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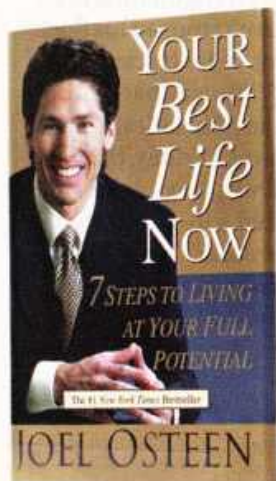
Joel Osteen is walking across the floor of Houston's massive Compaq Center sports arena when he suddenly stops dead in his tracks. "That's where I used to sit. Section 104. Season tickets," he says with a boyish enthusiasm that belies his middle-aged years. "And that," he adds proudly, pointing to an elevated stage at the front of the arena, "is where I'll be preaching."

At 42, Osteen is the head of Houston's Lakewood Church, the country's largest megaministry, with a \$48 million annual budget, a staff of 248 and weekly attendance of 30,000. And that's just the congregants who sit in the pews: Osteen's TV sermons are beamed to a reported 7 million U.S. viewers, while his current bestseller, *Your Best Life Now*, has sold an impressive 3 million copies.

On July 16 Osteen will lead his flock to even higher ground. After finishing a \$93 million renovation, he will move operations to the 210,000-sq.-ft. former home of the NBA's Houston Rockets. Not bad for the second son of a Southern Baptist preacher who founded Lakewood in a feed store in 1959. "For God to take us from there to here," says Osteen, is "a great blessing." Not that he hasn't had a hand in his own success. With a blend of Christian morality and motivational cheerleading—and a blinding grin that has earned him the nickname Smiling Preacher—he's forged a connection with a racially mixed, economically diverse follow-

# 'The Smiling Preacher'

With 3 million books sold and a giant new home for his flock, Joel Osteen has reason to rejoice



“Joel doesn't dwell on things that make people mad. He's a feel-good pastor”

Osteen and Victoria (in Lakewood Church) "are the same people in private as in front of the cameras," says a friend.

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ing that unites CEOs and former addicts. "Joel doesn't dwell on things that make people mad," says Jimmy Podaras, 41, an insurance broker who credits Osteen with helping him to control his once-violent temper. "He's a feel-good pastor." Osteen agrees: "I'm not necessarily going to teach you doctrine," he says. "I know what I'm called to present—a message of hope."

One of six children raised north of Houston, Osteen was so shy he skipped his prom and didn't date until he was 22. "In fact, I've never even tasted beer," he says. Sports was his one outlet. He was on his high school track team, played baseball and perfected the "mean jump shot" he still brags about today. During his first semester at Oral Roberts University, his mother, Dolores, was diagnosed with liver cancer but recovered without chemotherapy, Osteen says. "It just showed that you've got to believe in God and trust him."

Osteen took his own leap of faith the next year when he dropped out of college to handle TV production for his father, John Osteen, by then a well-known Houston pastor. Joel stopped by a jewelry store in December 1985 to buy a battery for his watch and noticed the owner's daughter, 24-year-old Victoria Iloff. "It was chemistry, or a God



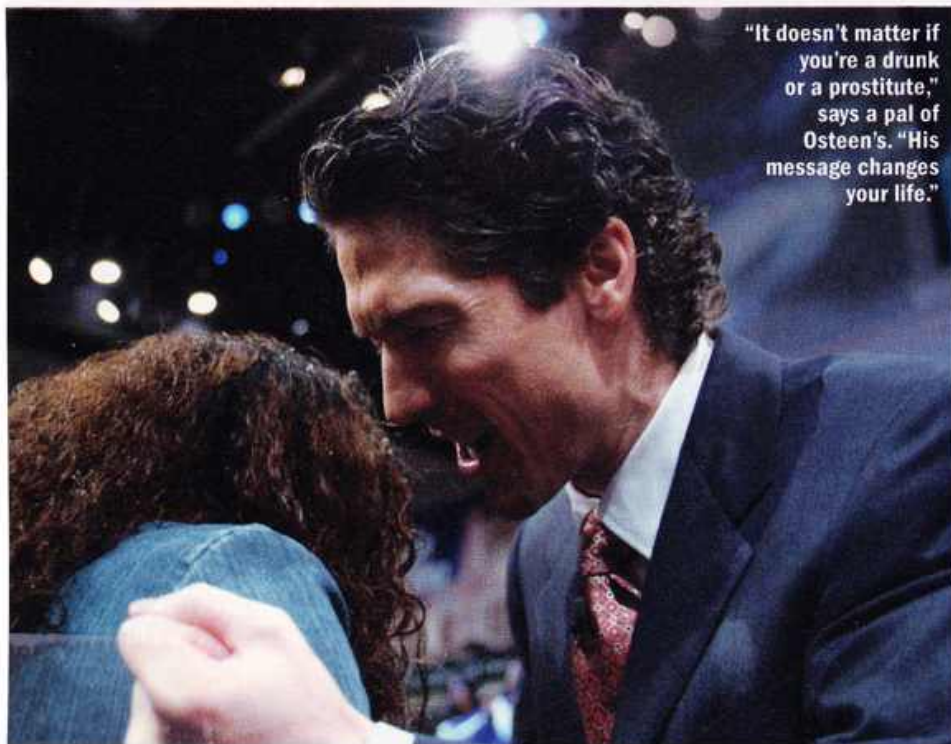
thing," says Johnny McGowan, a childhood friend who was there. "He was shaking so bad I told him, 'Do you want me to put that watch on your wrist?'" Victoria, too, was struck. "He talked like a champion," she says, and together, "I thought we could do anything."

Married in 1987, the couple earned enough buying and fixing up old houses to move into a home in Houston's Tanglewood section that today is worth \$2.25 million. Then, in 1999, came a phone call from Osteen's 77-year-old father saying that he didn't feel well and asking if Joel could take over his preaching duties that weekend. Osteen



declined, but five minutes later, after hearing what he calls "a strong inner voice," he phoned back to say he'd changed his mind.

During his first sermon, Osteen was "gripping the sides of the podium for dear life," recalls Don Iloff, Victoria's older brother. Eleven days later John Osteen died of a heart attack; Joel made the decision to carry on his father's work. In the years since, he's sometimes ruffled feathers—there was that "Victoria's Secret sermon," in which he urged women to wear lingerie as a way of strengthening marriages—but it hasn't stopped his flock from multiplying. In their scant spare time, he and Victoria, parents of Jonathan, 10, and Alexandra, 5, have a "date night" every Friday, but "my hobby is my family," says Joel, who recently launched a 16-city national tour. Does it ever seem like too much? "No," he says with a grin, "except on Sunday night, my cheeks are sore from so much smiling."



"It doesn't matter if you're a drunk or a prostitute," says a pal of Osteen's. "His message changes your life."

By Susan Schindehette. Cary Cardwell and Anne Lang in Houston