



THE GLOW OF GIVING.

Joan Ridley Willis lives by the words her father told her, "Always give back," and glows with the satisfaction of having done so.

PHOTO BY JAMES RAJOTTE

The eternal volunteer

by **Sandra Beckwith**

Who gets breast cancer and sees it as something positive? Joan Ridley Willis, for one. The 62-year-old optimist feels she got a new lease on life seven years ago when she received the diagnosis.

"If this hadn't happened, I would not have seen the value of moving on and pursuing the things I love," Willis says.

So, after successful treatment, Willis retired from her job as supervising director of student support services and special education for the Rochester City School District, giving her more time to do her life's

work: helping the community as a volunteer.

Willis's community affiliations, past and present, number more than a dozen, including the Legal Aid Society, Rochester Children's Nursery (which offers educational programs) and St. John's Home, where she also cares for her 89-year-old mother. And that's on top of a dozen more

professional affiliations (she studied at several institutions, including Smith College/ Harvard University and SUNY Brockport).

Divorced and the mother of an adult son and stepdaughter, Willis wonders how she fit it all in before retirement. "I did it," she says, smiling, "but I was a lot more harried then."

Then again, donating time is simply a way of life for her: Most people can see the need to help when tragedies like Hurricane Katrina strike. But Willis recognizes an ongoing need in the community. She started as a community volunteer when she was a teenager, in Newport News, Va., following her father's example. The owner of a service station, her father served on the board of the black hospital during segregation and founded the area's black Boys Club.

"My father said you should always give back," Willis says. "I never questioned it."

And so she spends her retirement fully engaged in work. For the school district's Grief Resource Network, which she's been involved with since its inception 20 years ago, Willis trains staff to help students and families dealing with trauma and loss. She works with the United Way's "Kids on Track" impact team to assist pre-teens and adolescents. She's part of the Rochester service project of The Links, Inc., an organization of women dedicated to improving the quality of life in their communities. She counsels people in the United Way's C.A.S.H. program, an initiative that helps working families become financially literate by providing free income tax help. "I could have been trained to prepare taxes," she says, "but I did what's right up my alley instead—I counseled people about community resources."

On top of that, in her "retirement," she has traveled to China and Thailand; taken classes in Tai Chi, drawing and the holistic exercise known as Nia; kept up on her assignments for her beloved book club; and even found time to remodel her kitchen.

But, still a social worker at heart, Willis is committed to her lifelong efforts to improve the community. "I am just so aware of the impact of poverty on people's lives," she says.

Maybe it's that awareness that makes her grateful for what she has. "I have a good life. If you have your health, safety, security, a warm place to live, good food and good friends, that's about as much as anybody could ask for."

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