by Margaret Guroff

mother's helper

photography by David Colwell and Scott Suchman

Thirty-five years ago, Carolyn Winn decided she needed help looking after her four disabled sons. She chose her only daughter, Laverne. Now, Carolyn is gone, and her sons are middle-aged men. What's a dutiful daughter to do?

Laverne Winn has four alarm clocks. Every morning at 4:30, the wind-up clock starts ringing. The battery-powered and electric clocks don't sound; Laverne only keeps them to guarantee she won't lose track of time. On the dresser sits a collection of stuffed bunnies, each in its own plastic bag. Across the room is a scuffed antique vanity, in whose mirror Laverne has watched her hair turn from brown to storm-cloud gray.

Laverne Winn has four brothers. Every morning at 4:31, she listens for them stirring. If she doesn't hear anything, she passes their empty bedrooms and pads down the stairs of the Northeast Baltimore house they share, to the room where all four sprawl, fully dressed, sleeping on sofas or chairs. Laverne doesn't know why her brothers like to sleep down here. Even the men don't know, but they've been doing it for two years, since about the time their father went into the nursing home. On Christmas Eve, Laverne will chase the men up to their rooms, so she can lay out the gifts she has bought for them, and the gifts she has bought them to give her.

Laverne Winn has one hour a day to get her brothers into uniform, fed, and out of the house. This used to be her mother's job.

Now, and forever, it is hers.

Laverne Winn with her brothers, *clockwise from bottom left,* William, Stuart, Boyett, and Jack.

Laverne's spot on the living-room sofa is the far left; her mother used to sit on the far right.

AT 52, LAVERNE IS THE OLDEST. SHE was born in Cairo, Georgia, after Hitler was defeated but before the atom bomb fell. Her mother, the former Carolyn Boyett, had been a schoolteacher. Her father, Philip Lavergne Winn, had worked at a gas station, a Civilian Conservation Corps camp, and a cafe, but by the time Laverne came along, he was a tree surgeon for the Davey Tree Company, a job he would keep 40 years.

Sons arrived every two years for a while—first Stuart, then Boyett, then William. The youngest, Jack, now 42, was born shortly after their father's company moved the family to Baltimore.

The Winns didn't know there was anything unusual about their children until Laverne started school. Teachers told them she was different from her classmates—more quiet, less quickly taught. Compared to her brothers, though, Laverne turned out to be the smart one. The boys were genial, good-looking, and strong, but their powers to reason were limited. Eventually, all four would be diagnosed with mental retardation.

Baltimore *deputy editor Margaret Guroff wrote about Vinny Testaverde in September.*

Back then, no one knew why this occurred. And no one knows today. It could have been built into the parents' genes, or some "genetic accident" such as a broken chromosome. Then again, there could have been an outside cause—something someone breathed or ate or simply stood too close to. According to the American Association on Mental Retardation, in three-quarters of the cases of mental retardation in this country, no cause is ever found.

As a child, Laverne was different from her classmates: more quiet, less quickly taught. But compared to her brothers, Laverne was the smart one.

In 1955, the only thing the mother knew for sure was that her boys were vulnerable. So she set out to protect them. And, without meaning to, she offered up Laverne.

IT'S 5:15 A.M. AND LAVERNE IS FEELING charitable, so Jack will get his French toast. She's standing silently with her back to the stove, dipping bread into raw-egg soup and then plopping it on an electric griddle, *tsss*. This is how her mother taught her to make French toast. Every dish Laverne prepares, she does as her mother taught her.

Boyett is nearby, plunking ice into a thermos. Each of the Winn brothers makes his own lunch and totes it to work in a red-and-white cooler that's big enough for a six-pack.

"A 36, a 44, a 52," says Boyett, volunteering the widths, in inches, of the lawn mowers he can operate. "I use a 52 all the time, all the time."

Laverne's glasses magnify her eyes so much she always looks surprised,

even by things she's seen or heard a million times. She glances at her brother, then back at the griddle. She turns the toast, *tsss*.

In the dining room, Stuart is pouring orange juice. He's the strong, silent type—the family's Gary Cooper. When he runs out of juice in the middle of a glass, he slowly lifts the spout to one eye and peers inside the carton.

While Stuart's still peering, here comes William with a fresh carton of juice. He pops it open and hands it over, taking the empty back to the kitchen with a nod and a brief, wistful smile. William's lower lip is lined with a row of whiskers he missed while shaving.

Laverne's voice comes through her nose and it has a permanent catch; she sounds like Peppermint Patty under a bell jar. Now she hollers "Jack!" and down he stomps, with a wad of cotton in his left ear. He always wears cotton in that ear only. No one quite knows why.

"I want my breakfast, woman!" Jack booms with a grin. "I'm hungry right here." He lets go of the lugubrious laugh that means he likes his joke.

All four men, in uniform now, take their seats at the table. Stuart, Boyett, and Jack wear the khaki shirt and slate chinos of the Baltimore Association for Retarded Citizens landscaping service. William wears a similar outfit to work in the greenhouse at Cylburn Arboretum.

Raising a topic of conversation at this table is like dropping a pebble into a pond. There's an initial splash, and then the responses ripple back, gradually subsiding.

"I don't drink coffee," says Laverne. "I never did care for it." This starts something.

"I like it black," says Boyett.

"That's how our parents drank it," Laverne says.

"I like cream," says Jack.

"Our father's brother doesn't drink it, and we have a cousin that doesn't drink it," Laverne adds.

"I drink coffee every day," Stuart offers.

"I need coffee every morning," William says.

There's a pause. Laverne has left the room.

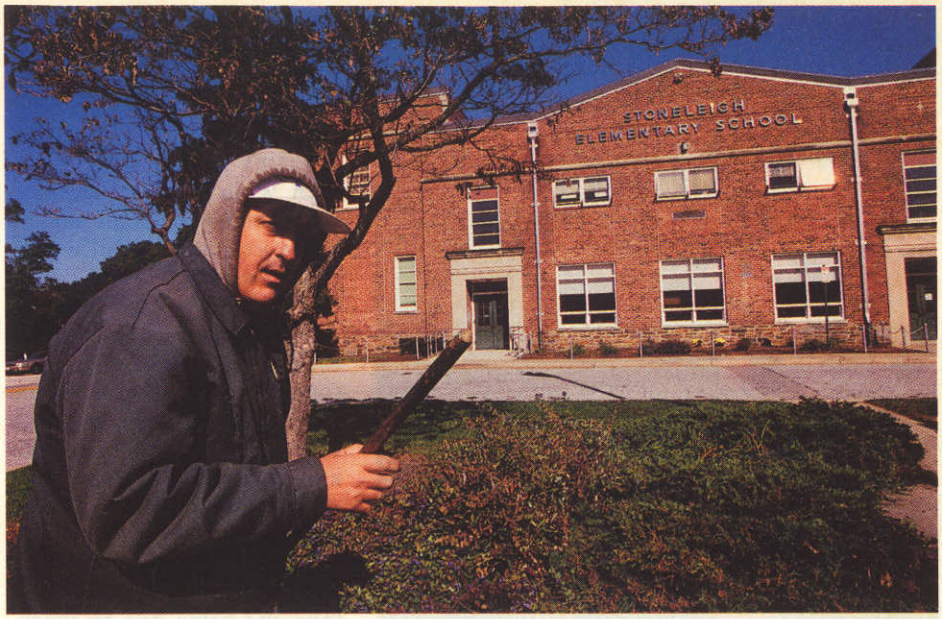
"I need my coffee," William says.

Another pause.

"I drink it every day," concludes Stuart. "Every day."

At this, Laverne returns, carrying a Dixie cup filled with water and a black unbreakable comb. She stands behind Boyett, dips the comb, and combs his hair down smooth. Boyett keeps on eating his fried eggs.

Laverne moves around to Jack and dips the comb again.



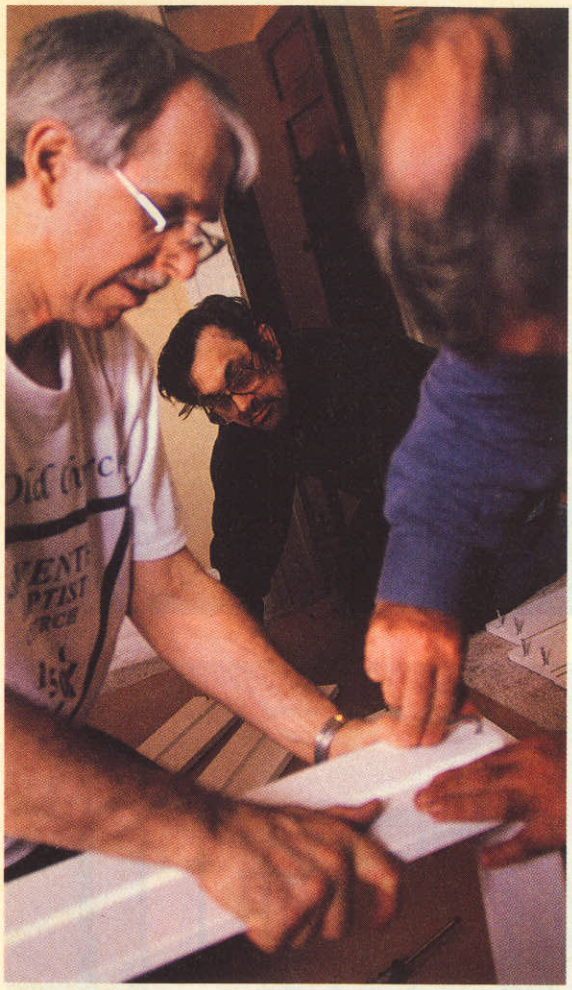
Top, *Stuart rakes leaves as part of his landscaping job.* Above, *a family portrait in the room where Carolyn and Philip Winn used to sleep.*

AFTER THE WINNS SETTLED IN BALTIMORE, they began looking for a church. In 1958, they found one: Seventh Baptist Church on North Avenue. It was the denomination of Carolyn's youth. Phil was raised Methodist.

Phil was an angular, agile man, very gentle and shy, in part because of a hearing loss that made it hard to communicate. One former pastor called Phil the kind of dad you'd learn your kindness from.

Carolyn, on the other hand, was eagerly outgoing, with a round face, a frequent smile, and a boundless desire to chat. As a result, she became the family's social ambassador. She volunteered at the church's resale boutique and at Cylburn Arboretum. She taught Sunday school, visited shut-ins, cooked for church dinners and bake sales. For years, her mysterious, powdered-sugar-topped bar cookies were a clamored-over treat. Friends nagged her for the recipe, which came down from her mother, but Carolyn kept her lips sealed. (Laverne now has the recipe; her lips are sealed, too.)

At first, Carolyn and Philip brought their oldest two children with them to church. Laverne and her father were baptized together in 1960, and Stuart sometime later. But as the years passed, Stuart stopped attending, and the youngest three boys came only once or twice a year, if at all. Most Sundays, the only Winns in church were Carolyn, Phil, and Laverne. After service, the timid, devoted young girl would trail



Gordon Bonham, a friend from church, visits the Winn house every Saturday. Here, he helps William and Boyett set up a new wardrobe.

her mother through the sanctuary as she made her hellos.

To some of Carolyn's closest friends, it seemed she was hiding her boys. Carolyn would talk endlessly, on the phone and in person, about her vegetable garden, her volunteer work, her days as a schoolteacher—practically anything but her family. One friend socialized with Carolyn for three years before she was invited to meet the boys, and only upon meeting them did she learn they had retardation. Another friend remembers only once during their 30-year acquaintance that Carolyn mentioned her children's situation: During a prayer circle, she asked a blessing for her "special" family. For a while, the Winns went out of their way to drive a different family with developmentally disabled children to church, but the Winns left their own boys at home.

Friends guess at a mix of reasons for this—Carolyn's worry that the boys might be disruptive; her strong desire to protect them from any possible harm; even her own embarrassment at their condition.

The one thing friends agree upon is this: The boys stayed home from church because their mother wanted them to.

AS THEY FINISH BREAKFAST, each Winn brother places his saucer on his plate, his mug on his saucer, and his juice glass inside his mug. Then he carries this stack to the kitchen.

The men go upstairs to brush their teeth and collect their coats and baseball caps. Boyett descends first, grabs his lunch box, and heads out the door into darkness. A couple of minutes later, William leaves. Then Jack, and finally, Stuart.

Five minutes later, the brothers are reunited, since they all take the same bus to work. William, Boyett, and Jack stand at the bus stop, talking about the cars that pass.

Stuart stands a bit apart, smoking, looking like some sort of *noir* detective. He cocks his head and gazes toward the horizon. "Come on, bus!" he hollers.

The bus obliges and trundles the men west on Northern Parkway. Stuart and Boyett get off at Roland Avenue. William gets off at Levindale. Jack rides alone to the end of the line: the Social Security Administration campus.

Though he is the youngest brother, Jack has been with BARC the longest, starting at a day activity center in 1975. The BARC landscaping service competes for contracts, but laborers' jobs are so-called "supported employment":

To some of Carolyn's friends, it seemed she was hiding her boys. One knew Carolyn for three years before she learned the boys were disabled.

The state's Developmental Disabilities Administration helps bear the cost of supervision. With that support, Jack has mastered such landscaping skills as driving a rider mower.

As the bus pulls into the terminus, Jack thinks of his strict supervisor and consults the watch he carries in his pocket. "7:03. I'm early yet," Jack says to himself. He laughs, a deep *heh, heh, heh.* "He ain't going to bother me," he says.

Jack pockets the watch and pulls out his key chain, selecting out the black, stubby key that starts the lawn mowers at work.

Not everyone who runs the mowers is entrusted with a key. Only the ones who can handle it.

LAVERNE GREW UP PRETTY, DELICATE, and shy, a porcelain replica of her mother. School was tough, but not impossible. In sixth grade, the principal called her aside and told her she'd never finish high school. But Laverne did graduate—she even passed algebra. Almost every signature in her high-school yearbook was addressed, "To a quiet girl."

According to one of Laverne's high-school teachers, a counselor lined up a full-time cashier's job for Laverne, but she never got to start it: Carolyn refused to give up her daughter's help at home.

With four boys growing bigger by the day—Jack was turning 9—the house had become a factory of beds to be made and laundry to be done. At the same time, Carolyn was beginning to develop the first symptoms of what would later become chronic asthma and a heart condition. Though she kept up her schedule of volunteer activities outside the house, when she was at home Carolyn did only the cooking and sewing. Laverne did the rest.

The household functioned on the force of Carolyn's personality—the mother made all the plans and saw them carried out. Phil, the father, made a habit of concurring with his wife's decisions. And from what friends could see, their sweet and pliant daughter did not object: Young Laverne seemed to hunt for ways to please her strong-willed mother.

All of Laverne's brothers finished school and got jobs, pooling their paychecks to support the family. Laverne stayed at home with her mother. The year she turned 30, her parents bought the Lauraville house where the family still lives. At about that time, the daughter began cooking all of the family's meals. When Laverne was 35, her father retired. That year, the daughter started wearing glasses. Five years later, she switched to bifocals. Laverne rarely left the house, except to go to church. She taught Sunday school for a while, but eventually gave it up.

On a Saturday, Jack entertains his girlfriend, BARC workmate Eileen Sedaki, as Boyett prepares to trim a hedge.

From the time Laverne graduated high school on, church friends urged Carolyn to allow her daughter to get a job, to have a normal life. The mother would not budge. "No, I need Laverne at home," was all she'd ever say.

Laverne remembers applying for a few jobs as a young woman, but she never got the jobs, and after a while, she stopped applying.

It's easy from this distance to judge the mother severely. It's not as easy to come up with a workable alternative. Carolyn was fiercely protective, and she knew that the outside world could be cruel to people with disabilities in ways a mother cannot control. Home, at least, could be a sanctuary—as long as Laverne was there to keep the household running.

Then, too, Carolyn probably did not understand the length of service she was asking of Laverne. Until recently, people with mental retardation were expected to die young. This expectation, it turns out, was both affected and caused by many doctors' reluctance to provide mentally disabled people with aggressive medical care. Even Carolyn's own brother, who had a developmental disability, was not expected to see his 40th year. (He died at 62.)

As the family stayed together year after year and Carolyn grew sicker and sicker, she began to fret increasingly about her children's future. In a life with enough struggles day to day, the future was a new concern for Carolyn. Around the time when Laverne, her oldest, turned 40, the mother confided her worries to a friend. "I don't know what we're going to do," she said in her Georgian accent. "I never expected the children to outlive me."

EVERY MORNING AT 7:15, BOYETT AND Stuart meet their work crews in a dell behind the BARC Landscaping Service building, a former power plant on the grounds of St. Mary's Seminary in North Baltimore. The brothers help load trucks with mowers and tools, then ride out to different job sites.

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Today, the gray-haired Boyett is mowing grass at the Milford Mill subway station. He's maneuvering a 52-inch-wide mower along the grassy edge of a stream bed. Boyett was just trained to use this big machine on hills, so he navigates with care, sometimes scuttering a half-step down the bank before recovering. If you were looking only at his proud, concerned face, you might think he was pushing a baby carriage.

As usual, Boyett is chewing on a toothpick and wearing three leather belts: The bottom one holds up his pants; the middle one carries the holster for his personal grass snips; the top one is a broad weightlifter's belt that rides high on his belly.

Boyett guides the mower along the whole length of the stream bed, then swoops up a few extra feet to where a visitor is watching him work. "I can handle it," Boyett says happily, pounding a

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fist on his chest. "I can handle it." And then he wrangles the machine around and starts down the bed again.

Over in Timonium, Stuart's team is working a different contract: tending the tiny patches of lawn surrounding a drive-in bank. Stuart pushes a small lawn mower with some deliberation—over, up, and down around an inconveniently placed storm drain. He's wearing a blue headset to protect his hearing.

Lawn work isn't Stuart's favorite thing. He'd prefer to work in a warehouse, as he and Boyett used to do. Still, he applies himself to the task at hand, bowing his head with concentration, until he spots a big-rig truck making a delivery to a nearby store.

Stuart stops the mower, stands straight up, and grins. As the truck passes within feet of him, he raises his right arm, grabs an imaginary cable, and pumps down twice—*toot, toot*—the universal sign for "Honk your horn!" Stuart does this pretty much every time he sees a truck.

He has no luck this time. The trucker rumbles on, staring straight ahead. Stuart bows his head and starts pushing again.

At the same time, across town, William is working in the greenhouse at Cylburn Arboretum, a job he does without special supervision and has held for 22 years.

"I do this every day, five days a week," William tells a visitor, pulling a blue shower head from his pants pocket and screwing it onto a hose. "I do this every day, every damn day," he adds mildly. William bends down to open a valve, then straightens to water the first of many tables full of potted poinsettias.

As he waters, William converses about this and that: He names the Cylburn supervisor who hired him in 1975; he recounts a day when the temperature inside the greenhouse reached 106 degrees. "My father's old, he's old," William volunteers softly. "He don't know who I am, he don't."

Of all the brothers, William is the most "relational," one friend says—the one who finds it easiest to connect with other people. If you say, "I appreciate your help," he'll respond, "I know you do." Sometimes, when you talk to William, you get the feeling you're both thinking the same thing: how complete his soul is, and how complete its cage.

CAROLYN WINN GREW WEAKER, BUT SHE did not give up service to the church until a heart bypass operation in August 1991. On October 14 of that year, Carolyn died at home of congestive heart failure. She was sitting in her habitual spot on the sofa with Laverne by her side.

Laverne and her father, Philip, tried to carry on, but without its matriarch, the family began to falter. Phil was nearly 76; he'd been retired from the tree company for 10 years already. His hearing was deteriorating further. His eyesight wasn't what it used to be. He had been accustomed to driving Stuart and Boyett to their warehouse jobs on Saturdays, but after causing a crash, he had to give up his car. Laverne had tried several times to learn to drive, but she couldn't pass the test. Stuart and Boyett began taking the erratic weekend bus, with transfers, from Lauraville to Arbutus.

Within a year, the family was in crisis. Philip's thinking wasn't clear, and his bookkeeping wasn't accurate. The family had always pooled all the paychecks, so everyone was affected. Banks and credit-card companies were calling for payment, and the Winns were threatened with the loss of their home. Stuart and Boyett missed Saturday work so often that they were disciplined and demoted. Later, they were fired.

The state has provisions for elderly parents who can no longer care for disabled adult children. But with more and more disabled people living longer lives, there was a long waiting list for assistance.

At Seventh Baptist Church, the question of what to do about the Winns became topic number one. Old church friends helped in the ways they could, with meals and rides and other kindnesses. But it seemed that what the family needed was a total overhaul.

That job fell to a relative newcomer, Gordon Scott Bonham, a sociologist from Kentucky who had recently taken a job at Towson State University. Bonham and his wife, Sandy, moved to Baltimore and joined Seventh Baptist; their adult son, who has a learning disability, stayed in Louisville, where he had an apartment and a job.

Bonham's sociology research had included studies of in-home services for people with mental disabilities. It was that expertise, as much as his experience in raising a disabled child, that gave Bonham the courage to begin navigating a new state's social-service system. He set himself to the task in May 1992. Only two years older than Laverne, the lanky academic eventually took on a fatherly role in the family, researching options, applying for benefits, and sitting the siblings down to discuss each change that could be made.

"There was a real need, and it's a very difficult process" to get help from the state, recalls Bonham. There is more demand than funding for every program offered by the state Developmental Disabilities Administration, including supervised jobs. Only the families in the most dire need can qualify.

Bonham's personal log records his official progress: IQ tests and other efforts to qualify for emergency services; practical help such as rides to medical appointments from an agency called Alliance, Inc.; new financial arrangements that meant forgiveness for many of Phil's debts; new jobs at BARC for Stuart and Boyett. In 1994, when Phil started to hallucinate and become violent, Bonham helped the Winn family find him medication and an adult daycare program. In October 1995, after a reaction to his medication landed Phil in the hospital, Bonham helped the siblings decide to move him to a nearby nursing home.

Along with family milestones came another change: As her mother's shadow faded, Laverne stepped into the light.

Along with those milestones came another, less measurable change: As her mother's shadow faded, Laverne stepped into the light. Running the Winn household requires a certain amount of decision-making and order-giving. And in the period following the mother's death, the taciturn Laverne found that she was up to the task.

These days, the household runs pretty smoothly. Laverne does the laundry and cleaning, as always. She also does her mother's work—shopping and cooking and keeping her brothers on schedule. On Fridays, a friend from church drives Laverne to the Bi-Rite, where she buys the food her mother bought: the same name brands, the same container sizes.

Laverne stays in touch with her parents' kin down South by telephone. When someone in her extended family or at church gets married or has a baby, Laverne is the one who telephones everyone else to let them know. "I have to keep in touch with *somebody*," she laughs.

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Gordon Bonham comes over every Saturday to check in and help Laverne pay bills. Often, he'll do small repairs or take the Winns to visit their father. Bonham also helped the Winns arrange (and finance) some long-needed renovations, including an updated bathroom and a new porch roof.

But the best marker of Gordon Bonham's success is the smallest change: Every Sunday, all five of the Winns attend church.

AFTER SHE GETS HER BROTHERS OFF TO work, Laverne eats her own breakfast. She clears the table; she washes the dishes; she gets started on one of her 19 weekly loads of laundry. Laverne watches Regis and Kathie Lee. Then, she watches Sally.

In the living room where Laverne sits, the shades are broken, so they're always drawn. Crystals that have fallen off the room's chandelier lie patiently in a candy dish, waiting to be reattached. Carolyn Winn's funeral was six years ago, but the guest book visitors signed that day still sits on a coffee table across the hall.

After all these years in the shade, Laverne's pink skin is uncannily smooth, like the powdery surface of a day-old balloon. When she tells stories, her hands splay excitedly, or they tug at the ends of her hair. Laverne talks the way a sewing machine sews, sometimes stopping abruptly and zizzing backwards to cover the same territory again in a slightly different way.

In this manner, she'll tell stories about distant relatives in "Miami, Florida; Winterhaven, Florida; Eustus, Florida; Pensacola, Florida; and Sarasota, Florida," among other places; about a snowball-throwing incident at a church retreat in 1969 that still amuses her; about her regret over having her mother die at the age of 75. "I thought my mother would be around longer," the daughter says with a shrug.

Laverne doesn't like to talk about how her life might have been different if she had taken a job and moved to her own place. When you ask her whether she regrets staying home, she just smiles anxiously and waits. In her silence hangs the question of what her brothers would do without her, but also the question of what, at this point, she would do without her brothers.

After a long, quiet moment, Laverne sighs. She crosses her arms against her chest and sinks into the sofa. "I wouldn't like living by myself," is all she'll finally say.