

# The Joseph Project...Restoring the Soul to Milwaukee's Inner City

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Do you believe in miracles?

For many graduates, “miracle” is the word they use to describe what’s happened to their lives since graduating from the Joseph Project and finding regular employment.

After giving their “all” to countless temporary positions so they would stand out and be selected for full-time employment, time-after-time they were let go because “the company no longer had a need.” This revolving door of false opportunities became the door to nowhere. People who believed in a better future began to internalize that “their best would never be good enough.” Self-doubt replaced hope, and fear swallowed their remaining self-worth.

Pastor Smith, founder of Greater Praise Church of God in Christ, located on 54<sup>th</sup> and Center St., Milwaukee, knows personally, and sees daily, the destruction that can happen when people live in poverty and despair.

The Joseph Project, <http://www.greaterpraisecogic.com/joseph-project>, named after Robert L. Woodson Sr.’s 1997 book The Triumphs of Joseph, is a non-denominational faith-based career placement program that connects inner city unemployed individuals with employers. Supported by Sen. Ron Johnson and staff members, Scott Bolstad and Orlando Owens, the program launched October 2015, in Sheboygan County.

Finding the right candidates is important, and Pastor Smith is the secret sauce. He interviews every individual to find the 10 to 15 people who are ready to make the life-changing commitment.

Candidates must pass a drug test, show up on time daily for classes, and demonstrate the right attitude. Smith tells each candidate, “You have to want this more than we want this for you.”

Bolstad and Smith then facilitate the soft and life skills training that includes: goal setting, communication skills, teamwork, conflict resolution, interviewing and presentation skills, spiritual fitness, and financial management.

Johnson has participated in every training session, either in person or via conference call, to provide encouragement and support, and to congratulate each individual. He tells graduates that their success carves a path for future candidates and also stresses that “Attitude is most important!”

Over the last 10 months, The Joseph Project has graduated 143 individuals, males and females, and has employed 80 people. Thirty-one are undergoing the hiring process and the program has a 71 percent retention rate.

When interviewed, Paul Bridges, almost 60 years old, said, “Having a job means that I have a future!”

The Joseph Project has proven that a bridge from poverty to self-sufficiency can be built. With the security of a regular paycheck, some graduates have been able to rent an apartment or purchase a car for the first time; some have engaged a financial planner to plan for retirement.



“The Joseph Project has completely turned my life around,” said Willie McShane, age 54. “I used to wake up with all the stresses of the world on me. I didn’t have a clue what to do. Now, I am stress-free and comfortable. I can see tomorrow and have hope. More than anyone, I’m proud of me!”

In the book, *The Triumphs of Joseph*, author Robert L. Woodson Sr. refers to the people who change the game as modern-day “Josephs.” He outlines ten defining characteristics that successful “Joseph’s” share in common and some of these include:

1. The program is open to all comers – there is no exclusivity.
2. Neighborhood healers have the same “zip code.” They have firsthand knowledge of the problems that people live with and also have a stake in their success.
3. Clear behavioral guidelines and discipline play an important role in the program’s success.
4. Grassroot healers fulfill the role of a parent, providing not only authority and structure, but also the love that is necessary for an individual to undergo healing, growth, and development.
5. Today’s Joseph’s are committed. They are in it for the Brotherhood of Service, which means that they are in it for long haul and make themselves available.

What you learn quickly when attending service at Greater Praise Church of God in Christ is that unconditional love fills every crevice of this small church. Each person is met with kindness, understanding, and support. When Smith says a personal blessing out loud to each parishioner, and hugs and holds those who need it, he demonstrates his fundamental belief that we all need the same things: to be seen, to be heard, to be loved, to be understood, to belong, and to feel safe.

For many who reside in the inner city, the unpaved road to self-sufficiency is a mountain with a narrow ledge and slippery slopes; the many attempts at scaling the mountain has left many feeling woefully unsafe and defeated.

Yet, in less than a year, the Joseph Project has shifted the trajectory of many graduates lives and their immediate family members. Children go to school with a deeper sense of pride; the home is more stable; and spousal relationships have become more loving.

The program has expanded and currently supports five vans and an SUV that transports employees to and from Milwaukee and Sheboygan employer sites six times daily, seven days a week, racking up more than 10,000 miles per month. Employees receive free transportation for the first month, and then pay \$10 a day thereafter, which doesn’t cover costs.

Currently, the program has two critical needs:

1. Funding. As a grassroots initiative, financial support comes from donations and a lot of prayers. Donations to support vehicle maintenance, driver salaries, and a dispatcher are urgently needed as the winter months approach.
2. Employment. In the greater Milwaukee area, employment is needed. When asked what seems to be the greatest stumbling block, Smith said, “Finding employers who are willing to make an exception to a candidate who doesn’t have their GED or a solid work background.”

Unable to look Smith or Johnson in the eyes before enrolling in the program, Billy Phillips, age 24, with months of stable employment, walks into the church, makes direct eye contact, and extends his hand wearing a big smile.

This is proof positive that the Joseph Project is changing lives and has the potential to improve Milwaukee’s inner city neighborhoods – one person at a time. Please consider a holiday gift, no matter how small, or if you have entry-level jobs, please contact the Joseph Project. You will certainly change, and maybe even be saving a life, and the world needs another miracle.