

Inner-city sanctum comes in stones

More than 10 years ago, third-generation stone cutter Alan Bird left his job and his English homeland to answer a holy call for help. Three months after his arrival at New York City's Cathedral of St. John the Divine, the world's largest Gothic cathedral, the man he had come to assist returned to England, leaving Bird the master mason for the entire project: the construction of two 300-ft-high stone towers, several chapels and a sunken cloister.

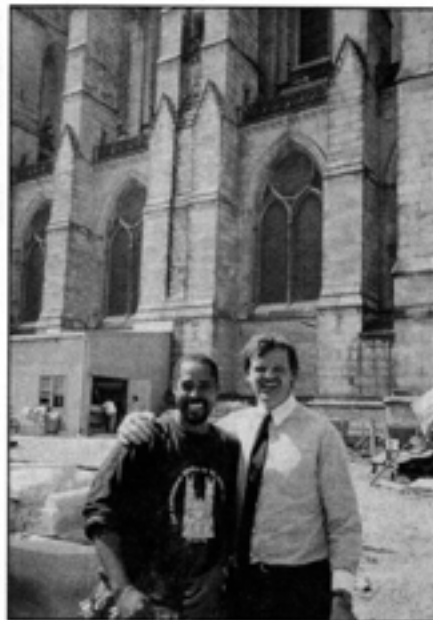
Obviously, Bird needed help, so he took charge of the church's program to recruit and train unemployed inner-city youths in the ancient art of stonecutting. Beyond providing jobs, Bird says, "What I wanted to do was bring some old-world values of pride, patience and longevity to these people." When selecting the first throng of apprentices, Bird says he "looked for people with the ability to listen. The skill was my end of the bargain."

The "old-world values" have paid off. Today there are more than 50 full-time, Bird-trained stonecutters at the cathedral. They have erected more than 4,000 of the projected 11,000 stones for the first tower. But the going is slow. "The completion of the cathedral is scheduled for 150 years from now, so patience is important," notes Bird.

A considerable demand for the expertise of Bird's stone cutters prompted the cathedral to join with New York City developer David M. Teitelbaum to form a partnership called Cathedral Stoneworks. Profits from the partnership are divided equally, with the cathedral's half invested back into its own building project. "We are blending medieval skills with modern technology to make stone a strong competitor with iron and steel," says Bird.

The enterprise has won several other large contracts, including work on the city's Jewish Museum and the Fifth Ave. Presbyterian Church, as well as a facade for Carnegie-Mellon University's College of Fine Arts in Pittsburgh. "We were impressed by the quality of their work and happy to contract a company that uses its profits for such a beneficial cause," says Richard Cleary, project manager for the Carnegie-Mellon building.

Bird plans to help start other similar inner-city, stonecutting training programs. "We want to teach the skills along with the ability to pass them on to the next generation," says Bird, whose own 17-year-old son began working last year as a fourth-generation stonecutter. "This whole thing is not just about building churches," says Bird. "It's about building people." ■



Alan Bird (right) and stoneyard manager Eddie Pizzaro, a disciple of Bird's values.