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A Mother Channels Her Own Anguish Into Hope for Kids

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Mrs. Rumph and Volunteers
Teach Life Lessons in LA;
Spelling Amid the Shooting

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LOS ANGELES—Three years ago, 35-year-old Al Wooten Jr. was killed in a drive-by shooting in South Central LA. He was no angel — he'd been in prison for a mugging and later became a crack addict before beginning to turn his life around — but his mother was torn apart by the loss of one of her three children. "When he died, it was like that bullet had pierced my heart," says Myrtle Faye Rumph.

Family and friends held stormy meetings in the Rumphs' living room about what to do. Some men in the family, which had already seen three relatives die by gunfire, wanted to find and kill the murderer. Others wanted to march on City Hall to demand the reopening of teen centers that dotted South Central's landscape after the Watts riots but were shuttered in the 1980s for lack of funds.

Finally, Mrs. Rumph spoke up. "I must help the next generation of children," she said. "I can't let another mother go through this." So the soft-spoken Mrs. Rumph, whose world had consisted of church functions, sewing her husband's clothing and keeping the books for his storage business, rented an empty 20-by-50-foot building next to her husband's office for \$500 a month and opened the Al Wooten Jr. Heritage Center.

What Would You Change?

Since then, in a storefront in the middle of South Central, Mrs. Rumph and a bunch of volunteers, many of them black professionals who live somewhere else, have been tutoring 25 kids, ages 11 to 17, in reading, writing and life.

The Heritage Center isn't the biggest volunteer effort in Los Angeles, or the oldest. And its successes so far are simply small daily triumphs. Still, for those who watched the Los Angeles riots and said somebody ought to do something, meet Mrs. Rumph, now 61.

Or, better yet, meet Jason Wilborne, now 12. When he first came to the Heritage Center, he was asked: "If you could change something in your life, what would it be?" Jason's answer: "Everything."

That was 17 months ago, when Jason used to disguise his inability to read. Now he snuggles up to Mrs. Rumph with a book. "I want to read you this," he tells her. His is the first hand to shoot up when teachers seek a volunteer to read. "Faye doin' a good thing," says Jason, who wants to be a computer operator. "I've got to learn math, how to read and spell to be what I want to be."



Myrtle Faye Rumph

Mrs. Rumph herself once dreamed of being a teacher, but dropped out of school in Dallas after the ninth grade because she didn't have the bus fare to get to a segregated black high school. Instead, she washed glasses at a restaurant and, when her father died three years later, married the first man who asked. She left him six years later with her three small children.

Her new home was Watts. By day, she worked as a salad chef for \$50 a week; by night, she took sewing lessons and finished high school. "My upbringing was, you take care of yourself," says Mrs. Rumph, straightening her hand-sewn green polyester pant suit. "I don't believe in handouts." Her father, a minister,

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delivered newspapers and scrounged for chores so he could feed his nine children. Although he had only a second-grade education, "there was not a word in the Bible he couldn't pronounce," she says.

Mrs. Rumph moved to South Central from Watts after the 1965 riots, which began near her sewing shop. South Central was a different place then. "It was so beautiful. This was the place to be," she says. The Heritage Center's block had three cafes and a bridal shop with tuxedos in the window.

She and her new husband, Harris, who has worked as a garbage truck driver, a gardener and now as a mover, put two of her children through college. But since the late 1970s, the exodus of 70,000 manufacturing jobs in the area crippled the neighborhood. The cafes and bridal shop failed, replaced by spots like the Love Trap Lounge. Even before the riot, Mrs. Rumph's husband had decided to close his H&M Moving and Storage Inc. "It's a depression," he says.

Healing the Wounds

The kids go to the Heritage Center for free, but Mrs. Rumph has gotten only one \$5,500 grant for the school, so last year, the Rumphs sold their home of 13 years to get operating funds for the school.

Now it's a lifeline for more than two dozen kids. Its classes supplement an education system in which local schools have dropout rates as high as 70% and some teens reach high school unable to spell their own names. Its partitioned areas provide a safe place for play, and its field trips to museums and parks show a different world.

The six-day-a-week center isn't licensed as a school and its teachers are volunteers — professional men and women willing to give up an afternoon or evening a week to teach such classes as reading, spelling and black history. Every Saturday there's an entrepreneur workshop in which the students learn what it takes to start and operate a small business. It's taught by Frank Denkins, who grew up in South Central, opened a chain of dry cleaners and now owns an office furniture outlet. "Whatever I can do to help, I will do," he says.

Half the boys in Mr. Denkins's class told him they wanted to be athletes. He discourages that, telling them it is unrealistic they will be superstars. "I tell them everyone can become an engineer, a doctor, if they work hard at it." Indeed, Lamar Porter, 13, is setting up a lawn-mowing business with three other boys in the class. "I'm gonna make it on my own," he says.

"We constantly hammer at them: You can do anything you want to. You just have to ask how," says Naomi Bradley, executive director of the center and Mrs. Rumph's niece. She says a similar, government-funded teen center helped her leave behind a life of robbery and drugs.

Teaching by Example

"Faye opens the door and the children rush in" — albeit through two metal security doors — says volunteer Alice Lane, seated below the portrait of Al Wooten Jr. that hangs at the center's entrance. Ms. Lane, a student activities worker at a community college, drives in from the nearby Crenshaw area to teach the grammar and language skills class.

The students play learning games or read from about 3:30 until 5 p.m., when a teacher arrives for an hour-long class. On the pastel-green walls hang charts with the students' names and blue stars: one star for attending each of three classes a week, eight stars to qualify for a field trip. Attendance generally isn't a problem; in fact, Mrs. Rumph urges the students to come only on days when they have class. Otherwise, the tiny center gets too packed. Kids and parents hear about the center by word of mouth — Mrs. Rumph says she hasn't yet had to turn anyone away.

The teachers try to show by example. Frank Elmore, who owns a management consulting business and teaches the "learning to learn" class, tells his class that confidence and hard work got him this far. Wanda Ross, who teaches phonics, says the key to buying her own home was education. She is an ophthalmic lab technician at the hospital of the University of California at Los Angeles.

Classes are charged with enthusiasm, but sometimes interrupted by reality. "Ascertain!" Ms. Ross says to student Holly Woods, 12. "Spell it!" Holly rushes to the chalkboard, but a rat-a-tat noise outside breaks her concentration. "What's that?" she asks, as a police siren starts wailing. "They shootin' again," another youngster pipes up. Finally, Holly, an aspiring lawyer, spells the word correctly and reads the definition from her dictionary. "Very good," says Ms. Ross.

A Pledge

But all those lessons threatened to go up in smoke the night the riots broke out. Mrs. Rumph, facing her students, knew she had to say something — and fast. "The way to change future verdicts is to get an education, to vote," she told them.

"That ain't gonna work," several shouted back. Lamar Porter was so angry he spit out: "I'm probably going to jail tonight."

But then Mrs. Rumph went around the room and made each student pledge not to loot. She called as many parents as possible to pick up their children early and drove the rest home through the streets.

The next day, with trepidation, Mrs. Rumph returned to the center. Only a few doors down, the Western Swap Meet and a Bank of America branch were burned out. But the center was untouched.

Just four days later, the center was open again and Ms. Ross, the phonics teacher, showed up to teach. Now, more than ever, she says, "we must show that people care about them, that they can amount to something." None of the students were injured or arrested — including Lamar Porter, who stayed home.

"Faye tells me: There are a lot of people out there trying to bring you down," he says. "But if you stay away from them, you'll make it."