

## Mission Statement

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By RENEE TAWA, TIMES STAFF WRITER



Miki Jordan, center, worked for several years alongside her mother before becoming president of Para Los Ninos, a Skid Row agency for families. Willie Jordan can't tell you exactly how she took over as president of the Fred Jordan Mission on Skid Row just as women and children became a common part of street life in the 50-block area of downtown Los Angeles. Nor can she tell you exactly how five of her seven wild-as-the-next-kids ended

up working alongside her, four of them specifically with women and children.

But Willie's late husband, who founded Fred Jordan Mission in 1944, had an inkling before he died of what was to come.

In April 1988, after Fred Jordan suffered a massive heart attack, Willie didn't leave his bedside.

"Can't you see how God's timing is perfect?" Fred, 78, asked her. "When I started the mission, it was for men. That was my burden. Now we have so many women and children in the inner city, and it's going to be carried on by a woman. You have the heart of a mother, a woman. You see things differently than I do."

"You know," said Willie, 66, "after he was gone, I saw that."

Now four of the couple's grown children, along with two daughters-in-law, work full time at the mission, which is known for huge events such as its annual Christmas celebration for 16,000 children and mothers. And their eldest, 42-year-old Miki Jordan, heads another major social services agency only two blocks from her parents' mission, serving homeless families and children in poverty.

Nobody knows exactly how many thousands of people live in Skid Row's run down hotels, at shelters and on the streets of the area bounded by 5th, San Pedro, Main and East 9th streets. The population is too transient to track. But in the last several years, service providers say the influx of women with children has been striking and mirrors a national trend brought on by cuts in public assistance, skyrocketing housing costs and other circumstances.

According to a December 1999 survey by the U.S. Conference of Mayors, for instance, families with children make up more than one-third of the homeless population across the nation. Experts started noting the change in the late 1980s; in 1987, the U.S. Conference of Mayors reported that the number of homeless families had increased by 31% in the previous two years.

At the Fred Jordan Mission, 60% of the clients now are women and children. (The mission estimates it provides services to 380,000 people a year, although hit's

impossible to know how many are repeat visits.) In the mission's first 40 years or so, more than 90% of the homeless population was men, Willie said.

Miki Jordan remembers when the mission was a place for men only. A photograph on her office wall shows a 1-year-old Miki in her father's arms, in front of a line of homeless men in old hats and ties.

Now Miki is president and chief executive of Para Los Ninos, which runs sports, literacy and other programs for more than 2,000 families a year. In the last seven years, with her leadership, the agency's budget has grown from \$1 million to \$5.9 million. As her parents once did, Miki travels overseas to work with other agencies, as part of the Child Welfare League of America's International Advisory Committee.

Still, she insists, "I didn't set out to lead the lives of my parents."

Growing up, the Jordan kids all volunteered at the mission. No one forced them to go; Skid Row was simply a part of family life. The kids ran errands for their parents, wrote thank-you notes to donors and decorated the mission's Christmas tree every year.

Miki remembers how her father, the son of a homemaker and Baptist minister in a small Texas coal mining town, taught his kids how to treat everyone the same. Fred Jordan would plop down on the curb and talk to homeless men about their lives or wander into the office of his close friend, then-county Supervisor Kenneth Hahn.

Willie, the daughter of a homemaker and plant foreman, would work at the mission and be home when the kids got out of school. The family had dinner together every night; on a family trip to Israel, the children were baptized together in the Jordan River.

### **Taking Their Mission Around the World**

Fred and Willie Jordan always worked as a team. Using private donations, the couple helped open schools, orphanages and clinics in places including Hong Kong, Japan, Ghana and Liberia. All of those facilities are still open. In their 32-year marriage, Fred and Willie never spent a night apart.

"To see two people so in love, like they were 16, until the day he died. . . ," Miki recalled.

As a kid, Miki thought that she might go into social work but not because of her parents. She liked to help people--she used to beg her father for dimes so she could buy ice cream for kids at school who couldn't afford it--and she liked to lead. Her father joked that she would be U.S. president someday.

Eventually, she got a bachelor's degree in psychology from the University of Texas at El Paso and a master's degree in organizational development from Chapman University in Orange. She gravitated to jobs involving children, some of whom were mentally ill, developmentally disabled or in juvenile halls.

For four years after her father's death, Miki worked full time at the mission to help her mother through the transition. Then one day in 1992, Miki told her mother that

she was ready for a change. It was time to look for another job--somewhere off Skid Row.

With her mother's blessing, Miki went to an interview at a job placement firm on Wilshire Boulevard and found a family services agency that needed a new leader--on Skid Row.

"As soon as I walked in, I knew this was where I was supposed to be," Miki said at Para Los Ninos. "I just knew."

Now, she and her mother talk "as colleagues and peers, as one CEO to another," Miki said, when they're not shopping or traveling or finding new restaurants together.

So far, Para Los Ninos and the Jordan mission have not worked on any projects together. But Miki and her brother, Tom Jordan, are talking about how the two agencies might collaborate sometime this year.

Tom, the Jordan mission's executive vice president for administration, never expected to carry on his father's work. But as a kid, like Miki, he thought he would end up helping people in some way.

At age 13, he begged to go on one of his parents' overseas projects, and they gave in. For the next 11 months, Tom helped missionaries build a medical clinic in West Africa. He lived in a mud hut, without running water. In Liberia, it hit him that he could make a difference.

Tom, 36, said he recently told his 9-year-old son how he ended up in the mission's leadership.

"I said, 'I'm not carrying on out of guilt or a commitment to Dad. Dad's long gone. It's not just to keep something going; it's a passion. . . . I'm doing it because I believe in it. It's not just to stoke a legacy.'"

Tom did what his father had hoped he would--but not by staying with the mission, said Paul Adkins, a longtime family friend.

"[Fred Jordan] would often say, 'I want my children to hear the voice of God for their own calling. . . . I do not want them to fall in my footsteps just because I am here.' He did not expect them to follow him. But he would be thrilled that they did."

#### Children Share Their Parents' Values

Willie says she is proud of all her children. Two of them had different callings, which is fine with her: Meiling Christopher is a nurse in Nashville, and James Jordan is a furniture sales representative in Covina.

"We didn't try to push them into a mold," Willie said. "They're all different. They're all individuals."

Along with Tom and his wife, Teresa Jordan, other family members working at the mission include son Joe Jordan, an executive vice president, and his wife, Kris Jordan, who run programs for migrant farm worker families in the Coachella Valley; daughter Billie Lou Turner, an administrator in the family and children's programs,

and her husband, Jim, a staff member with the men's programs; and son Peter Jordan, an administrator in the children's programs.

Funny, Willie thinks, how as a girl in Cudahy, she did not want to marry or have children. Then at age 13, she met Fred Jordan, who was speaking at a local church. Now it doesn't seem so long ago that a high school counselor was calling to say that Miki had ditched a class again, or Willie worried that one of the kids had stayed out too late at a party. Turns out she worried for nothing.

"We tried to teach them that no matter what they did in life, they had a responsibility to others, regardless of what vocation they might choose," Willie said. "And so one by one, they made these decisions on their own. We used to wonder what they would do, as all parents do, but of course now, especially now that Fred is gone, I think, 'Well, gee, maybe we did something right.'"

Her laughter rings with pleasure. "It's quite amazing."

Willie, mother of seven and grandmother of nine, a woman who bear-hugs everyone she meets and speaks in bellowing bursts, runs the mission with her own family in mind. That means the mission, which has a \$4.9-million annual budget and is funded entirely by donations from individuals and foundations, goes beyond traditional services, such as daily hot meals, addiction counseling and Bible studies.

"I try to take every major event that a family has and translate it to Skid Row," Willie said.

She remembers, for instance, how exciting back-to-school time was for the Jordan household in Covina. So in August, the mission gave away more than \$1 million worth of new clothes and shoes to about 5,000 children, who received Guess jeans and Nike sneakers donated by Foot Locker stores.

She remembers what it's like to raise kids. So each year, on Mother's Make-Over Day at the mission, 500 homeless women get facials, manicures and haircuts donated by professional stylists; volunteers watch the kids.

"You say, 'Well, do they really need that?' Well, yeah, they do, for their self-esteem," Willie said. "To feel like they're special. If a mother can't afford to feed her kids. . . ."

She remembers how her kids loved family outings. Willie and Fred used to pack up the kids in their motor home and take off. So, a couple of days each summer, mission staff and volunteers head to inner city parks with portable grills and volleyball nets. They barbecue hamburgers and hot dogs and toss big beach balls so the little kids can play volleyball, too.

### **Regulars say the mission's family feel is unmistakable.**

"You know who you're talking to--someone who's connected with the building," said Stacy Malone, 34, the mother of two small boys. The only time she gets her hair cut, she said, is once a year on Mother's Make-Over Day.

Sharon Palmer, 44, said the special events, like Make-Over Day, touch her.

"A lot of people who run missions like this--you never even see their faces," she said. "I feel comfortable here. It's like a family atmosphere, even though you're surrounded by poverty. It gives you a sense of hope when you have someone who cares for you."

### **Over the Years, Clientele Has Changed**

In Fred Jordan's day, the mission was a place for men to try to sober up and get back on their feet. Back then, in the mid-1940s, Jordan rounded up drunks from dives such as the Carnival Bar downtown, which was next door to a blood bank. Men would sell a pint of their blood for \$3 or so and use the money for drinks.

At the mission, you can see the changes from Fred Jordan's day by visiting the fourth floor, where a 300-bed dormitory for single men has given way to a children's play room with a Minnie Mouse chair and Big Bird painting on the wall. (The mission is outgrowing the six-story building on Towne Avenue and looking for a space to expand its family programs this year.)

These days, Willie leads a weekly support group for women that includes speed addicts, prostitutes and grandmothers. More and more grandmothers come to the mission for help; the women, who often are about the same age as Willie, care for grandkids whose parents are hooked on drugs or in prison. They remind her, Willie says, that she is the luckiest woman in the world to do what she does, to have kids who turned out right.

Willie, who has no immediate plans for retirement, says she hopes that the mission carries on with Jordans. But she never pushed her kids to do so when they were small, and she doesn't plan to start now.

"What I do is try to pass on to my children anything that I might know and can help them for the future," she said. "Then it's between them and God."

Information on Fred Jordan Mission: (626) 915-1981; on Para Los Ninos, (213) 623-8446.

PHOTO: Miki Jordan, center, worked for several years alongside her mother before becoming president of Para Los Ninos, a Skid Row agency for families.