



NEIGHBOR

Guided by Hope

Retired executive director of children's help agency reflects on his career

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17 April 2007

In high school, Jimmie Smith resigned himself to the fact that he would be a mechanic.

Fortunately, for the thousands of families he has helped through not-for-profit agencies like Kids Hope United in Lake Villa, where he was executive director for about 30 years, Smith's life took a different path.

Smith, 62, began his social service career working with Kenosha County's elderly and disabled. Upon completion of a master's degree, he began to work for the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services.

In 1976, Smith joined the staff of Central Baptist Children's Home/Family Services, later to become Kids Hope United.

Smith's co-workers describe him as tireless and unwavering in his leadership and development of programs for children and families. During his tenure, Smith expanded the Head Start Program, developed a preschool program in Elgin, Waukegan and Chicago for at-risk children and founded an in-school day care program in Waukegan to serve teen mothers and their children.

Smith retired this month. He recently sat down with the Daily Herald and discussed his years of service with the organization.

Q. How did you get involved in non-profit work?

A. I think I was led here by disguised direction. I graduated from high school not college-bound. As a fluke applied to Carthage College accepted on probation by the end of my semester, I was on final probation. Worked myself through college at a grocery store, got out and was in their management trainee program and I heard about a job as a caseworker in Kenosha County. Did that for a year and could see was going to be a pencil pusher unless I further educated myself. Applied to one school - the University of Chicago - and they were silly enough to let me in.

I feel very blessed the mission of this agency intersects with what I feel like I was put on this earth to do.

Q. How has the work changed over the last 30 years?

A. Oh lord, wow, so many changes. The people we are working with, the issues, are so much more complex and troubling. The access to drugs. The access to smut. The influence of pop culture and music, the role models. The fact that when I was growing up, it was uncommon for me not to sit down for a family meal. In today's society it is unusual for a family to sit down.

Q. What is the biggest challenge?

A. One of the biggest challenges is recruitment and retention issues. This is not a field people are drawn to. You have to really feel a sense of calling and be mission driven, and the whole country, I think, is lacking right now for people who want to do eyeball-to-eyeball work. This is very, very trying troubling work. What we see day in and day out wears on you.

I think another troubling spot is the way we are funded. We are funded only to the degree to placate the consciousness of society. Don't know if we are really expected to solve problems as much as manage them. Over the years I've certainly come to the realization, while there is a lot we can do, there is a lot we can't do and a lot we need to rely on divine intervention for.

Our middle name is hope, and it is that hope we have that helps bridge that gap between what we want to do and the limitations we have.

Q. Your list of accomplishments is long. What are you most proud of?

A. All I do and all I've done here is show up to work. Everything else is a team effort. After I walk in the door, I have a very talented group of executive vice presidents I work with and they in turn have talented groups of people they work with.

I'm proud of the reputation of the agency and what we stand for in the community. One of the things I try to do here is eradicate mediocrity in social services. Our mantra is our standards set standards and our expectations exceed expectations.

Q. Where do you see Kids Hope United going in the future? What about you?

A. We've been around 113 years, it is an awesome responsibility we all have. I'm sure we will be around for another 113 years.

As a partner agency, I think we will be looking to solidify our place in child care.

I'm going to stay here half-time for the broader federation and do some work. I might also do some consulting

I've been told for a long time I need to stop and smell the roses, first I have to find the rose garden.

When I announced this to the board, the analogy I used was Ecclesiastes, which talks about a time to reap, a time to sow; and I coupled that with a line from Kenny Rogers, you need to know when to hold 'em and when to fold 'em.

After 30 1/2 years here, it is time to fold 'em.

Kids Hope United

- The agency serves more than 15,000 children and families in five states. More than 5,000 children and families receive services in northern Illinois and southern Wisconsin.
- - Provides prevention, intervention and community-based programs; also child welfare system management, reform and training.
- For information, visit: www.kidshopeunited.org or call (847) 245-6503.

Caption: Jimmie Smith has retired after 30 years as the executive director of Kids Hope United. During his tenure, Smith implemented several programs including in-school day care for teenage mothers in Waukegan. Smith has been called tireless and unwavering in leadership by his co-workers at the Lake Villa not-for-profit organization.