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Lending Legitimacy to Literacy

— By Beverly Shay

"Everybody learns more when it's fun, when they're happy, so I make it my goal to make learning fun," said Joseph Jammer, aka Lyndale the Literary Lion. "Words are very powerful and can impact the hearer, especially a child, in a positive or negative manner, which will carry over into adulthood. Lyndale opens opportunities to impact children on a positive level by giving them something true and fun that they can then remember and bring into the difficult situations they face," Joseph remarked.

Joseph did not initially set out to become a lion, but he did aggressively pursue an acting career. Born and reared in Houston, Texas, Joseph earned a B.A. in theater cinema from Texas Southern University (originally known as Texas College for Negroes) in Houston. He then went to Columbus, Ohio, on an internship with Living the Dream theater troupe. His time with the troupe not only advanced his acting skills and career, it afforded him the opportunity to travel, where he was exposed to the cinema-mentality of acting as opposed to the stage-mentality. "People tended to assume I should play the tough guy, the thug, because I was African-American, but I felt to portray, to create that image, would betray my understanding of history. You see, a large part of stage acting is *becoming* the words you speak," he explained. After portraying an abusive father, "Some people told me they hated me," Joseph recalled. "I said, 'No, that was not me. It was only the character.' So I chose not to portray those types of characters."

When Joseph becomes Lyndale in his literacy program for children at libraries and schools, he speaks to them about the importance of words, specifically the words they accept into their characters. Lyndale was "born" in 2001 as the library was celebrating 100 years. Joseph had been working in outreach for the library throughout the city and noticed a lack of interest



in reading among children. "It was heartbreaking," Joseph confessed. "I began to think of ways to interest children, to show them the fun, positive side of learning." He shared his ideas with a co-worker, who then made him a Lyndale headdress, spats, tail and gloves.

"My goal is to give children the understanding that education and learning is power," he confided. "Imagination is power. I tell the children to look around at their shoes, the carpet, the building. Someone imagined those things and then created them. I tell them, 'You have the power to create and you can be powerful — if you want to be.'"

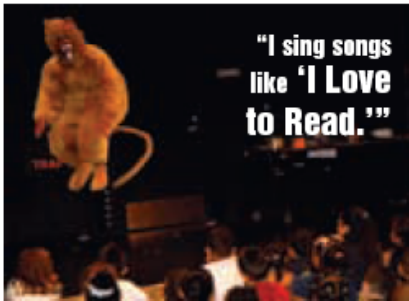
Joseph knows he cannot change everyone; not even Lyndale can. "But I look for those two or three children who really hear me and grab hold of what I am saying. I want to give them something better than the lesser values their lives may have communicated to them. Values have changed since I was a child," Joseph observed. "Today, children see status as value: in clothing styles, which cell phone you have. It is sad that those things have replaced values like honesty, truth, loyalty and responsibility.

"So I talk about how great it is to open presents when you are with friends. I ask them if they are my friends, and then I open a present: inside are words like respect and courage. I tell them that these are gifts they can give to their friends,

gifts that convey value and worth. I tell them how books and education will give them understanding of how to become a better human being. If they learn their own value, they will see and communicate the value of others," Joseph explained.

"Am I my brother's keeper?" I ask them. "I am. I am responsible and able to help others find a better way to live," Joseph related. "I ask them, 'What are you preparing for?' Then I tell them our choices prepare us for something; it could be good or it could be bad. So what do they want to prepare for? Education, reading, words: all these can prepare us for something good."

Joseph uses music and songs as well as props to provide children ages 4-15 with catchy ways to remember the truths he seeks to communicate. He noted that even the older kids are attracted to fun learning styles. "I sing songs like 'I Love to Read.' When you communicate in a fun manner, you give kids the



permission to imitate you. Words have changed meanings, and society, at least the society of their peers, has declared that being smart is no longer cool. Being inarticulate and unable to relate to others is cool. So I work at making reading and learning cool, while telling them not to let society negatively influence their understanding of value and worth," Joseph admitted. Lyndale the Literary Lion is available through Jammer Time Express, for general and after-school programs to promote the arts and education. **ARTS NOW**

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