



Betty Udesen / Seattle Times

In a photo taken in September, Herb Smith greets a former prison inmate who was coming to live at Transition House. Smith, executive director and co-founder of the house, died yesterday.

A life of opening doors, hearts

Herb Smith helped former prisoners through respect

by Sherry Stripling
Times staff reporter

Herb Smith felt he had three strikes against him:

- He was kept in the federal penitentiary too long.
- He was a person of color.
- He had very little education.

Yet when he died at 61 early yesterday morning at Tacoma General Hospital following respiratory complications, the impact was felt as high as the governor's office, where Smith had worked with Jean Gardner to promote the Gig Harbor Jazz Festival.

It was felt even more deeply on the

other end of society's spectrum.

A handful of ex-felons, comforting themselves with cigarette after cigarette, sat around in the sunken seats of second-hand couches at Transition House on Seattle's Capitol Hill and wondered if they have any future without him.

"I've never met a man who had as much heart as he did," said Darrell Windhorn, program manager at Transition House, an ex-offender who blinked watery eyes when he broke the news that Smith was dead.

The residents are seen as society's discards as the frayed carpet that runs up the stairway in the old house that

Smith founded and ran.

But to Smith they were always human beings who deserved more of a boost toward a second chance than the one most get: \$40 "walking" money and a suit of clothes from the state.

The program, which is a member agency of United Way of King County, will attempt to go on, but no longer with an executive director willing to work himself to death to keep it running, as some feel Smith did.

"What he gave to people in transition was a sense of 'I respect who you

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A life spent giving help

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are," said Smith's wife, Marny Pearce, who is deputy director. "He wasn't trying to change people, but he made them feel better about who they are, and that opened the door to change."

Smith always said he had a vendetta against the system, Pearce recalled.

He started Interaction Transition, the agency that runs Transition House and its employment programs, 24 years ago while serving time at McNeil Island, then a federal penitentiary, for bank robbery.

But it was how he channeled his emotions that made him such a shining example. He sat in support meetings and listened to prisoners and former prisoners tell about the highs and lows of re-entering the world, all the while reminding them to accept responsibility and to avoid blaming others.

When he was released from prison, Smith went to the University of Washington, where he maintained a perfect 4.0 grade-point average while earning a political-science degree.

The program he founded has received national attention as the only one of its kind in the country.

Smith was praised as "an example of the dynamic impact for good a private citizen can have on his community" when he received the 1989 Award for Outstanding Achievement by a Citizen from the Washington Council on Crime and Delinquency.

This fall, Smith compared ex-inmates and the world they face to the former hostages in Iran, who had to be carefully reintroduced to society.

Ex-inmates have the additional problem that they meet immediate disapproval from society, he said, and that disapproval is often compounded for ethnic minorities.

People who commit crimes deserve incarceration, he said, but more of the average \$40,000 a year it takes to house each prisoner should be spent on rehabilitation.

"It's inhuman to take a person and lock them away in an isolated situation and then turn them loose without any direction, without deprogramming," Smith said.

"The person will strike back and then society will lock them up again and say, 'Well, we did the best we can.'"

Few do get locked up again after going through the Interaction Transition program. More than 700 have been through the residential program in the past 12 years with a 96 percent success rate, Pearce said.

Besides the long hours by Smith and Pearce, and help from volunteers, a board of directors and the residents, much of the credit for Transition House's success rests on Smith's personality.

Dale Gluck, president of Interaction Transition's board of directors, said he was amazed at the turnout when he went with Smith to a meeting at McNeil Island one night.

"It was clear the prisoners were there that night because their honored leader was coming back to hold court," Gluck said. "He had profound respect from people on both sides of the bars."

Karen Arntson, former executive director of the Gig Harbor/Peninsula Area Chamber of Commerce, recalled Smith's charm seven years ago when he proposed the first Gig Harbor Jazz Festival, a cultural event that has drawn as many as 15,000 listeners and a fundraiser for Interaction Transition.

"Herb just kind of wandered in one day and had this dream," she recalled, saying that his graciousness led people to join in. "He was a wonderful man."

Pearce says the jazz festival will go on this summer and she hopes Transition House also will survive. She and her husband talked about his need to slow down after he was hospitalized recently with aneurysms, but more and more work was needed.

"He was always on the front line," she said. "This past year it was extraordinarily difficult to raise funds. Corrections is not a popular cause."

"He could have retired and said, 'I have done what I needed to do for the community,' but he didn't do that. He just simply said, 'I will not stop.'"

Smith, who was born in Oklahoma City, leaves behind two sons, Stephen, 6, and Alexander, 3, of Fox Island.

A celebration of his life is expected to be held Monday in Seattle, with a place and time yet to be determined.

Remembrances can be made to Interaction Transition, 935 16th Ave., Seattle, WA 98122, or to the Gig Harbor Jazz Festival, 625 Commerce St., Suite 10, Tacoma, WA 98402.

Service for Herb Smith will be Monday

A memorial service celebrating the life of Herb Smith, 61, founder of the Transition House for ex-offenders, will be at 1 p.m. Monday at the Central Lutheran

Church, 1710 11th Ave.

Smith, founder of the house, located on Capitol Hill in Seattle, died Wednesday.

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