

A Minister Spurs Housing in Brownsville

By **ROBERT E. TOMASSON**

A 32-year-old minister with firm theories about community building has become a guiding force in the development of new housing in the Brownsville section of Brooklyn.

The minister, Joseph Jeffries-El, is more than a theorist. He is the developer of an unusual new housing project. He heads a moving company and a management company. He organized a bingo operation that grossed \$225,000 last year. He has started educational, sports and social activities for the young. And he founded a credit-union branch.

"I am an organizer," says the minister, who prefers to be called Brother Joseph. "Government officials and bankers who have dealt with him concur with his description.

The crowning touch thus far in Brother Joseph's varied career is his sponsorship and management of Noble Drew Ali Plaza I, a federally aided project now nearing completion that will provide homes for 385 low-income and moderate-income families.

The five buildings that make up the development are an island of cleanliness and order in the sea of decay and desolation that spreads out in all directions through Brownsville.

Brother Joseph spends most of his time now in a small office at Noble Drew Ali Plaza, which was named for the founder of the Moorish Science Temple of America, who died in 1929.

In addition to being a developer, mover, manager and organizer, Brother Joseph is—as his father and grandfather once were—the Grand Sheik, or minister, of the Islamic temple at 1837 Straus Street.

Most of the 1,500 members of his congregation are older people, Brother Joseph said, and it was the realization that younger people were not attracted to the church that led him to an important conclusion: "The problems of this neighborhood had to be met on many different levels."

Soon after he graduated from Samuel Gompers High School in 1958, Brother Joseph began his part-time ministerial duties and went to work for the post office.

"When the war on poverty started around 1964," he said, "I thought that housing was going to be one of the most important parts." He quit his post office job.

"I worked with Haryou-Act for a while," he continued, "and started to study everything that came out relating to housing. I started writing and calling every legislator and housing official, and sat in on hearings. I did a great deal of homework."

With the backing of his temple, Brother Joseph then embarked on the first step in the development of Noble Drew Ali Plaza.

In conjunction with the Brownsville Community Council, the Brownsville Housing Development Fund Corporation was formed with Brother Joseph as president.

The minister then began organizing a joint venture by the Manufacturers Hanover Trust Company and the Federal National Mortgage Association to supply \$12-million in financing for the project, which is on a site bounded by Stone, Lott and New Lots Avenues and Osborn Street.

"Joe has done more in more areas with more struggling for every penny than anyone I know," said August W. McCarthy, a Manufacturers Hanover vice president. "He is extremely capable in organizing and carrying out projects."

S. William Green, the regional administrator of the United States Department of

Housing and Urban Development, which was also involved in the negotiations over the project, describes Brother Joseph as a man of "initiative, know-how and public spirit of an unusually high order."

With financing arranged and construction under way, Brother Joseph changed from financial packager to project manager.

"We had almost 3,000 applications for less than 400 apartments," the minister said. He had to administer strict Federal guidelines governing the choice of tenants, and he points out that few of the successful applicants were members of his congregation.

The next problem came up in August, when the first tenants arrived.

"When these people came in, we did not assume anything," Brother Joseph said. "Every tenant had to attend three classes, where we explained so many things that other people take for granted.

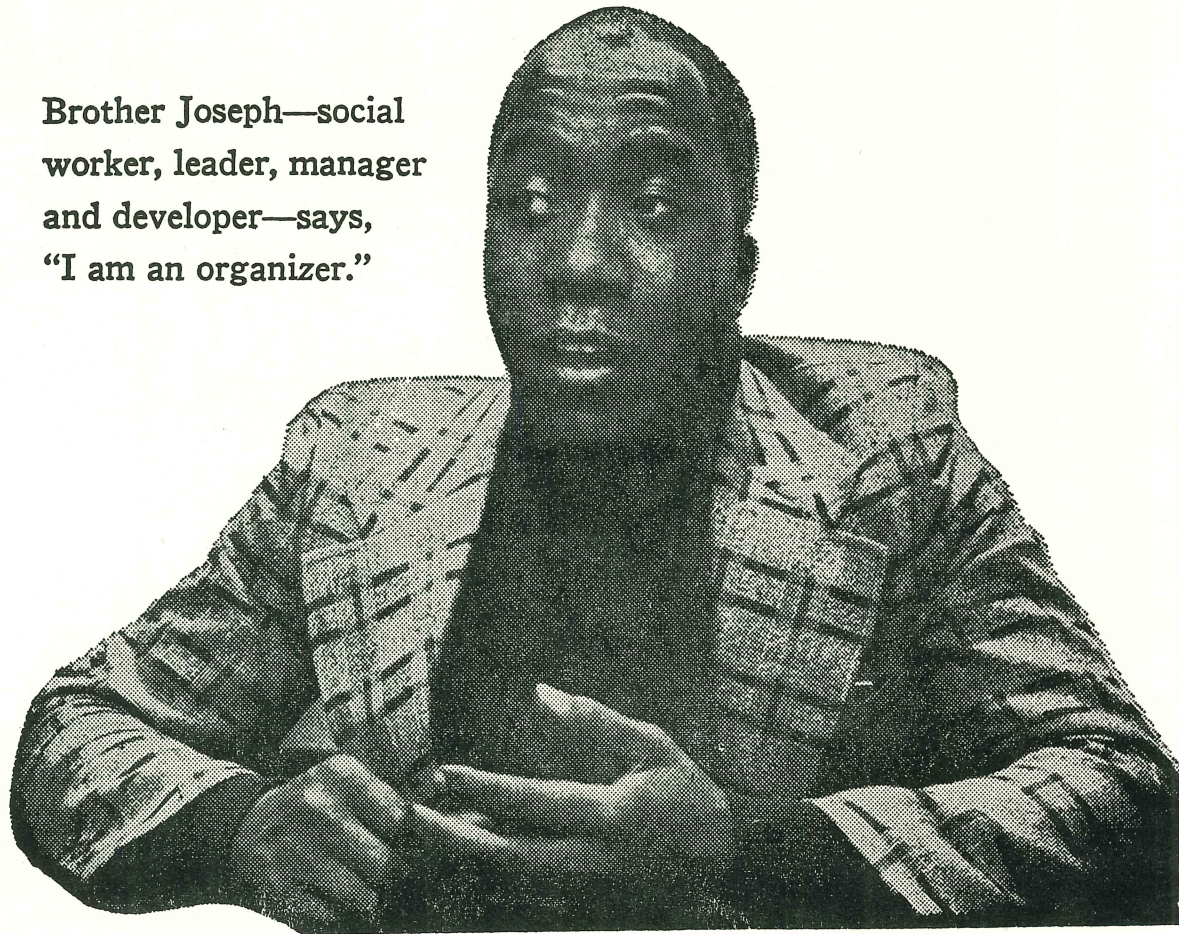
"People complained that the locks wouldn't open after they turned the key, not knowing that they were double locks and had to be turned twice. Some said their television sets wouldn't work, and we had to explain that some of the electrical outlets were hooked up to wall switches. We arranged to have some people from Con Ed come in and explain how to use the new stoves and ovens.

"You've got to remember where these people came from, the dilapidated buildings that didn't have these things. At the classes we told them what they could expect from us, but we also told them what we expected from them."

These days the nattily-dressed Brother Joseph, who drives a new Mercedes Benz complete with mobile telephone, moves about the project with ease—and, perhaps, a touch of paternalism—greeting tenants by name and quietly admonishing some of them for such infractions as improperly parked cars.

The minister attributes much of the success of the project to his close ties with the neighborhood and the rapport he has with the residents. A third-generation Brownsville resident, Brother Joseph was born two blocks from the project and now lives a few blocks away with his wife and six children.

Brother Joseph—social worker, leader, manager and developer—says, "I am an organizer."



"Tenants have a natural distrust of landlords," he said. "That's something we've got to change, and it's very important to have black management to do that."

Brother Joseph said that he was seeking to employ as many tenants as possible, both to help them supplement their incomes and to increase their involvement with the development. Some tenants work in the credit union, and plans are being made to employ others as painters.

Two of the first employees in the management office were Brother Joseph's father, who was a superintendent, and his sister, who is the assistant manager.

"I needed people I could trust," the minister said, adding with some pride that while his sister, Mrs. Ruth Gaskin, was studying for a real estate broker's license, other clerical workers were being trained to assume the duties of assistant manager.

Monthly rents in the development range from \$139, including utilities and outdoor parking space, for a one-bedroom apartment to \$215 for four bedrooms. The large units are unusual in publicly assisted housing.

Without an annual Federal mortgage subsidy of \$632,000

during the life of the 40-year mortgage, rents would range from \$243 to \$355 a month, Brother Joseph said. In addition, \$70,000 a year will be paid in rent supplements to help 77 low-income tenants.

At the ground-breaking ceremonies in November, 1970, Noble Drew Ali Plaza was hailed as the city's first major housing project in which the developer, the architect and the contractor were black. Since then, Brother Joseph said, he has realized that "simple economics" take precedence over racial solidarity.

The black general contractor for the project's initial phase, F. W. Eversley & Co., Inc., will not be used on two future sections, Brother Joseph said.

"They were handicapped by the elevator strike," he added, "but we still felt they ran too far over schedule, and it's costing us money. We need a bigger contractor that can use more advanced building techniques."

The minister said that Roger Glasgow, who designed the first unit, will also be the architect for the new section.

Thaddeus Burrell, a vice president of the Eversley

company, said that while he was disappointed that the company had not received the contract for the future projects, "it just was not worth it to us."

"Brother Joseph was taking all the money and we were taking all the risks," he said, explaining that the construction fees were too small.

"As to doing a job that size," the contractor added, "we will soon start on the Atlantic Terminal project, which is much bigger."

Despite the Federal moratorium on new housing subsidies, which are crucial to projects of this type, Federal officials and bankers anticipate that the new sections, Noble Drew Ali Plaza II and III, which will cost \$22-million and contain 588 units, will receive the necessary funding.

They pointed out that exceptions to the moratorium are most likely to be made for projects that are involved in several governmental programs, and Noble Drew Ali Plaza is in both an urban renewal area and the Central Brooklyn Model Cities area.

In addition, they said, the first section of the project is successful so there is reason to expect that the rest will succeed.



Noble Drew Ali Plaza I, left, and, at right, the sites for the second and third sections of the project