

# CITY JOURNAL

**Lara Becker**

A humanitarian until the end, **Ms. Independence is free** BY LARA BECKER

Willa Prince, the woman who brought the Marketview Heights neighborhood association to life, has died.

She was 61.

She was a resident for 30 years of Hollister and Lewis streets. She was a founder of the Neighborhood Action Program at the Lewis Street Center.

She was one of Mayor William A. Johnson Jr.'s Unsung Heroes, and a recipient - three times - of the Urban League's Distinguished Service Award.

She was a servant of God.

She was president of the Missionary Commission, and chairman of the Commission on Evangelism at New Bethel CME Church.

She was a singer in the senior choir. She was a Girl Scout leader and a Sunday School teacher. She was a purveyor of holiday turkeys.

She was a source of secondhand clothing (some of it castaways of the mayor's) for the needy and the new in town, for folks who needed a sports jacket for interviews.

She was a professional peacemaker, a teacher of conflict resolution at School 14.

She was a secretary at the Eastman Dental Dispensary, at Strong Memorial Hospital and School 9.

She was a college graduate.

She was one of just a few African-American women in those days to attend or graduate from Harper College-State University of New York at Binghamton.

She was later a graduate of the State University College at Brockport, Monroe Community College and Colgate Rochester Divinity School's PEARL Program - the program of Black Church Studies, Education and Action for Responsible Leadership.

She was chronically ill.

She was, by the time she was 27, a survivor of a heart attack, a stroke and a coma. She was a victim of temporary paralysis, emphysema and diabetes.

She was a double amputee. She was a nursing home resident.

She was never one to complain.

She was the adopted daughter of Rufus and Connie Prince. She was a native of Winston, N.C.

She was called Jack Rabbit by her daddy. She was not a runner. She was a thinker.

She was the oldest of three blood siblings, all of whom were also adopted, and only one of whom lived in Rochester.

She was the prettiest person in the whole wide world to her sister, Mary Ramsey. She was a genius. She was a keeper of secrets.

She was a capable tap and ballet dancer. She was the leader of the Campus Cuties after-school club. She was an easy mingler.

She was a comedian, or thought she was. She was full of corny jokes.

She was proud to leave the house wearing the far-out hairstyles her niece created for her.

She was a devotee of grilled cheese and bacon, of collard greens, floating in vinegar.

She was inspired to praise the Lord when she found a quarter in the street. She was moved to sing Jesus Loves the Little Children when surrounded by her own little children.

She was the mother of a son, Derek Prince, and a daughter, Tami Hicks, both of Winston, N.C. She was the grandmother of two and the great-grandmother of three. She was a godmother, an aunt, a friend.

She was the author of her own obituary.

She was a woman who fought all her life for others, and who fought for her own life. She was also called Ms. Independence.

She died on Independence Day.

Said her sister, Mary Ramsey:

"She was free, she was finally free."