

Community impact from Collin to Columbia

by Melanie Hess



Amid sprawling suburban homes, nationally-ranked schools, aesthetically-pleasing nature facilities and one of the highest median incomes in the nation, it might be hard to believe there are children in Collin County who find themselves without a place to call home.

Nonetheless, the harsh reality stands. Homelessness in Collin County rose 48% in 2012, and 52% of those individuals were minors.

Exposed to the reality of homelessness in the U.S. through volunteer work at City House, Collin College student Jammie Sean Smith decided keeping quiet wasn't an option.

The Beginning of a Quest for Change

Rewind a couple of years, and Smith, a celebrity wardrobe stylist with work experience in both New York and Los Angeles, returned to her hometown in North Texas, hoping to spend more time with family and pursue her goal of earning a college degree.

"I loved working in styling, and I was good at it," Smith said. "But it wasn't my dream. I feel like a lot of people get trapped in careers they're comfortable with, but not passionate about. To me, it was worth the risk."

After enrolling in honors courses at Collin College, Smith found professors like Ryan Rynbrandt and Dr. Kay Mizell, who she says encourage students to look outside the classroom—to think globally, but act locally.

According to Rynbrandt, Smith resonated with his concern for community involvement, constantly engaging the course material with an eye for better understanding and improving the world around her.

"She challenged her classmates both to excel in the classroom and to work for social change," Rynbrandt said. "When she found out about a threat to the local Samaritan Inn homeless shelter, Sean recruited classmates to attend a city council meeting in its defense."

"Mama" to a two-year-old little boy, Smith found she was deeply moved as she continued to learn more about child and family homelessness.

She joined Volunteer Outreach in Civic Engagement (VOICE), a Collin College student organization, and began volunteering at City House, a transitional living center serving homeless children and teens in Collin County.

Maegan Rodgers, program director at My Friends House, a branch of City House, said Smith worked directly with youth ages 0 to 17, whether that meant playing a game, doing a puzzle or helping a child through a crisis.

"When interacting with the kids, she is able to communicate, guide them through self play, help them with fine motor skills and just be there as a consistent person who they feel comfortable being around," Rodgers said. "During the homeless count last January, Jammie became very enthusiastic and helped put care packages together for the people she interacted with."

A New Talent

As she continued in her courses and volunteer work, Smith, somewhat accidentally, discovered another interest—film.

"I took a theater class from Shannon Kearns-Simmons," Smith said. "For our big semester project, we had to pick different roles on a production crew and make a film."

Smith's group chose her as director. It was through that role that she found she was not merely interested in film. She was good at it.

"In the midst of our class project, I just realized 'Oh my gosh! I'm supposed to be doing this,'" Smith said.

Kearns-Simmons said one thing she loved about Smith's project was her decision to put a twist on a classic play and focus on a controversial social issue.

A Vehicle for Creating Conversation

Now aware of her two strong passions, Smith began work on her dream and future career.

"I plan to use film as a vehicle to create and capture conversations about social justice issues, like homelessness," Smith said. "People need to be aware."



Jammie Sean Smith with her son Cruz

Starting with her local community, Smith developed a documentary focused on the increase of homelessness within Collin County.

Dr. Millie Black, Collin College faculty advisor for VOICE, said Smith is a change agent.

"She sees the world as it should be and seeks to go about creating a place where the voiceless have a voice, particularly disadvantaged children," Black said.

Ivy League and a Four-Year Degree

A member of Phi Theta Kappa honor society, Smith knew she wanted to continue on for a four-year degree.

Knowing a number of universities in Dallas-Fort Worth and the state of Texas house well-known film

programs, Smith applied locally.

Acceptance letters came in, and she was excited about her next step. However, as time went on, she just couldn't keep ignoring the recruiting emails she received from Columbia University in New York. Smith said she'd never really considered the possibility of attending an Ivy League college before, but decided it was worth a shot.

"When I finally looked into applying, I found out there was an entrance exam," Smith said. "I wasn't able to make that, but when I called they said their entrance exam was pretty comparable to the SAT. I could just take that again. I looked it up, and there was one last date to take the SAT before admissions for the next year closed. I signed up, went and took it."

A few weeks later, Smith received a call from Columbia University.

"They don't typically call people, but I'd discussed my situation of having to give up my spots at other schools," Smith explained. "They said I'd been accepted!"

The Next Step

Following a few good years with family and college courses that led to the discovery of an unexpected dream, Smith is excited to return to New York.

"If I hadn't gone to Collin, I would have never thought I could go to Columbia," Smith said. "Enrolling in honors classes was the best decision I made. They challenged me and pushed me to Ivy League thinking."

Although it required a cross-country move for the single mom with a two-year-old son, Smith wholeheartedly believes Columbia University is the next step in fulfilling her dreams and generating awareness about societal injustices in America.

As she enters Columbia University, the former Collin College student said she has one major goal: learn as much as she can about film and develop awareness about the needs facing the many children and families in America who simply cannot say, "I'm going home." ❖

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