

A Devil-Stomper In Brooklyn

In Brooklyn Lamont O'Neil has taken at-risk youth off the streets by teaching them to dance for God.

For Lamont O'Neil of Brooklyn, N. Y., the chances that he'd ever be able to climb out of the pit of ghetto poverty were practically nil. When he was 5 years old, his father abandoned the family, forcing his mother into welfare. She raised Lamont and his sister under the stigma of food-stamp dependency and the chiding of kids who mocked her children's uncool clothes.

They lived in public housing that was known for drug dealing and gang violence. "At a young age I learned to tell the difference between a firecracker going off and a gun shot," O'Neil says. Survival was a real issue.

Yet today, at 33, he stands tall in Christ as leader of the Nubian Gents Christian step-dancing team. He redirects youngsters who are heading down the wrong path and spreads the gospel among thousands of teenagers in the United States and Europe.

His credentials today are golden, even though yesterday's circumstances seemed hopeless. He won a scholarship to Philips Exeter Academy, a leading boarding high school in New Hampshire, and has degrees from Oberlin College in Ohio and Penn State University.

Step dancing, which originated in South Africa, is popular among black college students. Dancers in bright, baggy gym suits stomp their feet, slap their legs and clap their hands in synchronized rhythm. The routines are a mixture of hip-hop, aerobics and drill-team maneuvers, sprinkled with a dash of Michael Jackson's moonwalk.

To the accompaniment of contemporary gospel music, O'Neil steers the Gents in chanting lyrics such as: "No need to

worry. No need to cry. Jesus is there for you.” Young audiences eat it up.

O’Neil caught the step-dancing bug as a graduate student at Penn State. After watching a gospel choir incorporate “stepping”—as the moves are called—into their music, he was hooked. “That blew my mind,” he said. He learned the routine and says that God began sowing seeds of a vision in his heart.

He carried that vision to Junior High School 231 in the New York borough of Queens, where he landed a teaching job in 1993. Distressed that teens were being raised without fathers and were heading for trouble, he won approval during the 1995 fall semester to launch a male etiquette club using stepping to teach positive values and discipline.

When he announced the idea and demonstrated stepping to 500 seventh- and eighth-graders during a regular assembly, the students jumped up cheering and clapping. To his surprise, 100 young men enlisted, and the P.S. 231 Step Team was born.

But O’Neil faced a dilemma. How would he convey biblical truths when he couldn’t talk about Jesus or the Bible? His previous attempts at projecting a Christian testimony had been quashed by an assistant principal who had ordered him to remove a Bible from his desk. “I didn’t know how antagonistic they were about Christians’ beliefs,” O’Neil says.

His answer arrived in the form of wise principles he had learned from A.R. Bernard, pastor of Christian Cultural Center in Brooklyn. Such sayings as, “Private practice determines public performance” and “Suffer the pain of discipline or the pain of regret” provided O’Neil with a natural link to biblical references.

“God was giving [me] a strategy to minister the gospel without using the Bible,” he explains.

During semiweekly practice sessions for the club, the students

repeated the sayings while they danced. Eventually questions surfaced.

“Mr. O’Neil, where did you get all these sayings from?” they would ask.

“Stick around after practice, and I’ll show you,” he would tell them.

This opened a door for him to share Scripture with them in private after-school encounters.

“The Bible served to confirm what God had already begun birthing in their spirits and in their hearts,” he points out.

As the team perfected its routines, word spread, and requests for performances poured in to O’Neil’s office. His dancers were wanted for concerts, basketball halftime shows, and church and prison events. Paying out of his own pocket, he rented vans to attend these events. In 1996 the group became the Nubian Gents.

Before long, O’Neil had received a stipend for expenses and had access to four vans from New Life of New York City, an independent youth ministry. The Gents’ performance schedule took off from there. It now includes more than 100 shows a year.

They have toured Europe three times and in August completed a 22-state trip. O’Neil has since left teaching, except for consulting, and now directs the Gents full time as artistic coordinator in charge of community outreach for New Life.

Young men whose lives have been changed by the ministry include Dimy Jeannot, now a sophomore at Oberlin College, who joined the team as a ninth-grader. He became a Christian through the Gents and has influenced his family to find Christ. “Jesus is my source totally,” he says. “Everything that I am today is only due to the step team.”

Another is Philip Holder, who was an arrest waiting to happen. "He had a strong temper and a very, very belligerent spirit. I knew that he was going to have eventually a run-in with the police," O'Neil says.

Today Holder, 16, is a changed young man. "I look at Jesus as my personal Savior, my strength, my rock," he says.

O'Neil, who is trim, muscular and has a shaved head, eschews the glitzy show-biz image. His demeanor is sober, and he addresses both friends and strangers with, "Yes, sir," and "No, sir."

"I'm a fool," he says. "I will never understand why God chose to use me"—noting that because of his separation from his father he had fear, emotional baggage, and a lack of identity and understanding about manhood when he was growing up.

He became a Christian in 1988 when he gave his life to Christ right after singing "Jesus, You're the Center of My Joy" to a church audience in Ohio. "After I was done, I went in the back room, and the Spirit of God fell on me so hard, I knew it was time," he says.

He keeps a tight rein on his charges and doesn't allow them to curse, use drugs, smoke or get into mischief. He allows himself little slack, either, toiling long hours at rehearsals.

"I'm thinking about this all the time," O'Neil says. "This is what I was created to do. Apart from this I don't really live."

O'Neil has taken some hits about the dancing. Religious people have scolded him about dancing being "worldly," or lectured that God doesn't approve of it or that it is too sensual. He refutes the criticism by pointing to the thousands of young people who have made professions of faith in Christ at Gents events.

“Dancing is the most direct nonverbal expression of our devotion to God,” O’Neil says. “In the Bible the presence of God was celebrated with dancing.”

Because of this man’s compassion, a growing number of young people have something to dance about.

Peter K. Johnson *is Charisma’s New York City correspondent.*

For more information about the Nubian Gents, write New Life of New York City, 89-31 161st St., Suite 602, Jamaica, NY 11432. Send tax-deductible gifts to Christian Life Missions, P.O. Box 952248, Lake Mary, FL 32795-2248.