

# Damu Smith loses battle with cancer

By Hazel Trice Edney  
Special to Sentinel-Voice

WASHINGTON (NNPA) - The life of Damu Smith, the internationally acclaimed peace and environmental activist, who died of colon cancer last week, is being hailed as a monument to human rights that will survive his death.

"This is a monumental loss for so many movements and organizations. He touched the lives of so many, and will no doubt continue to inspire even more," says John Passacantando, executive director of the Washington, D.C.-based Greenpeace USA in a statement. Smith worked for 10 years as a toxics campaigner and national associate director for Greenpeace. He left the organization five years ago to establish the National Black Environmental Justice Network.

Passacantando said, "Damu Smith was one of the most motivated and committed activists that Greenpeace has ever known."

In most recent years, Smith also became well-known for his anti-war activism through his "Black Voices for Peace" organization that led several major marches on Washington.

"What motivates me to do this is my own passion for life for all people," Smith said in a 2003 interview with the NNPA News Service as he prepared for "The Great Black Peace March" on the Washington Mall.

He said he chose non-traditional civil rights issues, such as peace and the environment, because it appears other civil rights leaders back away from them.

But, then came his most difficult battle — the fight for his own life. While representing Black Voices for Peace at

a march in Palestine last year, Smith fainted and had a seizure. After being flown back to the U.S. he was diagnosed with stage four colon cancer — the final stage. Doctors told him that he had up to six months to live.

The feisty activist defied the odds, declaring, "I've got to fight back."

Six months later, Smith had defeated the prognosis. He described himself as "a long way from being completely healed," but he celebrated his life with a party on Sept. 25 and had been among 200 protesters that marched across the street from the White House on Sept. 9, demanding government accountability for conditions left by Hurricane Katrina.

At the George Washington University Hospital where he died in the wee hours of May 6, he was "surrounded by friends and family that spilled down hospital corridors," according to a release from his family.

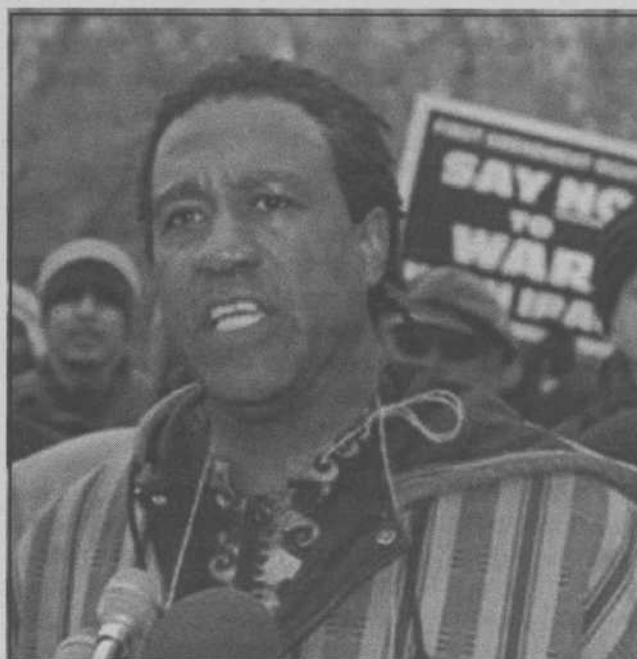
Born Leroy Wesley Smith, the son of the late Sylvester and Vernice Smith, he grew up in Carr Square Village, a housing development in predominantly Black North St. Louis.

The neighborhood was only blocks from the infamous Pruitt-Igoe housing development that was blown up with dynamite in 1972 by the local housing authority after it became such a failure.

Smith was first inspired to a life of activism during a field trip to Cairo, Ill., when he was only a 17-year-old student at Vashon High School.

There he met singer Nina Simone, civil rights legends Ralph Abernathy and Julian Bond, as well as poet Amiri Baraka.

Seeing the bullet holes



Damu Smith won praise for his environmental activism.

where White supremacists had been shooting into the homes of Black people, Smith recalled in an interview 36 years later, "On the bus home, I remember thinking about it. And I resolved then, at the age of 17, I'm in this forever."

During his college years at St. John's University in Collegeville, Minn., where he majored in political science and served as president of the Black Student Union, he changed his name to Damu Amir Imara Smith.

In Swahili, Damu means blood, Smith said, calling it "the blood that I am willing to shed for the liberation of my people."

Amir, he said, means leadership — "the leadership I must provide in the service of my people." Imara means strength — "the strength and stamina I have to maintain in the struggle."

More than 30 years later, wherever there was injustice, there was the crusader, Damu Smith. He was a leader in the South Africa anti-apartheid movement, in campaigns against gun violence and against police brutality.

## Three men indicted in cross burning in Ark.

TEXARKANA, Ark. (AP) - Three men are accused in a federal indictment of burning a cross near the home of a Black man to intimidate him.

Christopher Mitchell, James Bradley Weems and Clint Wurtele, all from Fouke, are accused of conspiring to threaten and intimidate the man because of his race.

The three men are friends of Christopher Baird, 33, who admitted last month in court that the cross-burning Aug. 5 near the home of his neighbor Anthony Briggins was racially motivated.

Miller County sheriff's deputies found a cross burning on a hill about 100 yards from the house where Briggins lives with Kristina

Robb, who is White, and their child.

Defense lawyers maintain their clients are innocent and the cross-burning was not racially motivated. Paul Hoover, Wurtele's attorney, described the incident to the Texarkana Gazette as a prank.

Prosecutors allege the three were drinking beer at Baird's house when they decided to burn the cross to drive Briggins out of the neighborhood.

Baird pleaded guilty last month to a federal charge of conspiracy to interfere with the right to occupy a dwelling free from intimidation and interference based on race and color. He faces up to 10 years in prison and a fine of up to \$250,000.

Never fearing a David and Goliath fight, he worked to expose corporations that targeted poor Black neighborhoods, including the infamous "Cancer Alley" along the Mississippi River between Baton Rouge and New Orleans.

Ron Daniels, executive director of the New York-based Center for Constitutional Rights, who has known Smith for 30 years, once recalled how Smith brought together opposing

sides of a conflict between the Japan-based Shintec Corp. and residents of Louisiana.

After nearly six years of marches, rallies and even a congressional hearing over the so-called "Cancer Alley," Shintec backed down from its plan to build the world's largest vinyl plant in the industrial region.

"Damu is absolutely one of the most brilliant organizers we have in Black America-barring none. And I think I'm pretty good," Daniels chuckled.

Smith remained executive director of the National Black Environmental Justice Network until his death. But, he had used much of the past year to help save lives by encouraging others to get colonoscopies, something that he had failed to do despite the fact that his father had died of colon cancer at 53, the same age that Smith was diagnosed.

Smith was also host of the "Spirit In Action" radio program on Pacifica's WPFW in Washington, which he often used as a medium to educate on crucial issues and mobilize people for demonstra-

tions.

The press release from his family said Smith had no health insurance when diagnosed. Therefore, he had to raise money for medical bills and health care. "He leveraged his personal battle as another social justice campaign, publicly speaking on the plight of the millions of uninsured Americans," the release states.

Funeral arrangements were still being planned at press time. The family was also establishing a fund in lieu of flowers, which will be announced.

Survivors include his daughter Asha Hadia Vernice Moore Smith, 12, whom Smith once boasted had started a "Black Kids for Peace" organization. He is also survived by a sister Slynice Williams; two brothers Richard Anthony Smith and Leslie Dudley Smith; a significant other Adeleke Foster, two nephews, six nieces and thousands of friends and fellow soldiers in the battle for peace and justice.

Smith also leaves behind an army of those whose lives he influenced.

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