

WOMEN LEADERSHIP VIRTUAL EXCHANGE (WLVE) DIGITAL STORYTELLING PROJECT

From Dorms to Difference-maker: One Professor's Journey towards Inclusivity

Story and photos by KSU student Sarah Swetlik.

From the Paul Jones building hallway, room 101 might look like any other office; however, for students of Tami Smith, this room serves as a safe haven and a place to find support.

Many years before she would grace a classroom podium, Smith served as an English peer facilitator to her friend Kathy, who had cerebral palsy. She watched Kathy endure insults from the children around her, and she felt a responsibility to fight for Kathy. She vowed to herself in that moment that, no matter what, she would always support those around her who were struggling.

During her eighth-grade year, one of Smith's teachers pulled her aside and told her that she would make a difference in the world. Smith credits that conversation as the first time that she recognized someone else's true faith in her, and a pivotal moment that launched her into her successful career in education.

After receiving her Associates degree from Reinhardt University, Smith went on to pursue an additional degree in Special Education from the University of Georgia before starting her career in the school system. Over 35 years in the Cherokee County School System, Smith held positions in elementary, middle and high schools, and retired in 2017 after serving as the Vice Principal over Special Education and the senior class at River Ridge High School.

However, shortly after her retirement began, Smith felt herself missing her students, and longed to go back to her roots. After performing her own research, she discovered that a significant number of college athletes were not graduating within their four year

scholarship time period, so Smith called the school and asked how she could help make that number smaller.



Tami Smith in her office, holding her Blue and Gold Spirit Award.

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Decades after her graduation from Reinhardt as a student, Smith returned, moved into an office next door to her first dorm, and began leading a study hall for football players.

Rather than trying to reteach material, Smith created a safe, reliable space for her students to depend on, where they could do homework, uninterrupted, for a few hours a week. Those students became lifelong friends, and Smith was asked to teach a class on special needs education, which then became a full-time position. All of a sudden, Smith was back in the work force, and she embraced it with open arms.

Now, Smith spends her days delivering hands-on lessons in a room that has been furnished with money from a grant written by one of her students, featuring a ball pit, a swing, and other resources. She devotes her time to helping education majors learn how to properly serve students who need access to special education.

Smith cites Jaqueline Kennedy Onassis as one of her greatest influences and mentioned the quote “You can separate the good from the bad, but perhaps there is no need to do so either,” as her guiding philosophy. Smith said, “I can teach my kids that there are going to be good and bad students, but you don't need to separate them. We can all work together.”

I was able to sit in on one of these classes, which happened to be the last day of a dyslexia unit. Smith set up various tables around the room with tactile equipment to spell out a list of words, divided by grade level, and each student completed the stations as a way to experience how to teach students with dyslexia.

Aside from her endeavors in the classroom, Smith participates on multiple committees, including one that matches a football player from Reinhardt to a boy with behavioral issues that is lacking a positive male influence. In 2018, her first year at Reinhardt, Smith received the

Jason Gamel Blue and Gold Spirit Award for her participation and generosity as a faculty member a true friend of Reinhardt. Today, she credits this award as one of her proudest accomplishments in her time at Reinhardt.

Although Smith loves her work and pours her heart into her students, her family and her faith are her first priorities. Smith says that each day, before she begins her work or communication, she starts with a devotion. When she and her family have dinner, work discussion is not allowed.

Smith said, “If you can learn to compartmentalize a little bit, then you come up with different ways to rejuvenate yourself.”

Though this level of compartmentalization still proves challenging for Smith, who claims that she always feels like she isn't giving enough to each of her priorities, she's learning to allow herself to make mistakes.

“I have a very strong faith,” said Smith, “and I think God put me here for a purpose. I think God closed the doors at Cherokee County for a purpose, because I don't think I ever would have retired and has moved into this position for a reason.”

At the end of the day, Smith doesn't chase promotions or glory. Her main objective is making sure that she covers enough information to equip her students to change the lives of students of their own by promoting a people-before-curriculum mentality.

“I just want to make sure that the level the playing field is level for special needs kids,” Smith told me as we concluded our interview, “I just want to make a difference.”