

Articles

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A Clean Start

As they make their way down the aisle at the 19th Street Baptist Church, a roar sweeps through the room, light bulbs flashing, tissues dabbing at watery eyes. The graduates step out, capped and gowned and festooned with kente cloth. Grinning. This is their day, and oh, they are so ready. Pumped. They bop down the stretch leading to the stage, all four of them, doing a cool little two-step to the strains of "Pomp and Circumstance." Step, two, three, four. Step, two, three, four. They pause at the flower-laden table at the front of the church, grab their kids, pulling them close, folding them into their laps as they sit down.

It's been six long, long months.

A few feet away from the graduates, at the dais where a sign reads, "First Graduation Ceremony of the Women's Residential Family Treatment Court Program," a group of folks are beaming. They're the ones that shepherded them through it all, the judges and the substance abuse counselors, the therapists and the government officials. It's been six long months for them, too.

"I don't think you can underestimate the will of a woman to change her life," Judge Lee F. Satterfield, presiding judge of Family Court, says from the lectern. "And when there are children involved . . . you can't underestimate the will of a mom to take care of her child. We think you're fantastic. You're wonderful.

"And you look good."

A woman, slinky in black, steps to the mike. With a flourish from the pianist, she opens her mouth to sing, mournful yet joyful, a gospel tune of recovery and redemption. It's hard to escape her fervor. Boxes of tissue make their way around the room.

Yvette Smith takes off her glasses, wipes her eyes. The tassel on her mortarboard bobs about as she nods her head to the music. Yes, yes, she murmurs. Thank you, Jesus.

Enlarge my territory. Oh Lord, test me indeed . . .

Indeed, Smith, 44, has been tested. And after today, she will be facing yet another test. Life on the outside. Life lived without the numbing comfort of crack and heroin.

Today, though, she is the belle of the ball, taking in the congratulations, the hugs, the good wishes.

Smiling, smiling, smiling.

Get On the Bus

The following day is moving day at the Community Action Group center in Anacostia, and the glow of graduation day has faded just a bit in the flurry of attending to last-minute business. Still, Smith's sense of excitement is palpable

All of her belongings have been stuffed into giant plastic bags and loaded onto a yellow school bus.

Her carriage awaits her.

Her classmates-the other graduates of the Family Treatment Court program, the District's first residential treatment facility for drug-addicted mothers and their children-have new jobs and new homes. But Smith isn't quite there yet. She's in transition. She's got some things to figure out, some red tape to untangle. Work will have to wait just a bit. She's put in for a housing transfer to get out of the Lincoln Heights projects, where she's lived for the past three years or so.

She wants out of there bad. But that hasn't happened yet, and so today, for the time being, she'll be heading back home.

But it's okay. Because Smith is on a mission, do you hear her? She's focused, cloaked in the zeal of the newly converted. When she talks, she measures her words, prefacing her statements with, "I want to say that . . ." It is her incantation, an invocation to make sure that she is heard.

Understood.

I want to say that I was willing to go to any lengths to get off drugs. I want to say that I had a wonderful childhood. I want to say that I want to be a role model for my kids.

I want to say. I want to say. I want to say.

She has many wants.

In one arm, she clutches her "treasure map," a cardboard collage of magazine cutouts and photos, all cataloguing her wants and desires, charting a rosy vision of her future. To signify her goal of being a geriatric counselor, there are pasted pictures of therapists consulting with clients. To illustrate how she'd like to drive her clients to their appointments-in safety and in style-there is an ad featuring a white van with the logo, "Bring Out the Adventure in You." To underscore her commitment to good parenting, there are pictures of her children, 3-year-old Sade, 6-year-old Delonte and her 24-year-old son, whom she declines to name to protect his privacy. And of course, you know she had to cut and paste a little prayer on there, too. To let God know that she knows He's in charge: "Thank you God for blessing my mind with intelligence, wisdom and inspiration to reach my goals . . ."

She's a tall and sturdy brown woman, warm and unfailingly polite. Intense. Rows of marcel waves hug her head with painstaking precision. She weighed 118 pounds when she entered detox back in May. Skinny. Now, she says, with just a touch of satisfaction in her voice, she weighs in at 180.

Inside the group center, a squat apartment building with the cinderblock rooms so readily found in public housing, a swarm of residents, children and house monitors surrounds her, passing out hugs and holding back tears. Standing back, holding oversize teddy bears and looking just a little bewildered, are Sade and Delonte. Sade, a sad-eyed beauty, drags hers just a bit.

Time to go

"I love you," Smith tells her friends, her voice breaking just a bit. "Peace! Peace!"

"Don't forget where you came from, girl," one of the residents says.

"You know I won't," Smith says over her shoulder as she heads out the door.

The Hamster Wheel

How could she forget? It's not the kind of thing she ever wants to forget, for fear that she'd end up back where she started. Not that she's going back. She's tried to get clean before, but she wasn't ready. She's been homeless, thanks to drugs. Swore it wouldn't happen again. But she wasn't ready, do you feel her? Now, she's ready.

She has to be. Smoking crack was bad enough, but it was the heroin that did her in.

"I did not know that once I got to use heroin, I'd be stuck with a habit," Smith says. "I really enjoyed the high. I didn't feel nothing, hear nothing. But once the high wore off . . . it was sickening. I'm talking cramps, you're throwing up. I couldn't get out of the bed. I had to have it every day."

Most mornings, she'd lie in bed, waiting until a friend would come over with a bag of dope. Waiting, waiting, waiting for that little magic bag to come and whisk the sickness away.

"In the drug world," she says, leaning forward to make sure that you get the point, "an addict would not want to see a sister sick. They know it's not a good feeling. They knew that once they brought me the bag and I was well, it was on. The party was started."

The party grew from a bag a day to four or five bags a day. She had to have it. But having it meant that her kids got pushed somewhere back in the haze of her mind.

Until, that is, the day someone dropped a dime on her. Some anonymous someone called the Child and Family Services Agency to report that Smith was neglecting her kids, that there were drugs in the home. She still doesn't know who it was. She's not mad about it. Really. She was unable to care for her children or herself. Friends had to come over to cook, to bathe her kids, to deal with homework. It was obvious that she needed help. Bad. And thanks to that phone call, she says, she got it.

Social workers showed up at her house on May 21. They searched the place from top to bottom, rooting around in the bedrooms, even ferreting around in the icebox. Looking for drugs. They didn't find any, she says, but she 'fessed up anyway.

I've got a problem with drugs, she told them. And I really want help. Then she walked upstairs and started packing.

When she was finished, she hugged and kissed her babies and told them that Mommy was going to the hospital to get better, but they shouldn't worry, please don't worry, as soon as I get better, I will come back and get you.

"I did get a chance to hug and kiss my kids," she says. "And then they took them away."

She stops talking. Her head drops, her face crinkles up, but the tears do not fall.

"I'm just flashing back on that day," she says.

"Now my kids have a mom, not a wild animal."

Breaking Free

Sade and Delonte went to a group home. Smith went into detox at D.C. General. She quit cold turkey, she says: cigarettes, crack, heroin. All in one swoop. No methadone for her.

"I really thought it would be another addictive drug, " she says. "And being stuck with another habit, being addicted? To methadone? Oh no. Uh-uh."

A counselor at the detox center referred her to the brand-new Family Treatment Court program. The idea was to give mothers and their children a chance to recover together, an idea that appealed to Smith. She didn't want to lose her kids to the system, do you understand what she's saying? Because once they're in the system, kids tend to stay in the system.

She didn't want that happening to her babies.

She agreed to go in and get clean. Help came quickly. Within three weeks, she and Sade and Delonte were together again, living in one room. A bed for her. Bunk beds for them.

"I wanted a new life, " she says. "I didn't want to continue to self-destruct and die because of drugs. And I thought that I would die."

At the treatment center, she says, she discovered that she could live. Well. Life there was great-as long as you followed the rules. No drugs. No drink. During the day, the children went to day care or to school while their mothers spent a day focusing on themselves. To that end, there were classes upon classes. Aerobics or yoga in the morning, parenting classes, life skills classes, addiction and recovery classes, 12-step meetings, one-on-one therapy.

The rewards were "awesome." She rediscovered her spiritual foundation, the one she'd had as a kid, growing up in her deacon dad's strict upper Northwest Washington home. The foundation she'd had before she started rebelling at 13, a geeky girl sneaking out and smoking pot and drinking beer. She just wanted to be cool, wanted the other kids to forget about her Catwoman glasses, her short hair and her too-long skirts. She never knew that a minute of youthful defiance would lead to three decades of riding the hamster wheel of using and getting clean, using and getting clean, dropping out of school, going back to school, dropping out of work, going back to work. . . . Then her father died. And the hamster wheel spun faster.

She's always been saved, but now she's born again. God has taken away her desire for drugs. She's got the tools to stay on track: Narcotics Anonymous meetings, a six-month "after care" program where she will undergo outpatient treatment, and the fellowship of her church.

And she's so, so, so very grateful.

Still, to move forward, she's got to temporarily, at least-go back to a place that pulled her down once. And could pull her down again.

Be It Ever So Humble

There is a dispirited air to the Lincoln Heights projects. Patchy grass, battered clusters of duplex apartments, worn-looking folks hustling just to get by.

It's a few days after graduation, a couple days after she moved back home. This is where, in her shabby but spotlessly clean three-bedroom apartment, she hit the proverbial bottom. And here is where she is again. Starting over.

She's not happy about this. The next day, there will be a shooting down the street, two kids shot, and her anxieties will return. Will her certainty hold? How can she raise her babies here? They need so much-one of her children, in fact, has special medical needs. And mostly, they need to be safe. She's not fearful for her safety, but her kids need to be able to run and laugh and play outside without her worrying about some stray bullet finding the wrong target.

She can't even begin to think about finding a job until she knows that the basics of their lives are taken care of. So for now, she focuses on rebuilding her family. Making this temporary home feel like home. There's a Christmas tree to put up. Groceries to buy.

But first, she's got to pick up Delonte from school.

She steps outside, into the cold, clutching Sade's hand. As she's locking up, an older woman with graying hair rushes up to Smith, throwing her arms around her and breaking into sobs.

"You look so different," the woman says. "God has been so good. You look so different, you look so different. I just thank God."

Smith breaks away, thanks her, says, "I love you." But as she's saying the words, she doesn't make eye contact, she keeps moving, walking as fast as she can from the woman.

Who was that?

"Just a neighbor."

A neighbor who had offered to take care of Sade so that Smith could get clean. It seemed like a plan, leaving her daughter in the care of someone whom she could trust. Until, that is, Smith found out the woman had her own little drug problem.

Now she trusts herself.

'Patience and Endurance'

But on graduation day, the challenges of life on the outside seem very, very far away. She's floating on a cloud of euphoria.

"Yvette Belinda Smith."

Smith walks up to the dais, Sade and Delonte in tow.

"Patience and endurance," the counselor says, handing Smith her graduation certificate. "Miss Smith. What can you say about her? She was so on fire with her recovery. She has not wavered one bit."

Thank you, Jesus.

Smith takes to the mike like she's to the manner born, whipping out a folder and reading from a prepared speech, her own little valedictory address.

Self-assured. Triumphant.

She lifts her chin. Looks out into the audience.

"Today I celebrate the miracle," she says.

"I am worth celebrating.

"Today is a new beginning, a new life.

"I celebrate the miracle. I celebrate me."

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