

IN 1990, Ramon Cortines, then the San Francisco schools superintendent, was asked by a group of neighborhood activists about the prospect of putting a grade school in the Tenderloin. His answer: "I don't see this happening."

Midge Wilson, of the Bay Area Women's and Children's Center, saw it differently.

In the decade I have known her, I have repeatedly said that if we're ever in a war, I want Midge on my side.

While this statement suggests her courage, strength and uncommon perseverance — the woman is intrepid — it also misleads; Midge Wilson would never take sides in a struggle that was guaranteed to kill people. Her power comes from her good and gentle heart. It beats to make life better for others.

Last week, at a funky groundbreaking for the long-needed Tenderloin grade school — the "ground" was a little pile of dirt on top of an asphalt parking lot — I watched as Midge stood against a graffiti-marred brick wall.

She was beaming.

At the mayor, late, as usual, but enthusiastic.

At Schools Superintendent Bill Rojas, who, unlike his predecessor,

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easily saw a school "happening."

At Jacky Spencer-Davies, Midge's co-pillar at the Women's and Children's Center.

At Franciscan Brother Kelly Cullen, an ally for 15 years in the fight for social justice and dignity for the poor.

At the parents of some of the 1,100 grade-school-age kids who call the mean streets of the Tenderloin home.

At the kids, who wore little yellow hard hats and sang, "If I Had a Hammer."

At the phalanx of architects from Esherick, Homsey, Dodge and Davis, and from Barcelon and Jang, who donated their talent and expertise for the creation of a school for almost 600 students.

At the politicians, the ministers, the school board members, the journalists, the advisors, the Ten-



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derloin merchants, landlords and housing activists, the Junior Leaguers, the welfare moms.

At her own 2½-year-old daughter, Ashley.

As I watched Midge beaming, I played a secret trick on her. Like the hero in Frank Capra's "It's a Wonderful Life," I imagined life if Midge Wilson had never existed. I pulled her

out of the celebration, the women's and children's center, the Tenderloin, San Francisco.

Forty-six years ago, she wasn't born. She never joined the Peace Corps. Never got a master's degree in divinity. Never moved here from the East Coast. Never got a vision in her head. Never made other people see it. Never said, "It's not me; everybody made this happen."

Whoosh. Everything but The City and the neighborhood disap-

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She wanted a school for the Tenderloin

peared. Ashley disappeared. She was back in China, waiting for someone to give her a loving home.

The women and children's center on Leavenworth Street, for 16 years a place of light, hope and education for the poor, was a boarded up storefront. The vibrant children's playground in the northeast corner of Civic Center Plaza — another project that no one in charge could see "happening" — was just a stretch of scraggly trees and filthy concrete.

The Tenderloin still had nearly 4,000 children living in it, but many of them were prisoners in their crowded family apartments. The other good and gentle hearts of the neighborhood were plugging away, fighting hard for affordable housing, safe streets, parks, health clinics and education facilities. But the fight was so much harder.

Midge Wilson, the ever-polite person who won't take no for an answer, the soft-spoken woman who considers "It can't be done" the most obscene sentence in the Eng-



FILE PHOTO/1990

Midge Wilson

lish language, wasn't there to make people say yes to dreams.

"When people say they can't say no to me, it just totally stuns me," Midge said after the groundbreak-

ing. "I never think of myself that way."

That, of course, is why it works. It's why people listen to this one woman talk passionately about the crying need for a public school in San Francisco's toughest neighborhood. And they tell her that it's a fine idea, but, gee, kind of impractical. Then the next thing they know, they're helping her build the school that will open in 1998.

One crisp autumn morning, they all end up in a parking lot at Van Ness Avenue between Golden Gate Avenue and Turk Street. Hundreds of people are there. They look at the cardboard model of the school and community center, the swatches of carpet and paint, the architects' drawings.

The kids dance and sing. The adults make self-effacing thank-you speeches and hug each other. A priest douses the cardboard model and dirt pile with holy water.

Then, using a glitter-coated shovel, everybody takes turns digging into the dirt and throwing it a few inches to the right or left.

When Midge takes her turn — not first, not second, maybe 10th — everyone in the crowd bursts into cheers and applause. It took them awhile, but now they see what Midge Wilson has always seen. It's so simple for her: It will help people who need and deserve help; it had to be done.