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Where Are They Now? Raised by Teachers, Kyle Smith Finds New Home in Classroom ^[1]

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By:

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This alumni profile is one in an occasional series of stories about the lives of former East Lansing students who have pursued career paths away from home.

Kyle Smith hadn't expected to become a teacher. And if he had, he wouldn't have guessed he would teach in an urban district.

Smith (pictured above) was prepared, though, to teach kids with life experiences and backgrounds dramatically different from his own. Part of what helped, he says, was growing up and attending school in East Lansing's culturally diverse community.

The 1991 alumnus of East Lansing High School teaches at Southeast High School [2] in Kansas City, Mo. The high school is part of a system ranked in the bottom tier [3] of Missouri public school districts by comparison sites like SchoolDigger [4]. Nearly all of the approximately 700 students qualify for free or reduced lunch.

Since joining the faculty in 2016, Smith has developed curriculum that taps into his students' needs and interests. It's a challenging environment, he said, where a lot of teachers come and go quickly. He's seen some who walk in and walk out on the same day.

"I didn't grow up and attend school in a similar setting," Smith said. "East Lansing was a university town and had this amazing diversity. The school I'm in now doesn't have all those different cultures, and students aren't exposed to people from other cultures much either. It's something I wasn't used to."

Team Smith's Game Plan Reaps Rewards

Smith grew up in the Tamarisk neighborhood [5] on East Lansing's northern edge. The neighborhood was nearly new when his parents bought the house in 1968. Jeff and Charlene Smith still own the house today. Smith and his brother Erik attended East Lansing schools their entire K-12 career.

Both of Smith's parents were teachers. His mother taught math before she stopped to raise her boys and become a contract programmer analyst. His dad taught math, too, and coached football [6] for 33 years at East Lansing High School after an early career at Hale, Grass Lake and St. Johns schools. During his three decades at the helm of Trojan football, the elder Smith and his coaching staff produced multiple championships seasons—including a perfect season and a state title [7]. He is the 12th winningest coach in Michigan history [8] with a career record 293-93-2. The elder Smith also coached Trojan track until his retirement in 2003.



Charlene and Jeff Smith outside their home in the Tamarisk neighborhood.

"My parents have always been there for me," Smith said. "My friend Sam (Hosey) said that my dad is like his other dad. A lot of people say that because he was so supportive of everyone. I had a dad who belonged to everyone."

Smith played football for his father and legendary coach. And while he always called him "Coach Smith" on the field, he called him "Dad" when he got home. Football was never pushed, although it was frequently the topic of dinner conversation. Team dynamics pervaded the household, with long summer vacations a venue for family bonding.

"I learned a lot from seeing my parents' relationship," Smith said. "They worked together. They understood how to work as a team. They knew it didn't mean the end of a relationship if you had a disagreement."

For Smith, the examples set by his parents are something he models in his classroom. His number one goal, he said, is to be a teacher students can call on for resources, guidance or a listening ear.

"You don't realize it, but every time someone turns in that English paper about themselves, you're seeing things that they won't say out loud," Smith said. "You're there to look at more than just grammar. You look at things for how much their heart and soul are in their writing, and to learn and understand more about where they come from and their problems. Sometimes you hear things that are really dark and challenging."

Teaching by doing

Smith's journey to teaching wasn't necessarily shaped by his parents as much as by workplace

experiences. After attending Northwestern University on a football scholarship, Smith applied his bachelor's degree in communications to jobs in advertising, video and animation technology. He worked 14 years for Sprint, and after reorganizations, downsizing and layoffs, decided the corporate life wasn't for him.

He worked for small ad agencies while earning his teaching certificate. He started out teaching English, and after applying for a few permanent teaching posts, accepted a job at Southeast.

"They hired me 20 minutes after I walked in the door," he said. "I thought it was weird, but I later saw how teachers came and went. It was a tough environment."

Smith immersed himself and got to know his students. He had them write papers. He welcomed conversations. He began introducing learning methods built on video and digital technologies. He developed a mass media curriculum that allowed students to tell stories using video. In the fall, he'll be working within the school's career and technical area, helping to propel the district's program in digital marketing. Part of his plan involves coordinating a class that operates like a small advertising and marketing agency to serve local non-profits.

"I want kids to understand the concept of doing things for the greater good, not just for their pocket," he said. "One of the reasons I started teaching was to do something good for the world."

While some of his friends might be surprised he's traded a corporate life for teaching, his parents aren't.

"Kyle has always been very creative and quick thinking," Charlene Smith said. "When he was in high school, one of his teachers brought him in as an aid. He worked well with kids even then."

Jeff Smith agrees that his son was always an original thinker.

"But he wasn't as fired up about math as I was," he said. "Math was always my favorite, but not Kyle's. His was English and history. He just put up with me."

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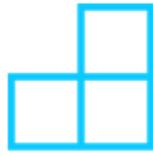
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