

Engineer-author aims to inspire minorities with entrepreneurship

'Soul Food' uses stores to teach success tenets

By Stacey Hirsh
SUNSTAFF

Robert L. Wallace can look back and know exactly what he was thinking on any given day for the past two decades.

"I have journals like this," he said, pointing to a hard-covered book with ink-filled pages, "that go back 20 years."

It's something he learned in engineering school, but it stuck so much that most of the ideas he has been scribbling in his journals over the years have become material for his books. Last month, the 44-year-old Howard County entrepreneur published his third book, "Soul Food: 52 Principles for Black Entrepreneurial Success."

Wallace, who travels around the world speaking on what it takes to become an entrepreneur and why there aren't more of them who are minorities, has spent the better part of the past two decades researching and writing books on minority entrepreneurs.

His first book, "Black Wealth Through Black Entrepreneurship," was published in 1993, and his second, "Black Wealth: Your Road to Small Business Success," came out in June. Both are "how to" books, or, as Wallace calls them, "left-side-of-the-brain books" that use case studies to teach readers how to be successful entrepreneurs.

On Sept. 20, Wallace came out with a new type of reading material. "Soul Food's a totally different book because Soul Food uses storytelling to explain and to illustrate the principles of long-term entrepreneurial success," Wallace said.

Soul Food uses accomplished minority business men and women to paint a picture of his 52 principles - one for each week of the year - for entrepreneurial success.

Aside from writing about them, Wallace uses the principles in his own business. "They have served me well," said Wallace, who lives in Ellicott City with his



Author: Robert L. Wallace has written three books on minority entrepreneurship.

wife and five children.

Sonia Stockton, regional director for the Maryland Small Business Development Center at Towson University, read Wallace's first books and said, "I was very impressed with him coming from not just the business aspect of your business, but the holistic approach to being a good entrepreneur."

Stockton said she used information in Wallace's book when helping small-business clients, and she just bought Soul Food.

"He's a wonderful role model," she said of Wallace, whom she heard speak at an African-American business development summit at Morgan State University.

A 1978 graduate of the University of Pennsylvania, Wallace worked as an engineer for five years after college, he said, and then went on to become an MBA student at Dartmouth College's Amos Tuck School of Business.

It was there that he first began studying an issue he said had irked him since he was

growing up in Cherry Hill and noticed that few store owners were African-American in the predominantly black neighborhood. "I was always amazed and saddened that minorities and women were not participating in the economy," he said.

Wallace began looking at what minorities and women must do to become successful entrepreneurs. Over the next decade, he wrote a 500-page research paper examining successful minority entrepreneurs and how to overcome sexism, racism, and classism, he said.

"I had no intent of writing a book - I'm an engineer," said Wallace, who can often be found pounding away on his computer in the wee hours of the morning. But the paper would later become material for his three books, and he isn't finished writing yet.

Wallace has continued working on his entrepreneur research, even after he graduated from Dartmouth in 1984 and worked at IBM for five years.

In 1989, Wallace became an entrepreneur himself. His first business was a mergers and acquisitions company that he started with two partners. But it went under after a deal soured and the company lost a large chunk of money, Wallace said.

So in 1993, Wallace started the BITH Group Inc., a Columbia-based information technology consulting and telecommunications business that also handles PC support and integration and entrepreneur and intrapreneur training.

Wallace defines an intrapreneur as someone who uses entrepreneurial skills to add value to the company he or she works for, looking beyond the job to enhance his or her role in the company.

In 1995, the BITH Group developed a new division, BITH Training Systems, that teaches employees to be more entrepreneurial. The company continues to branch out and prosper.

Wallace estimates that sales have doubled in the past three years. Last year, the BITH Group spun off a new company, entreteach.com

Entreteach.com, an e-learning company, brings Wallace's entrepreneur and intrapreneur training to the Internet. "We think that entreteach.com will eclipse the BITH Group," he said.