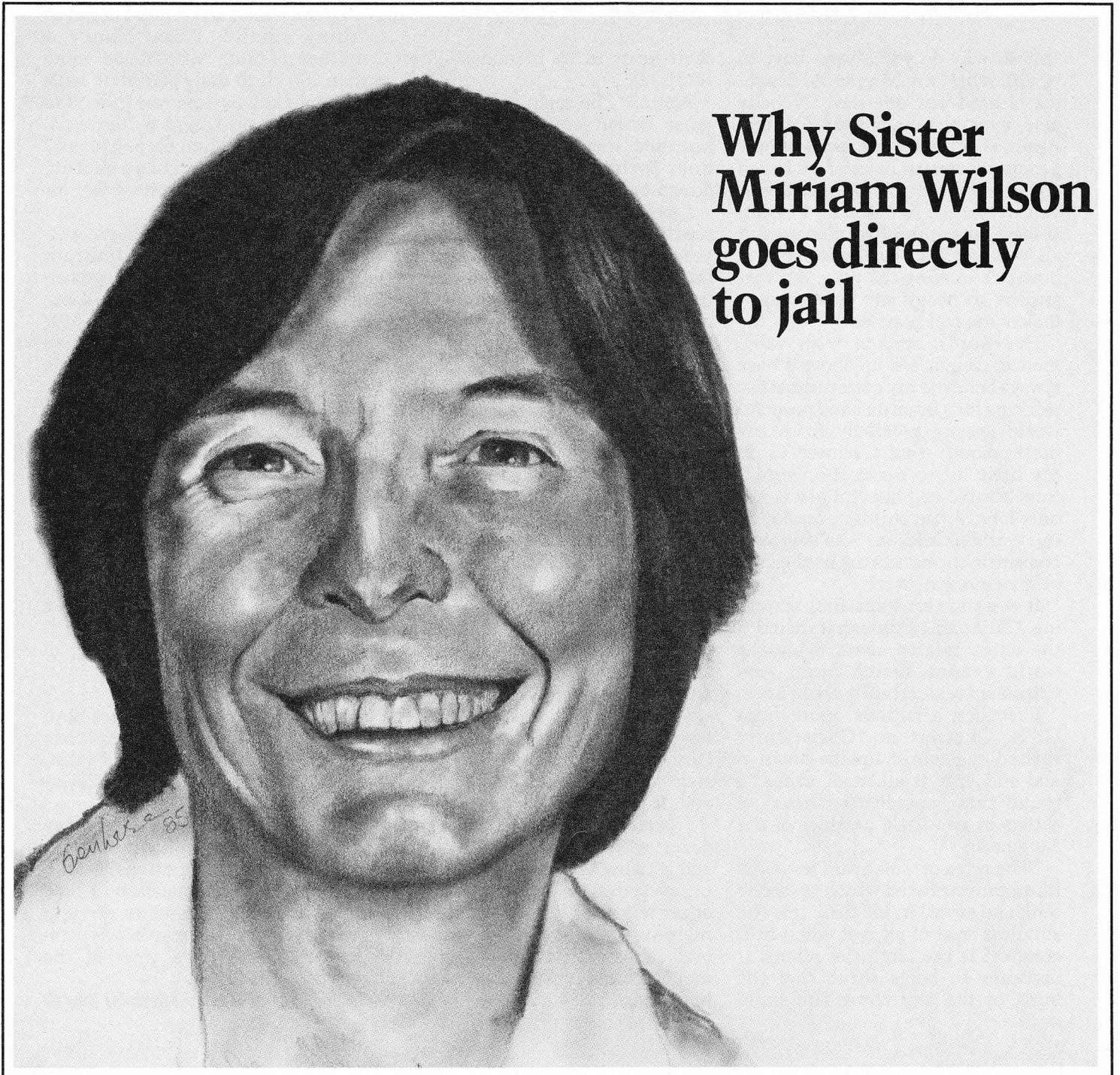
Meanwhile, back at the jail, Wilson accompanies a visitor on a tour of the cells. What's a nice person like you doing in a place like this, is the nearly irresistible question.

Wilson would probably try to smile to assure the questioner that she is not offended. But the temptation for the tired joke fades as the effect of Wilson's presence is felt. Men press against the doors, call out to her, and literally reach out to her, as if touching her arm or shoulder would make a difference. These are the world's tough guys, exposing their needs to this lady they trust. Sister Miriam Wilson is unquestionably a person who is in the right place. ■

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