

# THE WOODSON CENTER'S JOSEPH FUND



## Despite Decades of Economic Growth, Poverty and Crime Persist

This portfolio of community-based, innovative solutions developed by the people on the ground—who are fully devoted to our founding values—represents the most effective path to prosperity for struggling neighborhoods. Together, we can help make America everything it was meant to be.



Although America remains the most peaceful and prosperous multi-ethnic society in human history, crime, violence, and multigenerational poverty plague far too many communities. Despite billions poured into government programs and well-intended philanthropic efforts, these problems persist. Why?

Unfortunately, the overwhelming majority of researchers, policy makers, journalists, politicians, and charities view low-income Americans through the lens of dysfunction and deprivation instead of capacity. They do not believe that low-income communities possess inherent strengths that can be built on, and so they design their own interventions and impose them from the outside. But without the trust and confidence of local residents, such outsider programs are doomed to minimal effectiveness at best.

This tendency to discount the agency and self-efficacy of low-income Americans is exacerbated today by the notion that the American polity is hopelessly and thoroughly racist, and that “victimized” individuals and communities stand no chance of success unless massive — and extremely unlikely — revolutionary changes are pursued. And while “revolution” might sound attractive in the classroom, it wreaks havoc on the most vulnerable communities when pursued in real life. In 2020, homicides rose [an unprecedented 36.7 percent in 57 cities](#) across the United States and [continued to rise in 2021](#). And problems are not restricted to low-income urban centers. Since 1999, [nearly one million Americans](#) have died of drug overdoses, a number which [continued to rise last year](#), and suicides have [risen 35 percent](#) over the same time period. These deaths have afflicted families of all races and income levels, and [taken untold thousands of our young](#).

Clearly, a new approach is needed.

# A Better Approach

To address social problems at their root, the Woodson Center proposes the **Joseph Fund**, which in its first phase will raise \$50M to resource community-based solutions that align with the enduring values that have led to success for countless generations.

For decades, the Woodson Center has invested in modern-day Josephs: community leaders who, like Joseph in the Bible, often go unnoticed because they typically lack traditional credentialing. What these unsung heroes do have, however, is the experience and insight to solve the problems in their communities, and the necessary trust of their neighbors to implement those solutions.

In the Biblical story of Joseph, Pharaoh had troubling dreams that his “expert” counselors could not decipher. So, he followed the guidance of a young Hebrew prisoner, who had the gift to interpret dreams and foresaw a coming famine. Even though Joseph experienced unjust circumstances—falsely imprisoned and betrayed by his brothers who sold him into slavery—he never succumbed to bitterness or bad behavior. Pharaoh ended up appointing Joseph his viceroy, and Egypt not only survived the famine, but also prospered greatly.



The Woodson Center has successfully identified Josephs in low-income communities across America. They are working, day and night, to address the problems in their communities, and they have not yielded to bitterness or despair. What they lack are the resources to expand, systematize, and scale their efforts.

During the Woodson Center's forty years of work, modest funding to neighborhood Josephs has yielded numerous unprecedented victories, including [resident-managed public housing](#) that resulted in a drop in crime, a drop in teen pregnancies, and in more than 600 residents enrolling in college; [gang violence mediation](#) that resulted in zero gang-related deaths for 12 years straight in one of the previously most violent areas of Washington, D.C.; the creation of [Violence Free Zones](#) in public schools in cities across the country that raised grade point averages and graduation rates, while lowering violent incidents in schools and even crime rates within a radius of schools; a [rural poverty initiative](#) that saved 42 families from eviction, improved septic conditions for 80 families, and attracted millions in charitable donations and investment in the surrounding community; and many [bottom-up innovations](#).

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To expand this work, the Woodson Center has established the Joseph Fund, to resource a select number of thoroughly vetted and proven Joseph-led local groups that we identify through our Community Affiliate Network (CAN). **Our CAN initiative, designed as a pathway to long-term** sustainability, offers training and modest funds to these groups. **We provide oversight and accountability, assisting organizations** like the Alliance of Concerned Men (ACM), empowering them to scale up their operations and become eligible for Joseph Fund support. Thanks to our support and training, ACM has successfully reduced violence in the most dangerous neighborhoods of Washington, D.C. for over 30 years. From the beginning, the Woodson Center helped ACM secure their first major grant, helped them acquire a building for operations, and trained them in processes like bookkeeping and impact measurement. From eliminating gang-related homicides in the 1990s to preventing violence during the pandemic while it was rising in adjacent neighborhoods, ACM's work has saved and improved countless lives.

These resources will close the gap between what these Josephs are capable of achieving and what they can currently afford to do. The recipients will represent different racial and ethnic groups that are a part of the Woodson Center family of organizations. To ensure that support is used exactly as it is intended, 100 percent of the Joseph Fund will go to giving these groups the resources they need to be successful, frequently utilizing matching grant challenges to activate local donor networks and help these Joseph-led organizations develop sustainable fundraising. The Woodson Center will continue to raise its operating funds separately.

The results of Joseph Fund investment will be thoroughly studied and documented on both the organizational and community levels. Representatives of these groups will gather regularly at practitioners' conferences to share their unique approaches to problem-solving with one another and with select scholars and journalists. In this way, the Joseph Fund will not only enable communities to effectively create their own peace and prosperity, but also change the national narrative on race and poverty. The more that effective community-based solutions gain public attention, the less support there will be for approaches based on rioting, race grievance, or government expansion. The list of fund recipients will be regularly updated with detailed information.

Below is a representative sample of the types of groups the Joseph Fund will support:



**“The Woodson Center has been ACM's greatest supporter. They have been instrumental in providing the roadmap in establishing our organization’s sustainability. Their pioneering investment in our transformative programs paved the way for us to secure federal funding, resulting in significant impact, saving countless lives and transforming the communities we serve, making them safer and more prosperous.”**

**~Terrance Staley, Executive Director, ACM**



## **The Piney Woods School – Piney Woods, Mississippi**

The Woodson Center has found that effective education – especially in challenging populations – is so much more than the “right” textbooks or teachers with master’s degrees. It requires a profound and authentic connection between teachers and students, students and one another, and a value-centered culture embraced by everyone involved. No institution illustrates the effectiveness of this kind of culture more powerfully than The Piney Woods School, which today is the oldest, continually-operating historically black boarding school in the country.





The school began in the spring of 1909, when Laurence C. Jones delivered a reading lesson to his first three students, sitting on logs in the shade of a cedar tree in the rural, impoverished, segregated Deep South. Over a century after its founding, Piney Woods is thriving on nearly 2,000 acres of land: a 65-acre main campus and a 250-acre demonstration farm surrounded by nearly 1,000-acres of wildlife, renewable timber, lakes, and ponds. **Its 100 students from across the nation and around the globe are all supported by scholarships, and boasts a 100% college admission rate for all graduating seniors over the past 5 years.** Piney Woods graduates persist in college at more than twice the national average of demographically similar populations, according to Woodward Hines Foundation. Other institutions have taken note of the school's excellence, and it has established environmental and land management research partnerships with Brown University and Harvard University, respectively.

The Woodson Center's relationship with The Piney Woods School goes back for decades, when founder Robert Woodson and his wife enrolled a young lady they helped care for. Current Piney Woods School President (and Woodson Center Executive Vice President) Will Crossley is an alumnus of the school. Born in a low-income area on the south side of Chicago, Crossley left a lucrative legal practice to lead the school because he understood its transformative power firsthand. In 2020, when many institutions were struggling to stay afloat amid the pandemic, the Woodson Center hosted a fundraiser that enabled the school to grow. More recently, support from the Center and its donors transformed the school's dining hall into a beautiful, modern facility.

The school now receives many more applications from deserving students than it is able to accept. Support from the Joseph Fund would ensure that the work Laurence Jones began continues to grow and bear fruit for another hundred years. It would allow Piney Woods to offer more scholarships for qualifying students, welcome 50 more students into new dorms, sustain and expand its state-of-the-art facilities, and offer more hands-on experience in a variety of vocations alongside a classical Christian education. Most importantly, it would ensure that the values that enabled a generation of newly freed slaves to build prosperous American communities will be inculcated into young students for generations to come.

In February 2024, the feature-length documentary *Sacred Soil: The Piney Woods School Story* premiered on the Piney Woods School campus and streamed on Hulu. The Woodson Center's Joseph Fund made its first commitment as a \$2.5M matching challenge, with the total funds raised going to student housing and capital improvements that will enable the school to transform the lives of even more students well into the future.

Similar value-aligned educational projects are springing up all over the country and are looking to the Woodson Center and The Piney Woods School for guidance. Solidifying the future of Piney Woods will ensure it can continue to serve as a model for these community-led education efforts, multiplying the impact of Joseph Fund investment several fold.



# SACRED SOIL:

## The Piney Woods School Story



## CAN I LIVE: Washington, DC

Welfare, public housing, and other federal aid to the poor were originally intended to provide temporary relief to families in need. Unfortunately, there are currently over 1.2 million households in public housing—the overwhelming majority headed by single mothers—and the perverse incentives these programs create make it much harder for many to rise out of poverty. Racquel Williams-Jones understands this challenge firsthand because she navigated the welfare system for many years as a single mother of four. Now a college graduate and successful entrepreneur, Racquel teaches other single mothers and public housing residents how to escape poverty as she did, through her organization Can I Live.



**Based in Washington, DC, Can I Live teaches leadership and economic self-sufficiency strategies to single mothers living in public housing all over the country, and they have already helped hundreds of mothers successfully enter the middle class.** After assessing a resident who is ready to improve her life and the life of her family, Can I Live guides her through all the necessary steps to increase her earned income, reduce her dependence on social services, and finally become completely financially independent, typically through a combination of skill augmentation and small business formation.

Single mothers in public housing respond to Can I Live's leadership because Racquel and the other staff members have walked in their shoes and understand their struggles. While some mothers are prepared to successfully enter an associates' degree program and graduate prepared for a new career, many are better-suited to start their own businesses. The Can I Live Resident Owned Business Incubator (ROBI) program provides these budding entrepreneurs a full year of support, which includes a 24-week intensive business launch experience. The mothers also have access to legal and administrative back-office support, as well as marketing tools, networking opportunities, and a chance to win capital seed investment.

Many ROBI graduates start earning extra income right away by competing for contracts within their public housing complex. But they never stop there: Can I Live teaches them to manage their personal finances, save their new earnings, and finally free themselves from dependency altogether.

Can I Live's One Million Moms Off Welfare outreach initiative makes its audacious goal clear: to help one million mothers rise out of poverty and into the middle class by 2035. But their work is currently stymied by their financial need to contract with various government agencies. Joseph Fund investment would free them from these constraints and enable Can I Live to reach, train, and empower the hundreds of thousands of residents that are ready to move from poverty to financial self-sufficiency.



## **LOOP (Loving Others on Purpose): Elyria, Ohio**

According to the Centers for Disease Control, Ohio's drug overdose rate places it regularly in the top ten or even top five states in the country, leaving behind thousands of grieving families and communities each year. But there is hope: Loving Others On Purpose (LOOP) is a substance abuse recovery program in Ohio that credits its phenomenal success to more than just excellent clinical care. LOOP addresses the underlying reasons that people abuse drugs in the first place: their need for meaning, purpose, love, and belonging.



Founder Brian Wade began his work in 1999 with a small rescue home and street ministry. Through much love and toil, his work transformed the lives of over 60 individuals previously ensnared by drug addiction, prostitution, and other criminal behaviors. Brian's work has since expanded under the leadership of his son, Brian Jr., who is the Executive Director of six LOOP addiction recovery homes in the heart of the so-called "Rust Belt": once proud steel towns that are now ground zero for opioid addiction.

The Alpha Houses (men's recovery) and the Georgia Houses (women's recovery) model healthy, sober living by immersing residents in strong family connections, a peaceful atmosphere, strong work ethic, and so much more. These homes provide drug and alcohol counseling, but unlike other programs that focus almost exclusively on the medical side of detoxification, LOOP provides biblically-based relationship, parenting, and financial classes and vocational training. Residents leave prepared to begin careers in technology, welding, or agriculture, typically earning between \$55,000 and \$60,000 annually.

Alpha and Georgia House graduates are prepared to do so much more than shun drugs and alcohol; they are motivated to take care of their families, advance in their careers, and contribute to their communities. Some even choose to become certified recovery counselors, and 95% of the staff members operating the recovery homes are alumni hired from within the program.

The Woodson Center has already helped LOOP expand its service to the veteran population. With a Joseph Fund investment, we can help LOOP toward its vision of placing an Alpha House and a Georgia House in all 88 counties in Ohio, beginning with Vinton, Adams, Pike, Scioto, Ross, Thrumbull, Brown and Lawrence Counties, the eight counties that saw the largest number of deaths from overdoses in 2022 and 2023. Funds would also help ensure that each recovery home can be maintained properly. What is now an island of hope in Ohio could overtake the entire state with restoration and renewal.

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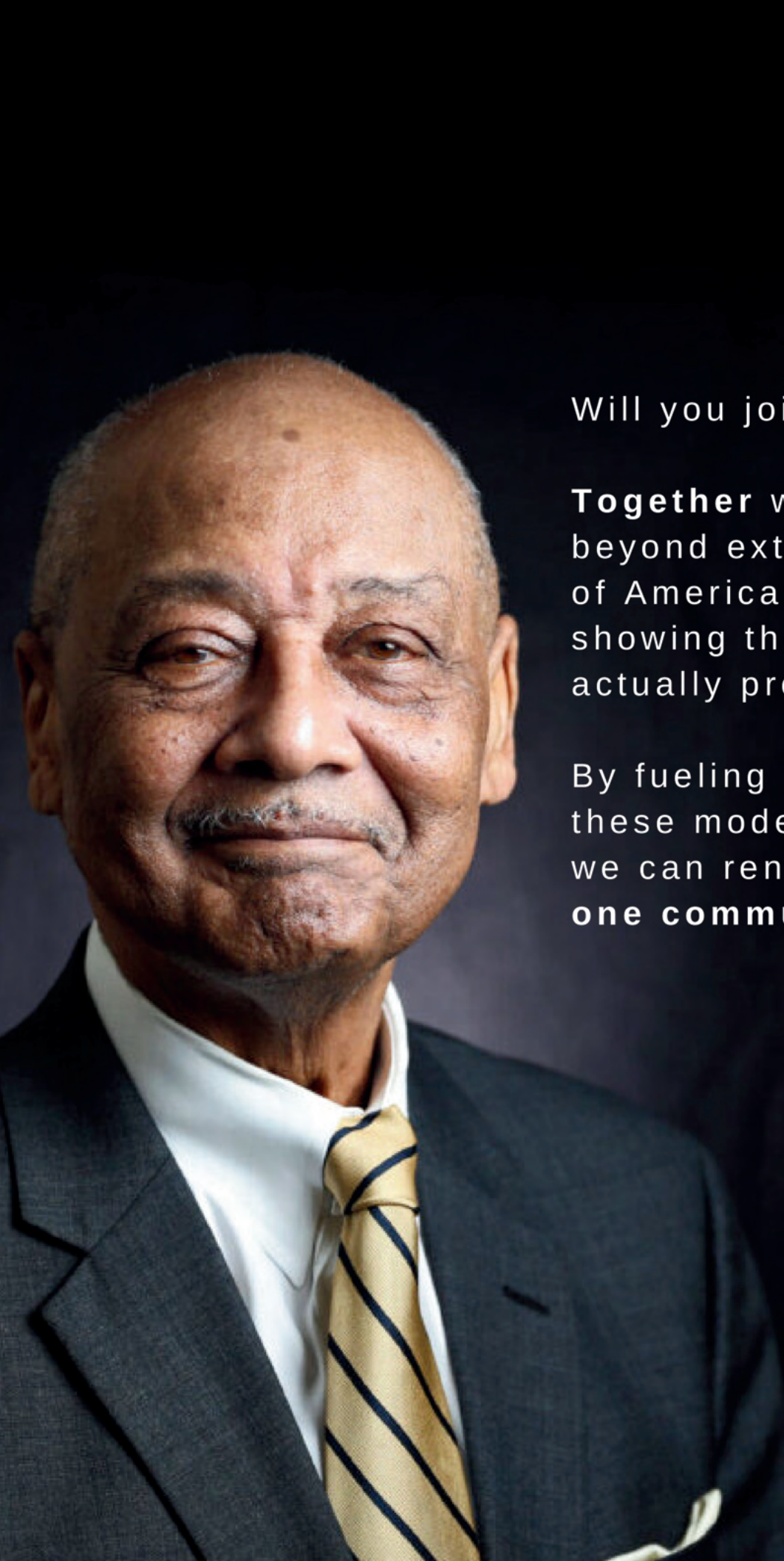
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The work described above is just a tiny sample of what “Joseph”-led groups are able to achieve with a fraction of the resources that large, top-down, outsider-led programs receive. The details of these Josephs’ activities vary greatly, but all of them possess moral authority and the trust of their neighbors, and all of them inculcate their communities with the same values that enabled America to become the greatest nation on earth.

Your investment in the Woodson Center’s Joseph Fund will ensure that institutions like the Piney Woods School and Alliance for Concerned Men **are finally able to do what they are fully capable of doing instead of just what they can afford to do.** More students, returning citizens, single mothers in public housing, and recovering addicts will transform their lives, families, and neighborhoods, and the ripple effects of such renewal will be felt far and wide.

Even more, the impact of the Joseph Fund will illustrate America’s values in action for all to see. By redeeming individuals and communities facing the supposedly “unsolvable” problems of our day, your investment will prove beyond a shadow of a doubt why American values are essential to our survival and success in the future.

Become part of the Joseph Fund, and help build a peaceful and prosperous future for all Americans, for generations to come. Will you join me? Together we can move beyond extolling the theory of American values to showing the fruit they actually produce. By fueling the efforts of these modern-day Josephs, we can renew our nation, one community at a time.



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