

STRIVING FOR A BETTER FUTURE

WLV man offers life experiences to Project Youth

By Nancy Watson
Sentinel-Voice

When you're only 16-years-old and headed to the state prison for shooting two men, it's either time to turn your life around or accept a ruined future.

For Ra-Shad Smith, of West Las Vegas, the decision to make the needed changes came while waiting two months for his turn in court, to plead guilty to battery with use of deadly weapon.

But Smith's contact with the police began much earlier when he was 13 and "goofin' off, hangin' out and just havin' fun" with his friends.

They were throwing rocks over a wall. The rocks broke four windows in a house. The teen-ager was busted for the first time.

He was convicted of vandalism and sentenced to three months probation. It was pretty painless.

He reported to his probation officer, hung out with his buddies, smoked pot and repeatedly got into trouble.

Curfew violations, using drugs, selling drugs, alcohol consumption by a minor. Bust after bust until he ended up with a sentence of five months at the Nevada Youth Training Camp in Elko.

While there, he went to class, played basketball and survived. There were seven or eight dorms filled with hundreds of other kids like himself.

Those years were very hard on his mother whom he described as "the best" and who loved him and provided him with everything he needed, if not everything he wanted.

He said he learned plenty

about himself during that five month stay, but evidently it wasn't enough to keep him from going back to his old friends, gang-bangers all.

"We hung together for protection," he said.

Basically, he just spent time the same old way doing the same old things. He drank, used and sold marijuana, goofed off, wasted time, wasted energy, chased girls, didn't study and broke curfews.

"I was setting myself up for failure and falling into the same footsteps, constantly doing things wrong," he said. He also fathered a child, a baby girl.

Then one night when he was 16, he and friend drove to a local convenience store. His friend and a man started fighting. Suddenly he was involved and someone pulled a gun on him.

"I was terrified. I had never had a gun in my face before. Neither of us wanted to shoot," he said.

But Smith did pull the trigger. He fired five times, indiscriminately and without knowing what he was doing. He had never fired a gun before his life, not even a hunting rifle. One of the bullets struck one man in the arm and the other bullet struck a man in the chest.

"I panicked and drove away," he said.

He went back to his friends' house and waited for the inevitable arrest, "I didn't know what to do. I couldn't tell my mother," he said.

He "grew up real fast" during the two months he was waiting for his case to be handled by the court and waiting to learn what his sentence would be. He pleaded guilty to battery

with use of a deadly weapon and was sentenced to the state penitentiary in Indian Springs.

"I didn't know what to do. I didn't know how to be. I wanted to go home," he said.

"But you have to be a man. There's no room for little boys in a man's world. You have to stand on your own two feet," he said.

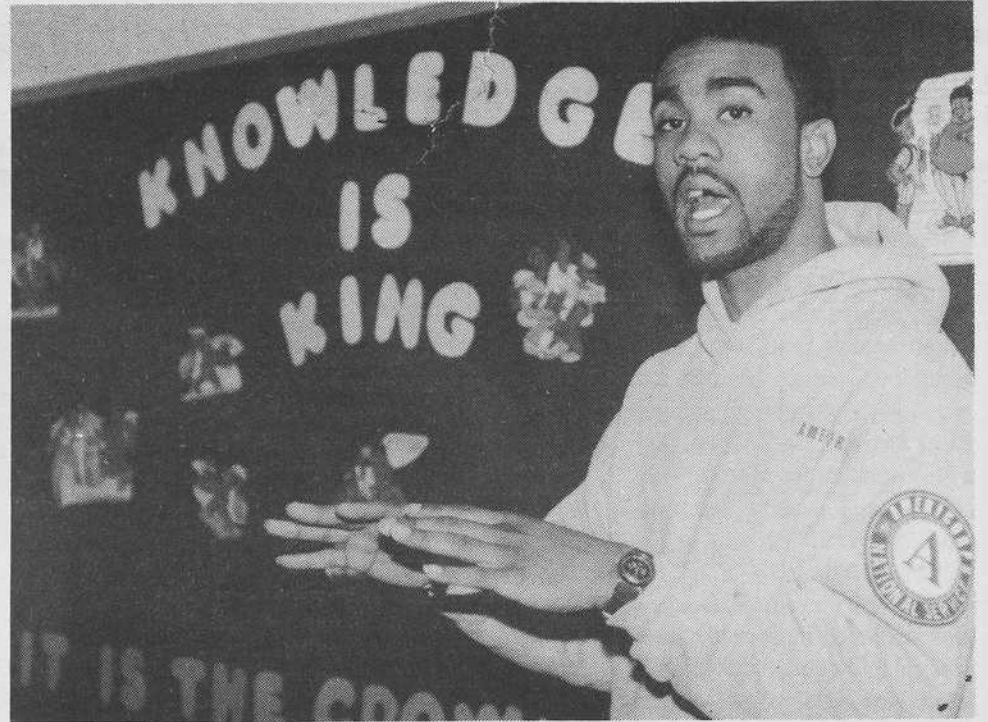
Most of the other prisoners were older than him, but he knew many of them. He had grown up near them and had heard about them.

"I felt bad that I wasn't home," he said.

Smith spent three years, 11 months and 16 days in the prison where his choices were go to school or go to work. He was moved around to various locations and just as he settled into his classes, he'd be moved to new location where he had to start the classes all over again so he could never attain his GED.

When he was released, he was finally tested for and received his GED certificate. Now, he's enrolled in community college and is working as a VISTA volunteer for Americorps.

His job site is Project Youth where he spends time with



Ra-Shad Smith is a familiar face at Project Youth.

Photo by Savoy LVS/Voice

other young people who are where he was not so long ago, young and lost.

Project Youth which teaches life skills is located in an old fire house at 1201 Miller Ave.

Each day from 4 to 6 p.m., children of varying ages, learn about the criminal justice system and take part in mock trials or they learn job searching skills such as how to fill out a job application, how to dress for an interview and how to present themselves during an interview.

"They need to work, they need the money," said Smith

who added most young people break the law and sell drugs because they need the money not the drugs.

But they face numerous obstacles from attitude, clothes and transportation to knowing how to properly complete an application, he said. One of those obstacles is low self esteem.

"Ain't nobody going to hire me," is a phrase that Ra-Shad and Renee Smith, the director of Project Youth, hear too often. So not only have they tried to improve the young people's self esteem, they are looking for employers to hire

youth for a few hours a day.

Although Project Youth's classes take place in the afternoon, the door opens at 10 a.m. and young people spend time "hangin' with Ra-Shad during the day.

Soft spoken and easy going, Ra-Shad is someone the young men and women of Project Youth can easily relate to. They talk to him about their personal problems, school problems, home problems and gang problems.

"I'd be here even if I didn't have the job, even if I didn't get paid," he said.

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LV NAACP examines Strip hotels' business practices

By Nancy Watson
Sentinel-Voice

The Las Vegas branch of the NAACP is trying to find out if African-Americans are blatantly being locked out of Las Vegas hotel construction opportunities.

According to the Rev. Chester Richardson, special assistant to Las Vegas NAACP President James Rogers, multi-billions of dollars are being spent in casino and hotel expansions on the Strip, but none of the contractors involved are African-American.

To prove the point, NAACP is mailing out 100 business surveys this week to the gaming license holders.

The survey includes questions about the number of African-Americans who are in management and administration positions within the casinos and

hotels as well as the number of African Americans on the board of directors.

The national office of the NAACP has done a similar survey with nationwide hotel chains, but eight of the 16 hotel chains surveyed did not respond to the survey. They received a rating of F from the national office.

The major emphasis of the Las Vegas NAACP survey is covered in Part II of the survey which asks how much money the casino spent for good and services and the number of subcontracts. Of that amount, the survey asks how much was spent with African-American vendors and contractors.

"Less than .005% of the multi-billions of dollars spent on casino expansions last year went to African-American contractors," Richardson said. "They were not even invited to

bid on the jobs," he added.

"One of the most blatant cases of African-American lockout is ITT'S Caesar's World," he said. Caesar's is currently undergoing a \$600 million renovation with little or no African-American contractors participating.

Richardson also said the Mirage, Excalibur, MGM, New York New York were all built without African-American contractors participating in the bidding process.

"We're not talking about a handout, or even a set-aside. We're talking about the holders of privileged gaming licenses providing equal opportunity for African-Americans to submit a bid just like everyone else," Richardson said.

The national office of the NAACP has called for a boycott of the hotels that received a rank of F by not

participating in their survey which included questions about the number of blacks in managerial and professional positions.

In the national survey, the Marriott and Hilton (including the Waldorf Astoria) hotel chains received the highest ranks of C. Hyatt, AdamsMark and Ritz-Carlton received scores of C-.

The national survey also requested information about the number of black vendors used and whether the companies supported charities that serve the black community.

Ranking D on the national survey because they answered some, but not all of the questions were, HFS (owners of Days Inn, Howard Johnson, Park International and Knights' Inn); ITT Sheraton (owners of Caesar's Palace) and Promus (owners of Embassy Suites, Hampton Inn and Homewood Suites).

Hotels which ranked F because they refused to answer the survey include Westin, Best Western, Radisson, Renaissance, Choice (includes Quality Inn, Sleep Inn, Comfort Inn, Clarion, Rodeway Inn, EconoLodge and Mainstay Suites), Holiday Inn, Omni and Doubletree.

Conference

(Continued from Page 1)

Creig and other conference participants were envious of the autonomy the Las Vegas Weed & Seed program has.

"Working together (public and private interests) relieves the federal government from telling (the local) Weed & Seed (program) what to do," Simpson said.



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