

Ordering your Own Steps



Legacy Interview of Joseph M. Showell

Interviewer Max's Note:

Joseph M. Showell (JMS) is wise, humble, faith-driven, and an educational visionary. I was astonished to hear that, for most of his life, he worked two careers at once: one as an educational specialist for the Maryland Department of Education, and another as a bishop. He enabled young four and five-year-old children to start school in pre-K in public schools across Maryland, which is something that I have personally taken for granted my whole life. In a sense, he was an unsung hero for Maryland's public-school systems. Not to mention his lifelong commitment to his religious faith. To me, his legacy stems from the lives he has touched and the people he's impacted, not his degrees or titles.

Max: So, the first thing that I like to do is this exercise called the three-minute mental makeover. I'm going to ask you three questions—pretty simple questions—but I want to give you a lot of time to think about each one. So, the first question I have for you is, what are three things that you're grateful for? Be as specific as you can.

JMS: Number one, I graduated from Morgan State University and earned 60 credits towards a master's in education at Hopkins. That was a new degree they were givin' out. Number two, I have been married to my wife for 57 years. Finally, I have a daughter who is working on a doctorate in divinity.

Max: Those are great answers, sir. The second question I have for you—and you can really take your time on this one—what is the story of your life in six words?

JMS: Courageous, educational accomplishments. Accomplished difficult tasks.

Max: That I'm sure you did. Thank you. So that was me asking about your past. This is now for the future: what are three wishes that you have?

JMS: I want to live to be 100.

Max: What a goal. I love it.

JMS: I wanna see all my grandsons' accomplishments. And I wanna pay for our million-dollar house!

Max: Perfect! So that's a great way to kind of frame the conversation, so I kind of have this glimpse of who you are just from those three questions. Now, could you tell me more about your background? Where were you born and raised?

JMS: I was born in Baltimore, Maryland. I was raised in Baltimore. And I'm in a very large family. I was the 7th child out of 11. Also, I was blessed to have my grandparents who live with us. My father and grandfather and uncle were religious leaders in the apostolic faith. They were bishops.

Max: Religion was clearly a big part of your family. What kind of effect do you think that has had on you as a child growing up?

JMS: Well, we went to church every Sunday, and during the week too. They totally helped to shape my perspective on life.

Max: In what way?

JMS: Well, I didn't become violent, or extremely violent in my behavior. I don't know how you can put this, but I felt that I was blessed and anointed by God.

Max: I like how you put that. I'm sure having Christ has been like an *anchor* in your life, right?

JMS: Yes. And then I followed in the steps of my grandparents, parents, and siblings. All of them were involved in church. I became a pastor when I was an adult, then I was elevated to a bishop.

Max: That's amazing. Let's get back to that in a bit. What was it like living with so many siblings? Any stories from your childhood?

JMS: (chuckles) I would say it was crowded. Six of us had to sleep in the same bedroom. It was just crowded too, with three generations of people in the same house. Most importantly, we looked out for each other and wanted each one to be as successful as the other one. I could also tell you that my father went to college, my father and mother

went to college, and my sister and brother graduated first. And all of us went to college and graduated with honors.

Max: Congratulations. That's amazing to hear.

JMS: Yep, we got scholarships and we took advantage of the state subsidy for education. We only had to pay like \$65 a semester. Because we were Maryland citizens and we were committed to education.

Max: Thank you for the background about your life story. Can you tell me about a time you felt most alive?

JMS: Well, I was the first black male to be selected as an early childhood education specialist for the Maryland Department of Education.

Max: You're kidding! You were the first?

JMS: First black male in early childhood education.

Max: That's one hell of an accomplishment to be proud of, sir, don't you think?

JMS: Sure, and I'm still alive. (chuckles) ... So, the time I was most alive, it was being a state specialist and travelling to all the counties of Maryland. I would go into every educational system and promote education for young children. You know, early childhood education was funded by a federal Title I grant. I had to talk to the leaders of the local school counties and convince them that they would get a special grant to bring four and five-year-olds into school planning. I would advocate to see if they were amenable to giving a four-year-old an opportunity to come into the public school system.

Max: That sounds like a very good cause. Why was it important that four to five-year-olds specifically were enrolled in these early childhood education programs?

JMS: Because many of them were in structured environments but not focusing on the learning principles. I didn't think four-year-olds needed to be nurtured the way they were. I thought they could meet more challenges, more learning challenges than that.

Max: Why do you say that?

JMS: In early childhood education, we used to tell everybody that *half* of the child's learning is received by age eight. So, after that, the child is developing more skills but adding to a foundation. That's why you can't wait until age eight to start teaching 'em. You gotta start at four or five.

Max: So, they would be enrolled in kindergarten? Or pre-K? How did that work?

JMS: It was Pre-K.

Max: So, for me, since I'm younger, I'm so used to it and took it for granted. Because I was in pre-K, and everybody my age was going to pre-K. So, it must've been different back then...

JMS: So, what I'm trying to tell you, then, I helped to spread that practice across the state of Maryland!

Max: Wow. We needed people like you back then. That's really amazing. Since I'm from Seattle, I imagine there were people similar to you who had to fight for the same causes.

JMS: Yeah, I was part of a national group of educators.

Max: So then, can I ask, to your understanding, why did we never start this way in the first place?

JMS: Because we had preconceived the limitations of younger children. And our perception was wrong. They were much more responsive to learning than they thought they were.

Max: So, it sounds like you committed yourself to a really impactful career in education and service, but you were a bishop before that? Or after?

JMS: During.

Max: Are you serious?

JMS: Sure. Well, I started out as just an educator first, but then I wanted to extend the principles to the Church.

Max: What principles?

JMS: Learning principles, growing principles, developing larger understandings and vocabularies to describe that learning. I think Church should be responsible for developing skills like school is. Knowledge of God, how to treat people, how to grow people. As an educator, I think you need to know that all of us are not alike, and you need to provide different attractions for the different levels of learning.

Max: What does that mean?

JMS: I should do something that creates an interest for a group of people that don't have that interest when you start. Like getting children to study the Bible, it's a continuous journey, of course you read it all the way through. Doesn't mean you

understand it. Then to actually understand it, you have to put what you understand into practice.

Max: So how did your approach to teaching children differ from with the adults?

JMS: I think we did it well. My wife was very good at that. We gave them learning practices that were on their level, and opportunities to participate and remember verses and stuff like that.

Max: That's amazing. So, I'm imagining that you were working 80 hours a week or something! Something crazy!

JMS: Yes, it was. It was a continuous cycle.

Max: Now there's a fun question I like to ask. If you could turn your life into a book, what would you title that book, and what would be the opening scene in that book?

JMS: This is crazy, (chuckles) but I would call it *Joseph Shows Well!*

Max: (laughs) I'm sure you showed very well throughout your life! Now what would be the opening scene, or "prologue," of your life story?

JMS: I think I would have a group of children sitting on the floor of a classroom, in a circle. The teacher asks, "Do you know what you want to be in later years?" That would be a good beginning.

Max: Would you be the one asking that question?

JMS: No, I would be sitting in the circle like everybody else. What I would try to depict is that *that* circle is still limited by age and knowledge. Everyone in that circle has to

figure out their own path. So, then the final paragraph would be how the different people from that circle became specialists in special fields of life.

Max: I see. Because you don't know what your specialty is when you're still young.

JMS: That's right. You've got to discover that. If you start out having excellent or very good experiences, that kind of stuff directs you. But from birth to adulthood, there are a whole lot of question marks. And you have to answer them for yourself.

Max: I see.

JMS: But that life doesn't answer your questions for you if you're not asking the question. Only people that seek knowledge receive knowledge.

Max: I like that. That was good.

JMS: Another thing I would add is that *appearance is everything*.

Max: When you say appearance, what do you mean?

JMS: How you look. So, this is funny—I had a big Lincoln car. I drove my team of state specialists to the various school systems, some of whom were higher ranked than I was. People would interpret, because I was black, that I was just their chauffeur.

Max: But you were actually a state specialist, not a chauffeur. You were one of them.

JMS: That's right. They didn't think I was more than a chauffeur, so I had to go in and show 'em.

Max: That must've been hard, being the first and only black educational specialist in Maryland for some time. If you had to estimate, how many school systems were you able to start those early childhood education programs in?

JMS: All of 'em.

Max: And how many is that?

JMS: Twenty-three.

Max: So, to make sure I get this right, would you say that you guys started pre-K programs in all 23 school systems in Maryland?

JMS: I would say we helped with funding. We initiated in some, developed in some others, and others we extended. They were already doin' it, but they were doin' it with limited money.

Max: Such a unique line of work. I don't think I've met anybody who worked as an educational specialist before. I'm glad that you did it. You did a service to Maryland, really.

JMS: I guess the other thing you have to observe is you never know where your special skills will lead you.

Max: So how did you discover education as your specialty?

JMS: Well, after I finished at Morgan, I was assigned classrooms in the public school system. I was funded by Title I. They saw that I could do more than just teach. I could speak to parents, speak to staff, and help to steer funding in the right direction.

Max: I see. So, what was it like teaching before you became a specialist?

JMS: At the time when I started teaching, men could not teach below the third grade.

Max: So, they only allowed women to teach below third grade? Why is that?

JMS: Don't ask me! I think it's because the school itself thought it needed men to lead it. What they didn't say but I knew is that men in leadership create a different image than females. To the general public, men are more authoritative. And a class of jobs like teaching school without men softens the impression that could be provided if a man was the leader.

Max: Thank you for sharing that story. Are there any sayings you learned in your lifetime that you want to pass along to somebody else?

JMS: If you think it, you can create it.

Max: I like that. Why do you say that?

JMS: Because learning is very speculative. That means you don't know what to expect! Once it comes to fruition, you've got a principle that you can build on.

Max: You said that very well. Is there any message you would like to pass along to each member of your family? Or would it be the same message for all of them?

JMS: One, you can order your own steps. And then whatever you choose you gotta develop it. It's a developmental element in that field or in that job. Let me give you an example. My son works for a certain organization. But it wasn't a whole lot of black people in that field, in the leadership field. They worked in the centers, but I didn't know them as having a leadership role. Now he's come along, he's got his degree. They have placed him in a lot of different special modules where he would show leadership.

Max: Good for him.

JMS: Also, here's an example. When they closed up the schools during the pandemic, that program needed somebody to go into the office, and he chose to do that. While everybody else was talking from home. He's shown us that he has initiative. So, I'm very proud of him for that.

The thing that I would say is that you, the individual, have a lot to do with where you end up in life. You can't keep blamin' people because you're not succeeding.

Max: What about your wife? What would you tell her?

JMS: She was outstanding in her work. Her job was at one of the big businesses of Maryland that was on the border and moved to Pennsylvania for some reason.

Max: Like a steel mill?

JMS: Yeah. She's a hard worker, well-organized, and has skills of *stick-to-it-tiveness*.

Max: I like the word you just made there! I might start using that.

(silence)

Max: Well, I feel like I could go on for hours longer. But I want to let you know that it's 4 o'clock now, and I know you wanted to watch the Ravens game. Is there one last thing that you want to say?

JMS: Education is continual, and you never stop learning. You need to have an open mind for learning. And like I said before, only people that seek knowledge receive knowledge. Thank you.

Max: Thank you, Mr. Showell.