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## Forebears helped him; now he helps others

BY OZZIE ROBERTS

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Eric Smith's curse-and-blessing kicked in after he began drawing demon smoke from homemade crack through a glass tube.

Instantly he was hooked into an addiction that in less than three years from that day in 1989 would cause him to lose self-respect and a loving wife.

But the saving grace for the founder of a nearly 14-year-old Oak Park church and related senior outreach center was that he was a tough study.

At 33, he was a former church kid who had survived the Jim Crow South and a speech impediment that always made him fear uttering even a sentence in public.

He never could ignore feelings that like David, the greatest king in the Old Testament, he was still "a man after God's own heart," despite how badly he was living.

"I just knew," Eric says, "that God had another purpose for me."

And at a crossroads, he kicked his habit — cold turkey — after telling himself he could do it if his parents and their forebears could rise above slavery.

Eric, 53, says his Loving Care Center and his Loving Care Outreach Church were born in his heart around that time in late 1991.

But he wouldn't get them established until six years later.

Ever since, he has provided emotional and spiritual support for the young and old in nursing homes, in lockups and on the streets of San Diego.

There's no way to accurately tally, Eric says, how many he and a solid core of six volunteers have reached through the years with programs including poetry reading sessions, Bible study, singing and worship services.

But he continues to get feedback in calls and letters like this one from the activity director at a nursing and rehabilitation center in Encinitas: "Hello Rev. Smith/volunteers. Everyone here at ManorCare Health Services deeply



The Rev. Eric Smith helps convalescing seniors at Paradise Valley Manor and Health. Here, Smith leads the group through hymns. Nelvin C. Cepeda / Union-Tribune

appreciate the time your volunteers have spent with our residents. Your focus of remembering the gift of giving has not gone unnoticed.... Your center is a great asset to our ever-growing community.”

Says Eric, who owns a 21-year-old commercial and residential painting business: Even with the stutter, “I’ve always been a people person and gravitated toward socializing with folks. And I’ve always been concerned with looking out for our elders.”

He also once had a huge attraction to the wild side of life. And he self-published a book about his experiences through AuthorHouse in February.

The 88-page opus is titled “From Crack to Clergy Provoking Thoughts.”

Born and raised in Chattanooga, Tenn., he was the eighth of nine kids of determined parents who walked on opposite sides of the straight and narrow.

Lizzi Smith, who died of cancer at 86, was a devout Baptist, and Frank Smith Jr., who would succumb to a heart attack at 76, worked in an iron pipe foundry. On the side, he was a pistol-packing loan shark who also sold moonshine and whiskey.

Eric got early and frequent exposure to the real world through his dad.

By the time he was bused across town amid efforts to integrate Chattanooga’s all-white high school in the early ’70s, he was a freethinking adventure seeker.

He got deeply into smoking cigarettes and pot, and by the time he was a junior, he dropped out of school.

He was living here and there before an older sister took him in and persuaded him to finish school.

At 20, Eric recalls, after working odd jobs in real estate and at the Chattanooga country club, he decided to get out of his hometown.

He joined the Navy, where he would get introduced to a heavy drug culture, and left 10 years later after growing weary of sea duty.

As a civilian, he sold and used cocaine.

But even in those days, he says, he never forgot the two characteristics that always most impressed him about his parents.

His mother had an extremely big heart and would always go out of her way to provide for people in need.

And although neither she nor her husband could read or write, they never let it prevent them from doing what they wanted to do.

The influence of all that, Eric says, is a big part of what moved him to earn a bachelor’s degree in a Bible-based human development course at Christian Heritage College. It also spurred him to do his first work as a minister at Faith Chapel Church of God and Christ.

“I’m (now) doing something that I should be doing, that we all should be doing,” Eric says. “We all should be looking out for each other. We have a duty and obligation” to do that.

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