

PHOTOGRAPH BY  
MICHAEL BRANSCOM

As any student of architecture will note, our cathedral does not actually resemble Notre Dame.  
But we love it anyway.

## My Holiday Fixer-Upper

Gingerbread Notre Dame would be built, and in the holiday spirit. Even if it meant sub-contractors and time and a half. **BY SARAH JORDAN**

**W**ith grim determination, I named myself the chief architect/baker/artisan of the mightiest gingerbread construction this town would ever see. But something more was in store for me than just the greatest baking moment of my life, something which I hadn't even a glimmer of yet.

During phase one of Project Gingerbread Notre Dame, I would read the instructions before going to bed — usually drifting off to sleep by the time I got to the chapter on gilding. After a few nights I could see the Fome-Cor substructure rising from the base, with walls of gingerbread affixed just so. I could see the candy stained-glass windows encircling the upper and lower galleries. Confidently building it in my head, it was time for some reality-based labor.

I made a list, checked it twice and dispatched trusty intern Gabe to collect a knee-buckling assemblage of non-edibles, including sheets of Fome-Cor, a glue gun, an artist's knife, X-Ac-

to razor saws and a lighting fixture (to illuminate the interior of the gingerbread cathedral).

Then, after careful study of the blueprints and recipes, I realized that sub-contractors would be a necessity. Notre Dame demanded a real kitchen in a real home. No mini, step-saver, city-apartment kitchen would do for this colossus of bakery. Family members must be enlisted. And this is when the holiday magic began to work. As any good holiday project should do, the cathedral was about to trigger some major togetherness time for my family.

The 22-page war plan was faxed to my sister Laura. She hustled out to the grocery and craft stores to round out our list of supplies. Despite her commitment, she still was not immune to a little embarrassment, going through the checkout line with 11 pounds of flour, six jars of molasses and enough baking items, including 36 rolls of Life Savers, to strain the back of the red-suited fat man himself.

On a Sunday, Laura picked me up at

the train station in the suburbs. It's only a 10-minute walk home from the station, but we'd already realized then that every minute counted if we were going to get this little house of worship completed in time. Like the labors of Job, our tasks took on biblical proportions. The making of endless batches of dough was Laura's labor; mine was carving out a cruel number of fussy templates from the cardboard and Fome-Cor.

Each night Laura and I would check in by phone with progress reports and planning strategies. My progress was limited as I, being the foreman, sat on my duff in the city — away from the big suburban kitchen — and did nothing. Meanwhile, Laura doggedly marched on along her path of unrelenting dough-making. We'd later realize that Rose Levy Beranbaum, the author of *Rose's Christmas Cookies* (Morrow), from which we took the recipe, played fast and loose with numbers. Either that or she had zero confidence in her readers' abilities and felt the need to arm them with excessive amounts of dough, icing, cardboard and candy for major screw-ups.

We had only one weekend left to raise the roof — as well as walls, doors, steeples — deck its halls and bring that baby into Center City.

Laura and I both took Friday off from our regular work schedules to devote to the cathedral. As she collected me at the station, I fretted about the ►



► elapsing time and work that still lay before us. She said all the right things as only a big sister can do. We nattered on like two old ladies, going round and round about our list of tasks.

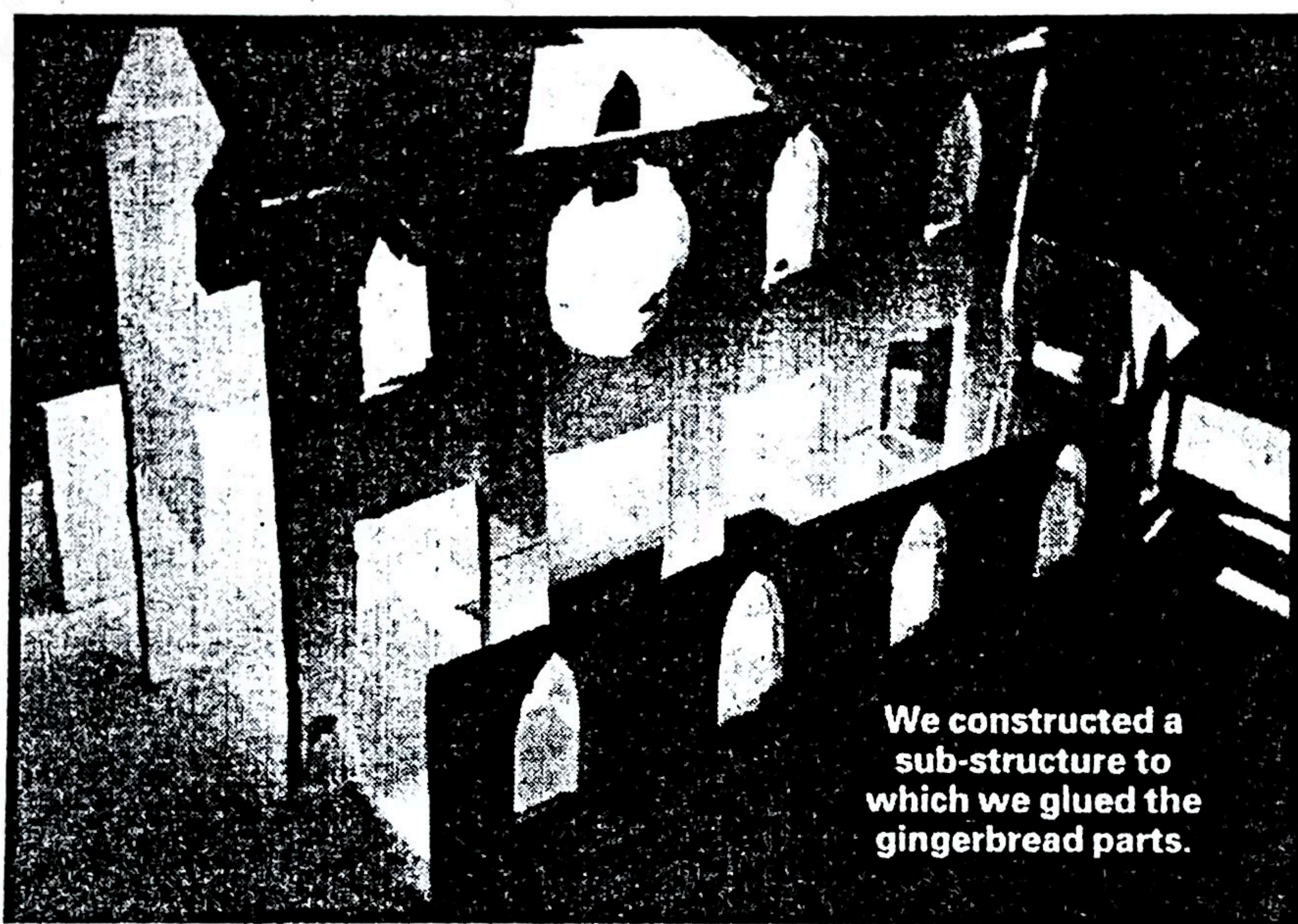
I had left the city behind. As she and I walked from the garage to the house, I could see Mom waiting for us at the back door. She'd thoughtfully brewed a fresh pot of coffee for us so we could get suitably hopped up on caffeine.

Laura and I went to work to the sounds of my dad's Hit Parade collection. We began in 1941 and would complete the cathedral somewhere well into the '50s. We were slowly moving into the next phase of construction. Laura had achieved a Zen-like calm as she toiled away uncomplaining at the nonstop baking (using the templates I had cut out). I had more of a zealot's look in my eyes as I fired up the glue gun and began passionately affixing the Fome-Cor and cardboard sub-

other six minutes we pulled them out of the oven to see perfect (some more perfect than others) panes of colored "glass."

By the end of Saturday, it still felt as though we'd never see our cathedral. We took a break that night, but I returned the next morning. The second Sunday of our project found us filled with hope and an eerie calm that all would be right. I began scoring the "stone" lines into the pilasters and the gothic windows. Next up was the scoring of the multiple pieces that I would later glue together to make the flying buttresses. Laura did her Zen thing again as she created the tiles on the roof out of icing. Dad returned from a trip and made all the right "oohs" and "aahs." I prompted him numerous times to repeat how "realistic" the pilasters and buttresses looked.

Finally, the moment had arrived when we could actually begin constructing the cathedral. With the glue gun heated up and ready to go, I attached the first gothic window to



**We constructed a sub-structure to which we glued the gingerbread parts.**

structure onto our Fome-Cor base. Laura would slip out of her Zen thing and quietly say something like, "I think you should have greater confidence in the glue." I'd look up from my extreme precautionary measures and mumble phrases like "structural integrity" and "excessive dead loads."

She baked more. I glued. There was lunch. Mom came downstairs and made a fire, more for atmosphere than actual warmth. We talked about our lives — the little things, too, that often don't merit a phone call but convey more. The afternoon included more baking. I organized the Life Savers into color categories for the stained-glass windows.

I went out for a jog around town just in time for a spectacular sunset in a harvest sky. Laura went out with friends for dinner and I went out with Mom. We couldn't remember the last time just the two of us had dined.

Later, when Laura got back, we squeezed in a little more work before bedtime. By Saturday afternoon Laura had finally had it with the baking. Perhaps my hammering away — pulverizing the Life Savers — didn't help her mental state. I finished the baking while Laura took up the icing tasks, making hundreds of little stars which would later be attached for decoration.

One of the few tasks which gave us instant gratification was making the stained-glass windows. We put the already-baked windows on a cookie sheet and filled the window space with the crushed candy. After baking for an-

the lower wall. The building went up quickly at this stage. Lower windows were attached, then front door, rose window, lower-roof tiles. (If you look carefully, you may notice that on one roof section the tiles flow upward instead of downward. Laura pointed out that I'd glued them on in the wrong direction. This was when a particularly riveting family discussion developed in the kitchen.)

The one tense moment came when we saw that the roof and steeple section did not meet up properly. Laura wanted me to dismantle the hodgepodge fix-it pieces I'd glued just below the steeple and try a different method to resolve the construction problem. But I, knowing how much glue I'd used to affix the pieces and knowing Laura's expertise with the icing, determined there was no going back.

Soon after, my husband arrived and clucked noises of approval before heading out of the kitchen to talk with Dad. We briefly broke for dinner but Laura and I knew we were close.

Then, lo and behold, the final moment arrived late that Sunday night. We placed the portable light in the slot we'd cut out from the Fome-Cor base, turned off the lights in the kitchen (the sun had set long ago) and gathered all family members. And there stood the family, quiet as church mice, staring at our funny cathedral. We peered at it from the darkness, the light glowing from within. It was a nice moment as we all stood together and smiled at the cathedral and at each other. ●