

## PORTLAND'S OWN 'JOSEPH' - Oregonian, The (Portland, OR) - June 28, 1998 - page E04

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Summary: Celebration Tabernacle's **Elbert Mondaine** transforms lives with gospel of personal responsibility and self-help

Robert Woodson's biblical reference, you can bet, was not lost on Portland's **Elbert D. Mondaine** at a Thursday night lecture put on by Cascade Policy Institute, the American Institute for Full Employment and the Oregon Association of Minority Entrepreneurs.

Woodson, director of the National Center for Neighborhood Enterprise in Washington, D.C., was in town to talk about some of the ideas set forth in his new book, "The Triumphs of Joseph." It is, at once, a provocative and inspiring work once he explains what he means by "Joseph." (It takes more than a sound bite.)

The former Urban League organizer is referring to the Old Testament son of Israel whose jealous brothers sold him into slavery in Egypt. Joseph was sold to the Pharaoh's assistant. In servitude and then in prison -- his master's wife tried to seduce him and falsely accused him of attempted rape when he spurned her -- Joseph faithfully accepted his fate and served diligently. Ultimately, the lowly Hebrew's ability to interpret dreams brought him to Pharaoh's attention. Joseph interpreted Pharaoh's dreams to be a portent of seven years of bountiful harvest and seven years of famine. He advised Pharaoh to put away 20 percent of the crop during the good times as a hedge against future famine.

In Woodson's telling "Pharaoh was not deterred by the fact that Joseph was not of the same background, that he came from a 'dysfunctional Hebrew family,' or that he was a prisoner." He listened to him and put him in charge of the harvest. Result: When the famine came, Pharaoh's land was ready.

What's this got to do with the crisis in today's inner cities, a crisis of drug addiction, violence, crime and lost lives Woodson sees spreading to more privileged communities? He thinks that after spending \$3.5 trillion on top-down anti-poverty programs and decades of civil-rights laws and racial agitation, "Pharaoh" ought to listen to the unsung modern-day Josephs who are already turning people away from drugs, violence and welfare dependency.

They're not our public-policy experts. They often come from our mean streets instead of our policy elites. Some even have come out crime and drug abuse. They don't have fancy offices, fax machines and case files. They just run programs -- often faith-based programs stressing individual responsibility -- that work. As Woodson told an appreciative multicultural crowd Thursday night, "The Harvards of this country do not have an answer to the Harlems of this country."

Woodson thinks he's found some answers in the 15 modern-day Josephs he features in his book. They each differ, but they have some key commonalities: First, notes Woodson, "they all refused to let external circumstances control their destinies, regardless of the odds they faced to accept the label of victim." They may live "in poverty," he says, but they're not "of poverty."

Also most had a personal transformation that led them to help others in similar spots. How? By serving as "moral tutors" or "character champions" by their advice or -- and this is more important -- good example.

North Portland's **Mondaine** didn't really need a Woodson lecture on Josephs. First, he's pastor of Celebration Tabernacle Church. Second, **Mondaine** is a premier Portland "Joseph." Indeed, Woodson gave him a "Joseph" award Thursday evening.

Celebration has about 200 members, most young and impoverished. It has more than its share of single-parent moms. **Mondaine** knows the life. He grew up in the St. Louis projects. Years ago, his wife left him with two young sons to raise as a single parent.

Three years ago, as **Mondaine's** flock was transforming a warehouse into a church, a young woman who had three children and one on the way told **Mondaine** she wanted to be in charge of the new kitchen. Next day this welfare mom gave him a detailed plan she had done herself: "I said, 'Girl, you ought to be doing something with yourself.' "

Quickly he concluded that all these young women had too much intelligence going to waste. The result: **Mondaine** and company started an espresso shop called Fridays, equipped by trips to salvage stores and junk yards. Pretty soon they also moved into secretarial services. The idea was to train the young men and women until they had the skills and experience to move into better paying jobs and off welfare.

Says **Mondaine**: "Our philosophy is: If you're in church the government should not be taking care of you. The church needs take care of the needs of the people. Church ought to be more than saying hallelujah."

He rattles off names of people his entrepreneurial ministry has helped -- better put, helped to help themselves -- move off welfare, crack, crime or ignorance into good jobs and better educations. The number is small. But **Mondaine** has a better sense of the accomplishment: "A lot of people may think this is insignificant, but it is significant, especially when you're breaking those bonds -- generational curses -- that have been there since their grandparents."

Part of his gospel: "We don't allow you to be a victim here. You can only be a victim as long as you let yourself be a victim."

Hallelujah.