

4-1-2013

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Recommended Citation

Daniels, Sean (2013) "The Resilience of One Tennessee State University Professor in Providing a Path to Excellence for Youths," *Engaged: The journal of Tennessee State University*: Vol. 1, Article 5.
Available at: <http://digitalscholarship.tnstate.edu/ejtsu/vol1/iss1/5>

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The Resilience of One Tennessee State University Professor in Providing a Path to Excellence for Youths

Sean Daniels¹

William Oscar Smith was born 1917 in Bartow, Georgia.² The family left Bartow soon after Smith's birth. W. O. Smith's father William was run out of town by the Klu Klux Klan for opening a grocery store next to a White-owned business in Bartow. The Klan gave Smith's father twenty-four hours to clear out; leaving his wife and three children behind to stay with relatives, Smith's Dad William made it to Philadelphia with seventy-five cents in his pocket. William rented a pushcart for a quarter and bought fifty-cents worth of cabbage. Through this investment, William made enough money to buy more cabbage and sell it the next day. A storeowner allowed him to set up a fruit stand in front of the business, and a few weeks later he sent for his family, having gained a toehold in the heart of the black community.

W. O. Smith's mother Ida Beatrice Smith followed her husband William to Philadelphia on the train through the Jim Crow South in the late spring of 1917 with a nine-year-old son, Charles Spencer; an eight-year-old daughter, Willie Mae; and a screaming infant, W.O.³ Ida Smith had a fifth grade education but many cultural interests. W.O. Smith's mother developed a skill of looking at a particular dress, then purchasing the material and making an exact duplicate of the dress. Mrs. Smith later used these skills to open a dressmaking school. According to W.O. Smith, his mother's determination that her son needed a college education was her most important legacy.⁴

W.O. Smith lived his childhood at 1306 Brown Street, an inner-city neighborhood in North Philadelphia. Smith's father purchased the narrow, three-story row house in 1918 for six hundred dollars, but he almost lost the house during the Depression. Although they were poor, the family was happy, and the

¹ © 2012 By Sean Daniels

² W. O. Smith, *Sideman*, (Nashville: Rutledge Hill Press, 1991), 19.

³ Smith, *Sideman*, 20

⁴ W. O. Smith, *Sideman*, (Nashville: Rutledge Hill Press, 1991), 22.

neighborhood was safe. W. O. Smith believed that Brown Street was a good place to grow up: There in the center of city, close to City Hall, the main library was within walking distance, as were the museums, the academy of music, and other cultural offerings. Smith thought that Central Philly was great, but Brown Street was greater because it did not suffer from a poverty of spirit.

While growing up in Brown Street, W.O Smith was accustomed to the family's home serving as a gathering place for young, black jazz musicians. Trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie and Jimmy Hamilton (clarinetist with Duke Ellington) would discuss and argue matters of music, form, and aesthetics as they pertained to Jazz. Other musicians would also participate. W.O. Smith learned through these discussions that music was not all play and self-indulgence, but also study, listening, and work.

W.O Smith received his first instrument when he was in the third grade. It was an old, battered clarinet, given to him by Kaiser, a World War I vet, who frequented his father's poolroom. Smith had neither teacher nor even an instruction book but began to learn by trial and error. This resulted in Smith being banned from practicing within the confines of the house. The family's backyard became W.O. Smith's practice room. Eventually, W.O. Smith was selected to play third clarinet in the United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) children's band, led by Marcus Garvey. The UNIA accepted any kid who had an instrument. W.O. Smith was quite fond of the satin shirt emblazoned with U.N.I.A. on the front. Smith states that he was in deep bliss whenever the group had a parade down Ridge Avenue.

His next memorable music experience was a real teacher, Fred Tindley, whose father was the Reverend Tindley, founder of Tindley Temple and a historic figure in the evolution of black gospel music, for violin. Mr. Fred Tindley was a trumpet teacher who taught everything from piano to piccolo. Mr. Tindley was a fine musician but not a violinist; therefore Smith was left to his own skills when it came to proper bowing, hand position, and fingering on the violin. The trial and error that Smith experienced in his early years would become the catalyst for him to major in music education and musicology.

Smith would continue to figure out things like hand positions, double stops, and vibrato as well as producing a satisfactory tone. He enjoyed baroque composers like Corelli, Vivaldi, and Tartini. He would check the music out of the Philadelphia Library, and then agonize over problems of how to read and play the music. Smith was not in high demand as a violinist; however, he did take the opportunity to perform with the First African Baptist Church's Sunday school orchestra. The group played primarily church music and some light classics. The attraction was the orchestra's leader and violinist, Archie Durham.⁵ Hearing Durham's outstanding violin playing up close provided Smith with the example that he needed to remain motivated and further develop as a musician.

W.O. Smith attended Central High School, in Philadelphia, was a school for the elite. Students were selected to the school from all over the city. There were no more than twenty-five blacks who attended out of twenty-five hundred students. The academic program at Central was rigorous. Smith was sixteen years old when he graduated from Central High School. Smith received a Bachelor of Science degree from Central and was admitted to all the colleges to which he had applied. However, this was during the Depression, and Smith could not afford to attend Cornell, Dartmouth, Brown, or Northwestern. Smith recalls, "After graduation, with no employment, some of us were counseled into the first vocational music class at Mastbaum Vocational School. This was a great gift from the city of Philadelphia, and retrospect it was to become my conservatory."⁶ W.O. Smith attended Mastbaum for a couple of years where he learned music theory, music history, and orchestration. He also participated in the band, orchestra, and other chamber groups. He credits his two years at Mastbaum Vocational school for contributing to his maturity and self-reliance as a musician.

W.O. Smith was selected for the all-Philadelphia high-school orchestra. He was chosen three consecutive years on three different instruments: viola, double bass, and

⁵ W.O. Smith, *Sideman*, (Nashville: Rutledge Hill Press, 1991), 27.

⁶ W.O. Smith, *Sideman*, (Nashville: Rutledge Hill Press, 1991), 29.

tuba. These early experiences would serve as the foundation of Smiths' interest in helping students achieve the best in life through the gift of music.

W.O. Smith played his first paying music gig with Bessie Smith, the empress of the blues and the first African-American woman to make a commercial recording.⁷ Through his participation with the Fairfax Big Band in Philadelphia, W.O. Smith had the good fortune to play with several great musicians: trumpeters Dizzy Gillespie, Charlie Shavers, Johnny Lynch, Bama Warwick, Palmer Davis, Harold Reed, John Brown, Shorty Cawthon, Calvin Jackson, Ernie Washington, Norman Dibble, and Shadow Wilson. Smith also played with the legendary Fats Waller at the Nixon Grand Theater in Philadelphia. The aforementioned experiences and others moved Smith to seek the action place for jazz musicians, New York City.

Smith states,

The evening before my departure for New York in the fall of 1938, I sat down at the dinner table, and made my announcement. Nobody was upset. Nobody tried to dissuade me. My mother, in her calm and reserved fashion, admonished me not to waste my time just hanging around jazz orchestras but to go to college. We had never had a college person in our family. Out of the Philadelphia branch of the family, I was the first high-school graduate. My father had died two years previously. I was leaving behind, my mother, my grandmother, and my Uncle Charlie, and not one of them was impressed by names like Calloway, Ellington, or Basie.⁸

On a bright September day in 1938, W.O. Smith left for New York, City. He was accompanied by his good friend and band mate Calvin Johnson who was going to Julliard on a scholarship for Piano. Smith was moving into the unknown. Calvin had arranged for Smith to stay with Lenny and Edna Foreman. The Foreman apartment was located in the Sugar Hill neighborhood of Harlem. The Foremans were to become both "parents" and New York counselors to Smith and Johnson.

⁷ W. O. Smith, *Sideman*, (Nashville: Rutledge Hill Press, 1991), 32.

⁸ W.O. Smith, *Sideman*, 58.

The Central High school curriculum had been so rigorous that Smith tested out of most of the freshman courses required for New York University. After enrolling, he spent the next few days discovering the city's architecture, subway system, and, of course, the music. New York provided Smith with the opportunity to meet and work with many great people and outstanding jazz musicians: Charlie Christian, Jimmy Shirley, Sy Oliver, Mercer Ellington, Langston Hughes, and Coleman Hawkins.

On October 13, 1939, Coleman Hawkins and his group recorded the standard "Body and Soul." Smith was the bass player on that recording. In 1964, Smith received a twenty-fifth anniversary copy of one of the first million sellers, "Body and Soul," compliments of RCA. Smith states, "I am extremely grateful for the lucky accident that placed me in association with Coleman Hawkins. Not only was it providential in terms of my education as a musician but also for the fame it gave me in the world of Jazz."⁹

However, Smith did have to turn down the opportunity to travel on the road with the Coleman Hawkins band. He had promised his mother that he would stay in school at New York University. Reluctantly he turned in his two weeks notice with the band in January of 1940. Smith would later graduate from New York University with an undergraduate degree, his teacher's certificate, and a Master's degree. There were, however, many obstacles along the way, included being drafted into the military.

W.O. Smith then worked as an educator at Morgan College, now Morgan State University, where he started the Morgan College Marching Band.¹⁰ Upon leaving Morgan College for a better salary, Smith served as band director at Texas State College, now known as Texas Southern University.

Smith would eventually leave Texas Southern University for Nashville and a position at Tennessee A & I, now Tennessee State University. The job came in the form of a telegram from Dr. Herbert F. Mells, offering a position as director of graduate studies in music education, teacher of music methods, and violist in the

⁹ W. O. Smith, *Sideman*, (Nashville: Rutledge Hill Press, 1991), 90.

¹⁰ W.O. Smith, *Sideman*, (Nashville: Rutledge Hill Press, 1991), 169.

newly formed string quartet. Smith states, “The last part caught my attention I played viola in the University of Texas Opera orchestra and was intrigued with the idea of a black string quartet.”¹¹ Smith was hired at Tennessee State University as an Associate Professor.

W.O. Smith arrived in Nashville in the summer of 1952, where he interviewed with Dr. W.S. Davis, president and Vice President Flowers. After all was said and done, Smith accepted the position and moved to Nashville with his wife Kitty and their newborn baby. Dr. Davis had arranged for Smith to move in with Don Q. Pullen and his wife Wilma until the Smiths could find a place. Pullen was a Tennessee State University graduate and a junior high school instrumental music director. He was also a preeminent black jazz band director and a good jazz pianist who had studied with Teddy Wilson at the Julliard Conservatory of Music in New York.

Dr. Herbert F. Mells had also hired Smith to play in the newly developed faculty string quartet. The quartet was the only string ensemble associated with a black college. The group was made up of Brenton Banks, a violinist and jazz pianist from the Cleveland Institute; Maureen Stoval played second violin; W.O. Smith played the viola; and a graduate student named Dave Kibrell played the cello. With the death of Dr. Mells in 1953, Tennessee State University hired Dr. Edward C. Lewis as head of the Music Department. Dr. Lewis gave Smith permission to seek a student chapter franchised of the Music Educators National Conference (MENC). In 1953 Tennessee State University obtained what was likely the first chapter granted to a predominantly black college.¹²

W.O. Smith had a goal to organize a string ensemble, and with the help of his students, notably bassists Charles Dungey and Edward Moon, Smith was able to realize his goal. The group’s most accomplished concert was under the direction of Dr. Thor Johnson, conductor of the Nashville Symphony as the guest conductor, along with the University Choir of around one hundred voices to perform Mendelssohn’s *Second Symphony*. W.O. Smith did use the musician’s trust fund to

¹¹ W.O. Smith, *Sideman*, 201.

¹² W.O. Smith, *Sideman*, (Nashville: Rutledge Hill Press, 1991), 211.

fill out the group with a few young players from the Nashville Symphony for this concert. He also took care that Tennessee State University students maintained the majority of each section of the Orchestra.

In 1961 W.O. Smith became the first African American to join the bass section of the Nashville Symphony Orchestra. He and Booker T. Rowe, a violinist from Temple University, were the only blacks in the Nashville Symphony. In a few years, five other African Americans would join the Nashville Symphony. Smith's connection with the Nashville Symphony allowed him to become acquainted with the major players in the Nashville community music scene. Other important connections were the men from the *Wednesday Night Club*. This group was a collection of men who were intellectually inclined. The group started with Smith and five others from Tennessee State University: W. C. Lathon, Ben Butler, Buddy Taylor, Princetta, Jerry Crosby, and Chuck Mitchell. The group met once a month, usually on Wednesdays, no dues taken, or records kept. These contacts would prove vital for developing the W. O Smith Community Music School.

The W. O Smith Community Music School was born out of the frustrations of a third grader trying to figure out the fingering patterns on an Albert system clarinet. While serving as a volunteer teacher at Bedford Stuyvesant Community Center, Smith began to realize how beneficial even a small amount of formal instruction can enhance the musical experience of a beginning musician. Smith had experienced the same notion while working with students at Seward Park High School. He concluded that there were many talented, low-income kids, but the system of knowledge transfer in music was not set up to reach and help them.

Smith began to sketch ideas and outlines for a program that would serve gifted but financially needy young students. His initial thought was to utilize Tennessee State University as the program's base. Thus, Smith penned a grant proposal. Dr. E. C. Lewis, the music department head, endorsed the idea and advised Smith to take his proposal to the Tennessee State University Development Office.

Smith prepared a rough copy of the proposal with the help of his wife Kitty. He also included in the proposal fees for the school's director and a small staff. The

director of the Tennessee State University Development Office informed Smith that he had to submit a final draft and the University would choose the school's director and would have complete control of the finances.¹³ Smith left the office discouraged. He then mentioned his idea to Thor Johnson, the conductor of the Nashville Symphony. Johnson asked Smith to bring the proposal by his office. Johnson read the proposal and agreed to support the venture. The base of the operation changed from Tennessee State University to the Nashville Symphony. The symphony office staff typed up professional copies. W.O. Smith then mailed the proposal to the National Endowment for Arts, who rejected Smith's proposal.¹⁴

Smith had given up on the idea until 1982 when he received an invitation to attend a meeting of the Music Consortium of Nashville, an umbrella organization made up of the city's leading music establishments, school music programs, Nashville Symphony Orchestra, the Jazz and Blues Society, and the media. The idea for the W.O. Smith Community Music School was up for consideration. The consortium then formed a committee to study it further and pursue the project.

The committee members chosen for the project were Del Sawyer of Blair; Leonard Morton, director of music in the Nashville Public Schools; Don Butler, president of the Gospel Music Association; Anne Brown, head of the Metro Arts Commission; and W.O. Smith. The committee was one of action. Reverend Fred Cloud, a member of the committee, collected an official charter for the proposed school. Thus, the committee became independent of the consortium and began working directly for the proposed school. William D. Killen was selected as chairman of the board of directors. Killen, known as Buddy, was the driving force behind Tree Publishing Company and one of the most influential powers in the city. The committee acquired a consultant, Dean Kenneth Wendrich of Bowling Green State University in Ohio, who had been the director of the Neighborhood Music School in New Haven, Connecticut.¹⁵

¹³ W.O. Smith, Sideman, (Nashville: Rutledge Hill Press, 1991), 297.

¹⁴ W.O. Smith, Sideman, (Nashville: Rutledge Hill Press, 1991), 297.

¹⁵ W.O. Smith, Sideman, (Nashville: Rutledge Hill Press, 1991), 298.

The next step for the board was to raise money. The local Nashville musicians union voted to award a fifteen-hundred-dollar grant towards a fund-raising concert. Fred Cloud enlisted the aid of the Jazz and Blues Society as sponsors. The concert featured Beegie Adair with her group and the Andy Goodrich Quartet featuring Lewis Smith, Morris Palmer, and Charles Dungey. The event charged a twenty-dollar admission/donation; the event collected close to three thousand dollars toward implementing the music school. By the summer of 1984, the school had an executive director, a board of directors, a chairman, and solid funding. Smith and the directors located a house that was near Music Row but also next to public housing. The group purchased the three story red brick building at 1416 Edgehill Avenue. W.O. Smith/Nashville Community Music School opened in October of 1984. The board's operating policies were that each student would pay a fee of fifty cents per lesson. The students would range in age from four to eighteen. Finally, the faculty would consist entirely of unpaid volunteers. The lesson cost for studying music privately on average is between fifteen to thirty dollars per half hour depending on the level of training the private teacher has attained. This is why W.O. Smith's dream was and is so important today. His quest was to level the playing field for aspiring talented students who could not afford instruments, sheet music, or professional training.

Throughout the first seven years of operation the W.O. Smith/Nashville Community Music School served on average two-hundred fifty students and forty-five teachers a year.¹⁶

W.O. Smith had always hoped to live long enough to see one graduate from the Community Music School attend a major college or university in music. In 1989 W.O. Smith would realize this dream when he delivered Lisa Williamson to the internationally acclaimed Oberlin Conservatory of Music. Smith drove Ms. Williamson from Nashville to the doorsteps of the Oberlin Conservatory where she enrolled.¹⁷

¹⁶ W.O. Smith, *Sideman*, (Nashville: Rutledge Hill Press, 1991), 304

¹⁷ W.O. Smith, *Sideman*, (Nashville: Rutledge Hill Press, 1991), 304

William Oscar Smith lost his battle with cancer on Thursday, morning May 30, 1991. In his own words W.O. Smith asserted, “It has been a long and interesting gig for me, and I have played with abandon, giving myself to the music and to the life it opened up to me. I embrace it all, body and soul.”¹⁸ Smith’s legacy will live on through the thousands of students who have and continue to benefit from their enrollment in the W.O Smith Community Music School.

This researcher has many memories from serving as a volunteer teacher at the school. My intent was to give something back to the community through the gift of music instruction. The truth of the matter is that I received far more from the students I served than I could have ever given them in music instruction. I would encourage everyone who is able to spend a year with the remarkable students enrolled in the W.O Smith Nashville/Community Music School. The dream that W. O. Smith had years ago continues to inspire students and instructors.

The year is 2012, and the W.O. Smith/Nashville Community Music School is currently open for business in its new location at 1125 8th Avenue South, Nashville, Tennessee. Jonah Rabinowitz serves as the school’s director; Lynn Adelman is the Assistant Director; Laura Fisher serves as the Development Coordinator; and Alex Naser is the school’s Program Coordinator.¹⁹

In an interview conducted by the researcher with Lynn Adelman, Assistant Director for the W.O. Smith/Nashville Community Music School, Adelman provided much of the following information regarding the history and progress of the school’s twenty-seven-year existence:

The first location of the music school was in the Edgehill community. This area was selected for several reasons: Dr. and Mrs. Smith lived and attended church in the Edgehill community, and the property was next to the Edgehill United Methodist Church, just blocks away from Nashville’s Music Row area. Then pastor of the United Methodist Church Reverend Bill Barnes, along with several music row executives, assisted in securing the original property. The idea was to draw

¹⁸ W. O. Smith, *Sideman*, (Nashville: Rutledge Hill Press, 1991), 307.

¹⁹ W. O. Smith Music School, “W.O. Smith Music School”<http://www.wosmith.org/contact-us> (November 15, 2011)

professional musicians from Music Row to volunteer as teachers. The property had several other appealing aspects: closeness to several universities, located in the center of the city, located on a major public transit line, and affordability. The Edgehill Avenue facility served around 210 students in private lessons, 80 students in choral/instrumental ensembles, and 15 in young musicians' class, and summer programming served around 130 students. Over 100 volunteers offered to teach.

The schools current location on 8th Avenue serves over 340 students in private lessons, 125 in choral/instrumental ensembles, 20 students in young musicians' class, and summer programming serves around 250 students. Currently 183 volunteers have offered to teach.²⁰

Each student who attends class at the music school receives assignment books, drumsticks, curriculum, repertoire, and any accessories needed for their given instrument. The W.O Smith School loans instruments to students at no charge for practicing at home and for use in school band/orchestra programs.

Throughout the school's twenty-seven-year existence, many former students have gone on to have prosperous adult lives which have been positively linked with music. Adelman recalled two such students during the interview. The first is a male student who studied piano at W.O. Smith from the age of 9 years old until he graduated from high school. He received a piano scholarship from a state university, enabling him to attend college. His high school grade point average was mediocre, but he obtained a 4.0 grade point average during his freshman year and transferred to another school. He graduated with a music performance degree, continued his studies, and acquired a second bachelor's degree in political science. He moved to Texas and received a Master's degree in Political Science from Texas A & M University. After an exhaustive interview and scrutiny process, he was hired by the U.S. Department of Defense in Washington, D.C. He currently works at the Pentagon.

The second student studied piano, clarinet, and voice while at W.O. Smith, beginning her studies at the age of 9. Upon high school graduation, she attended a

²⁰ Lynn Adelman, interview by author held during a meeting at W.O. Smith. November 2011.

private college in Alabama and received a Bachelor's Degree in Music Education. Through her college, she applied for an internship program to teach music at a parochial school in Harlem. She was subsequently hired by the school. She taught there for 5 years. During those 5 years, she obtained her Master's Degree in Music Education from Columbia Teachers' College in New York. She traveled around the world, experiencing all types of music-making. She recently completed all of her course work towards her Doctorate degree in Edinburgh, Scotland.

The impact on the community has been long term and impressive. In the past twenty-seven years, W.O. Smith students have achieved higher academic performance than average. In the past decade, all of the schools high school seniors have graduated, and all but four of those have attended a two or four year college program. Four current graduates are music majors in colleges and universities around the country. These students received scholarships through a fund with the Community Foundation of Middle Tennessee.

Each student who participates in the W.O Smith Nashville Community Music School program has an increased sense of cultural awareness, awareness of themselves, and the world. W.O. Smith Music students composed music for an independent film in conjunction with the Nashville Film Festival, performed on recordings with Aaron Tippin and Lady Antebellum, and participated in a master class with artists and composers Daniel Benard Roumain and Alfredo Rodriquez.

In July of 2009, W.O. Smith students were the featured musical guests for the program "Country at the White House," part of a music education series sponsored by First Lady Michelle Obama. In 2011, the W.O. Smith School received the Tennessee Arts Commission's Governor's Arts Award, one of eight arts awards presented to recipients that exemplify the state's finest cultural traditions.

By fulfilling the simple mission of making affordable, quality music instruction available to children from low-income families, the school has obtained national acclaim as an afterschool program that transforms lives through music.²¹

²¹ Lynn Adelman, interview by author held during a meeting at W.O. Smith. November 2011

The W.O. Smith Nashville Community Music School continues to provide opportunities to the underserved youths for whom its founder William Oscar Smith was so very concerned t. The W.O. Smith Nashville Community Music School is forever linked to the Tennessee State University family as well. Tennessee State University music faculty and music students have volunteered at the Community Music School throughout its twenty-seven-year existence.

With more emphasis being placed on Tennessee State University students to gain hands-on experience before graduating by way of internships, teaching experience, and service learning to the Nashville community, the W.O Smith school clearly provides a vehicle that our students can utilize to fulfill these and other service-learning requirements.

Tennessee State University Professor William Oscar Smith who put forth the effort to “Think, Work, and Serve,” and his wish fulfilled has opened up doors and provided new opportunities for thousands of underserved youths. It is for this reason that recognition is due to Professor Smith and the W.O. Smith Nashville Community Music School for their accomplishments and impact on the Nashville community.

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