




Beyond the riots

By Robert L. Woodson Sr.

Milwaukee, and cities like it across the nation, should look to indigenous ‘Joseph’ groups in their communities quietly making a difference

A photograph of a man in a purple shirt speaking to a youth. The man is seen from the back, with his arm around the youth's shoulder. The youth is wearing a purple shirt and a green headband. They are in a park setting with picnic tables and trees in the background.

In Milwaukee's Sherman Park neighborhood, they took to the streets for different reasons.

There were what I call the "riot-shoppers," opportunists who took advantage of a volatile situation to loot local businesses during unrest in August that erupted following a fatal police shooting.

A man speaks with a youth during the 300+ Strong event at Milwaukee's Sherman Park on Sept. 10. The second annual event was hosted by the Running Rebels and a collective of grass-roots and youth-serving organizations.

Tom Lynn photo



Tom Lynn photo

A few hundred people attend this year's 300+ Strong gathering at Sherman Park.

And then there were the young people concerned about the inequalities and disadvantages they've witnessed. They've been conditioned to believe that the cause of — and solutions for — their neighborhood troubles are beyond their control and lie outside of the black community. They protest to vent their frustration with this purported impotence and to demand response from the presumed agents of control on the outside.

Hope for these disgruntled young people — and determination to enact effective change — cannot come from the outside. But it can come from the groups among them that are quietly making a difference, working day after day to address their neighborhood's needs and empowering those who seem destined to a dismal future to reclaim their lives and rise up.

The people and groups that are making a difference and have dedicated themselves to bringing solutions do

not seek the limelight or take advantage of volatile conditions as funding opportunities. They are tightly focused on the people who rely on them for guidance and assistance.

In a sense, the qualities that make them effective also make them invisible to those on the outside. They have been engaged in life-salvaging outreach on an ongoing basis and do not cease their efforts even in an atmosphere of crisis.

I call these grass-roots leaders our nation's "Josephs," connoting the unassuming biblical figure — a young man in the Pharaoh's prison — who brought the Pharaoh solutions for Egypt's impending crises when none of his conventional counselors and advisors had anything to offer (*"The Triumphs of Joseph"* by Robert L. Woodson Sr., New York, Free Press/Simon and Schuster Inc., 1998).

In 35 years of working with hundreds of community

The people in need of help vote with their feet, bypassing larger, well-funded, professionally staffed organizations, institutions and agencies to seek out and find the “Josephs” in their communities.

leaders, I have witnessed qualities that they have in common, wherever they serve and whatever problems they have committed themselves to address. Most started their outreach with whatever meager resources they had and continued to work on shoestring budgets. Some began, literally, by moving out the furniture from their homes to make room for the people they served.

These “Josephs” share the same geographic and cultural ZIP codes with those they reach out to and have earned their trust and response. They have a firsthand understanding of the problems they address, are available 24/7 and are committed for the long haul — often for the lifetime of those they serve.

Running Rebels

Among the “Josephs” of Milwaukee are Victor and Dawn Barnett, who direct Running Rebels, a nonprofit dedicated to providing positive opportunities and models for youths ages 8 to 19, who daily face the lures of drug abuse, delinquency, street violence and teen parenthood. Since its founding in 1980, the program has grown to include activities in the arts, sports, music and entertainment as well as job training and education. Essential elements of its outreach include cooperation with other groups in the community and the enlistment of the program’s alumni as mentors to youths who are coming in and rising up.

Among the programs of Running Rebels is a Violence-Free Zone initiative that is active in six Milwaukee public schools (four high schools and two middle schools), a collaborative effort that involves representatives of the

school administration and law enforcement and employs young adults from the communities as youth mentors. Data provided by police evidences the initiative’s success in sharply decreasing violent incidents, truancy and suspensions and raising academic achievement in the participating schools. Data also reveals that the program’s effectiveness goes beyond the school grounds, resulting in decreased incidents of crime in the surrounding neighborhoods.

On the basis of its track record of success, the courts and probation staff enlisted the Running Rebels to implement a program of

“targeted monitoring” for young serious chronic offenders as an alternative to being placed in a correctional facility. Rather than identifying its participants in terms of their past offenses, the initiative focuses on the capacities and potential of the youths through a program of close communication with an assigned mentor. It has elicited trust

and engendered the redirection of many of the youths it has served, who have proved their accountability to the courts and have notably reduced rates of recidivism.

An analysis of impact revealed that the program has generated more than \$63 million in savings to Milwaukee County from 1998 to 2012, based on a calculation worksheet developed by the county. More important, the program has made a life-changing difference among participants. Not one of the youths currently enrolled in the targeted monitoring program took part in the August riots at Sherman Park.



Tom Lynn photo

Brothers Noah and Jonah Smith play during the rally. Running Rebels and other groups offer year-round programs to support Milwaukee youths.

On Sept. 10, the Running Rebels and a collective of grass-roots and youth-serving organizations hosted a STILL 300+ Strong event at the site of that violence as a way to “wrap the community’s arms around the youth” and provide them with onsite resources that they can connect to as it brings together individuals, agencies and leaders who serve young people and their families. This was the second annual such community gathering at Sherman Park and had been planned for months before the flames of unrest erupted in the area. A few hundred people attended this year’s gathering.

The event takes its name from the tally of the 300-plus youths — mostly young black males — who come through the doors of the hosting groups on a regular basis. Together, the groups are working to link and coordinate activities that offer year-round programs, exposure to career pathways and employment opportunities, and safe places where black youths, at a critical stage in their lives, can receive support and mentoring from older and young-adult role models.

Though the impact of Running Rebels has been remarkable, there are cases in which a participant does not successfully redirect his or her life and slides back into old ways. This was the case of a young man who is currently serving a life sentence.

When regret and remorse resulted in his being placed on a suicide watch, prison authorities arranged for him to call the Barnetts, because they knew that the couple had provided the one oasis of hope and vision in the young man’s life. In that call, he apologized for failing to make use of the opportunity and guidance they provided him. Then, in a heart-wrenching moment, he pleaded: “Never give up on me!”

While this young man is destined for life inside prison walls and others might consider him beyond hope, the Barnetts and their counterparts throughout the country do not. They strongly believe that there is always hope

and that no one is beyond redemption.

The Alma Center

Another Milwaukee “Joseph” organization, by its very nature and mission, evidences that conviction. The Alma Center was created to reach and change the lives of abusive men who have been involved in criminal cases of domestic violence, many of whom have been referred by the justice system. Rather than focusing on the men’s wrongdoing,

the program works with its root cause — emotional and physical trauma they had experienced while growing up.

The majority of program participants had a parent who abused drugs or alcohol; half never knew their fathers; many had been victims of sexual and physical abuse. Half had a friend or relative murdered, and more than 40% had witnessed a homicide.

Through a five-stage program of identifying, dealing with and releasing that pain, participants are empowered to reclaim and renew their lives. That progress is augmented with programs to gain the life skills and job training necessary to secure employment and with a Restorative Fatherhood program that engenders the compassion, forgiveness and responsibility necessary to become a caring parent to their children and end the cycle of



Tom Lynn photo

Running Rebels member Andre Ester attends the rally wearing his 300+ Strong shirt.

domestic violence.

Earning trust is key

The Running Rebels, the Alma Center and similar groups throughout the nation share a common approach that has resulted in their capacity to reach and salvage lives. They meet people at their point of need.

They don’t require their participants to fit into a pre-conceived definition of “service provision.” They offer immediate help where it is most needed and, thereby, establish a bond of trust. That trust brings hope and vision, the basis of transformation. And that transformation provides a foundation on which practical opportunities for such things as employment, training and education

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Jeffrey Phelps photo

The Alma Center's Wisdom Walk to Self Mastery group meets in September. The group, led by program facilitator Floyd Rowell (right), gathers twice a week for six months, working to end the cycle of domestic violence. The Alma Center, in Milwaukee, was founded to reach and change the lives of abusive men.

can be effective.

I opt not to list here a glossary of many other “Joseph” groups throughout Milwaukee but, instead, describe the efforts of two exemplary groups that embody the qualities that are the unique defining characteristics of outreach that is making a difference. Equipped with this understanding, those who seek to offer support for effective and sustainable individual and community revitalization can identify the legitimate indigenous service-providers in any community.

The common traits are shared by effective groups and can be found in any neighborhood, in any city, if one knows what to look for, and they are found among good groups regardless of what “service category” they fulfill.

At its core, the dissolution of hope and the disintegration of a life begin with the failure of relationship, within the family and community. Our nation’s “Josephs” work to re-establish those relationships among those they serve.



They use the authority and trust resulting from their outreach and care to help reconnect people to family, to work and to a sense of personal responsibility.

The best proof that these groups are effectively serving their neighborhoods is that the people in need of help vote with their feet, bypassing larger, well-funded, professionally staffed organizations, institutions and agencies to seek out and find the “Josephs” in their communities.

What distinguishes the organizations that are legitimate is that they have earned the trust and confidence of some of the most dissatisfied people in the community. They use their outreach to reconnect them. And, ultimately, what they accomplish is transformation and redemption. [WI](#)

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