

Never give up:

That's the constant message the Rev. Ervin Williams delivers at Restoration Urban Ministries — he knows from experience

By CANDICE NORWOOD
For The News-Gazette

The Rev. Ervin Williams loves Sunday night, the rare time when he can stop, relax and listen. As the founder of Champaign's Restoration Urban Ministries, his work week is long and often divided among preaching three church services, running staff meetings and teaching classes aimed at helping the 120 homeless residents the ministry has on average in its Transitional Housing Program.

Yet each Sunday, he and a handful of congregants gather inside Restoration's sanctuary for worship and testimony. During the morning service, the sanctuary's 60 chairs might be full. Tonight, there are 14 people.

Sitting in the front row near the center aisle, Williams wears a navy blue suit, V-neck dress shirt and worn, black leather shoes. A strikingly calm, soft-spoken man, he often appears tired and older than his 62 years. He sits quietly, in concentration, with his head tilted toward the sky, his eyes squinting.

He listens as a former resident of the housing program talks about the sense of community she felt at Restoration. He listens to Bonnie Craft-Tolston, with tears rolling down her face, as she thanks God for getting her through hardships.

When Williams makes his way up to the church stage, there's a slight limp in his walk, the result of nerve damage that has weakened the left side of his body.

"When we worship tonight something's got to chant in you: 'Behold the eyes of the Lord,'" he tells the gathering, a hint of southern Missouri twang still in his voice. "You won't see judgment; you see love and passion. There's something in those eyes that says, 'I won't give up on you. I won't give up.'"



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After all, Williams knows people did not give up on him. Not as he struggled to create his ministry, not when he was ravaged by drugs and drink, and not when he was a boy living in Smeltonville. That wasn't the official name for the small annex to Cape Girardeau, Mo., between La Cruz Street on the north end and Cape La Croix Creek on the south, but the nickname stuck for Williams' home neighborhood. Bordered by out-houses, backwoods and a rock quarry, Smeltonville gained a reputation as the "dumping place for all the poor," he says.

He can still remember the heavy scent of gasoline from the neighborhood's mobile tanks. When it wasn't gas in the air, it was sewage from the city facility nearby.

When it wasn't sewage, it was "chitlins" — pig intestines — from the meat processing plant.

"We'd go to school smelling like whatever the flavor of the air was that day because it would be in our clothing," he says. "Everybody washed. We were clean, but they had the smell."

Growing up, Williams, his mother and 11 siblings all lived in his grandmother's home. His grandma was a hard-working, Christian woman, who taught Williams the value of helping others. She visited the sick and cleaned their houses — just because she wanted to help. She used the little money she made scrubbing floors to get Williams piano lessons and the clothing he needed to be an altar boy at

their African Methodist Episcopal Church.

Other than summer visits to his biological father, a minister in Champaign, Williams didn't have a man to look up to in his life until he was 5 and his mother married his stepdad. He encouraged the boy's curiosity and told him he "needed to do something" with his life. Williams called him Daddy.

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Each Christmas, the boys in his family traditionally got cowboy hats and toy guns so they could mimic their favorite TV cowboys. When Williams was 10, however, he wanted a microscope instead. He didn't have the heart to tell his family. He knew they were poor and didn't have the money for such a gift. Yet, when he

unwrapped his present on Christmas day, he found a microscope — a gift from Daddy. Talking about it today still brings tears to his eyes.

"I could never figure out how my stepdad knew what I wanted was a microscope," he says. "That was something that changed by whole life."

Even as a child, Williams was a leader. He joined the Boy Scouts at 12 and read books constantly. His favorites were comic books and biographies — the stories of great men imagined and real.

At 17, he rallied his friends and created a civic center for Smeltonville, where kids could hang out, stay out of trouble and train for jobs. After two years as a paramedic for the Army in his early 20s, Williams attended Eastern Illinois University, where he graduated with a degree in psychology.

In 1976, he moved to Oklahoma City with his new wife Marilyn to manage a Sears department store. After a couple of years, he left Sears and set up his own businesses, first a general goods store, then a carpentry company. When the businesses took off, the money started coming in.

For the first time, Williams could afford nice houses, cars, clothing and security for his family. He couldn't stop working or slow down. He wanted more.

Many moments were good. One day, he and Marilyn were so excited about their prosperity that they went to the bank, brought home a large number of single bills and tossed them in the air for fun. Afterward, they neatly stacked the bills again and returned them to the bank.

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But then came the drugs: alcohol, marijuana and cocaine. At first, he could control them. But slowly, they took over his life. Williams didn't have his grandmoth-

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er's religion to fall back on. By then, he had become an agnostic.

It all came to a head at age 28. He was sitting in his truck outside a motel where his crew was working. Drunk and high, the music blasting — Williams is hazy on the details today — his car "somehow" changed gears from park to drive and ran a hole right through the building. The insurance company wouldn't cover the damage, so \$50,000 had to come from his pocket.

Williams started "going through money like tissue paper," as he puts it, and was forced to shut down his offices. Tension at home got to be too much, and he moved to a motel, leaving Marilyn alone for three months to care for their young son.

He wanted to give up. He saw nothing going his way. Then a friend insisted he and Marilyn come to a service at the friend's small Baptist church. Williams was reluctant but knew that he didn't have much to lose.

Stepping into the church that day felt like "coming home," he remembers. A sense of freedom came over him.

At this church, a woman they called Mother Towns told him that God had called on her to help guide Williams and Marilyn back to Him. Everyday after work they would go to Mother Towns' home to pray — sometimes for two or three hours.

"She would just tell me: 'You're almost there, you need to pray a little longer. You're almost there.'"

And he would dutifully pray some more. Mother Towns wouldn't give up on him. Weeks with her turned into months, and when Williams opened his first ministry in Oklahoma City a couple of years later, Mother Towns came.

She looked Williams in the eye and said: "You're my pastor now."



The ministry started out small — a gathering of friends praying together — but it grew quickly. Then, just after Williams had moved his congregation to a larger facility, he got an unexpected phone call from his father in Champaign. He was sick with diabetes and needed help with his own ministry. So in 1989, he and Marilyn moved. As his father's health deteriorated, though, so did his ministry. Williams began putting Restoration together.

In its early years, Restoration Ministries was

a food and clothing pantry until Williams purchased an old motel and created the housing program in 1997.

His work at Restoration is never easy. It's a constant fight to win small battles: help a resident get a job or kick a drug addiction. Williams knows that he can't save everyone, but he lives for the days when he can get through to just one person. A person such as Tiffany Walton, a single mother of five who came to Restoration last June defeated, with gambling and alcohol abuse problems. Today, she's sober and has hopes of going to cosmetology school.

Williams' goal is to provide people with skills that can make them independent. He can't do it alone. His efforts are fueled by the faith of the community members who provide the \$480,000 yearly that Restoration needs on average to keep running.

Some days this faith arrives as a \$20 bill, which Bishop King James Underwood of the New Free Will Baptist Church drops off from time to time. Other days it comes as the \$250,000 or \$750,000 checks Williams says someone once sent anonymously with instructions to expand the facility.



Restoration reached its 20th anniversary recently, and Williams can't help but think

about his years with the ministry. One afternoon inside the living room of his quaint, two-story home in north Champaign, he sits in an armchair smiling as he talks about the future. His body has slowed, and he has cut back hours at the ministry due to back pain and recent neck surgery. In a few years, it will be time to pass on the leadership.

"I have to leave so that a new person or group of people can continue to make Restoration grow and evolve into what it is supposed to be."

He wants to spend more time with Marilyn — just the two of them. Maybe they'll move to Tennessee where they have family, or maybe they'll just stay in Champaign and enjoy each other's company.

Williams eases out of his chair and walks gingerly to his front lawn. It's a nice, spring day. He lifts his head to take in the sun. He often thinks about what Restoration will become without him. He knows it will be different once he's gone.

"But that's OK," he says. "It's their time."

Candice Norwood is a University of Illinois journalism student. This story was done in a spring semester version of Professor Walt Harrington's literary feature writing class. Funding came from the Marajen Stevick Foundation.