

## **Youth's success a testament to mentoring, personal drive**

**By MARIE GRADY**

SPRINGFIELD - "Gooooo moooooorning Minnechaug!"

Nearly every school day at 7:30 a.m. the voice of Michael D. Smith II booms through the loudspeakers at Minnechaug Regional High School in Wilbraham, another reminder to bleary-eyed students and others that the day has begun.

If his public delivery sounds polished to a perfect pitch, it's because he's had plenty of practice. In addition to making school announcements as the "Voice of Minnechaug," this 17-year-old Springfield youth has conferred with President Clinton, introduced Attorney General Janet Reno to a national justice conference and chatted with congressmen.

At a time when President Clinton is calling on Americans to become mentors to children, he might look no farther than Smith for a model of what a mentor is supposed to be.

And what mentors can do for youth.

"I think it's very important for every child to have a series of mentors," says Smith, who has just finished reading to 5- and 6-year-olds at the Girls Club Family Center on Acorn Street. "Every time we see (the slain rapper) Tupac Shakur in the news, we need to see two more Colin Powells."

It could be a young Colin Powell staring back at you now. Smith, who has won state and national Boys Club honors among a slew of others, presents a can-do, clean-cut image in a suit and tie.

If you had not heard him minutes before worrying about being overdressed for a photography session with the children - or seen him fishing in his bag for a pair of dress shoes to replace his sneakers - you might think he is always this clean-cut.

You wouldn't be far off the mark.

Smith's story could easily have turned out differently. When Kim Bress gave birth to her son, she was a teen-age mother facing many obstacles.

But she was determined that Michael would have as many opportunities as possible.

When he was 5, she enrolled him in the Metropolitan Council on Education Opportunities program, a state-funded effort that allows inner-city children to attend suburban schools.

At 8, she enrolled him in the Springfield Boys and Girls Club.

Along the way, she also got her high school diploma and a bachelor's degree in marketing. She now works as a contract analyst at Unicare Life and Health Insurance Co., formerly Mass. Mutual Life and Health.

She admits that she is still amazed by her son's success, and advises other parents to get their children involved in extracurricular activities early.

In addition to Michael's own drive and the family's strong faith in God, there may be another key to his accomplishments - a close relationship with his mother.

"Michael and I are best friends, although he looks up to me and respects me as a parent," said Bress, 34.

Smith, chairman of the diversity committee for the Minnechaug Student Council, just got his driver's license last November and will graduate this year, but he already has a resume some can only dream about.

In addition to the Boy's Club honors that helped land him two visits with the president, he was named an "Everyday Hero" by the national teen magazine "React" last year for his work as an HIV-AIDS peer counselor.

He has been recognized by state and local officials, including Gov. William Weld. He also has served as an intern for U.S. Rep. Richard Neal, D-Springfield, and plans to do so again this summer.

He has spoken at national conferences on juvenile justice, including one last week in Miami.

Smith acknowledges he preached to the converted when he told President Clinton at a recent ABC News Radio forum at the White House that an "ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure" when it comes to youth drug use.

And he says he is tired of politically correct speech when it comes to racism. He says many blacks, whites and Hispanics are polite strangers when they could be confronting the racial stereotypes each faces.

"We need to have more open lines of communication," says Smith, whose mother says he has the best of both worlds because he grew up in the inner city but goes to a suburban school.

He is not short on praise for those who helped him along the way. There is Carol Rawson, executive director of the Springfield Girls Club Family Center - He once called her his "second mother."

There are teachers at Minnechaug. There are Neal and Clinton. And there is Powell, who gave Smith a signed copy of his autobiography after the youth raced through all 535 legislative offices of Congress with a personal appeal from Powell for more funding for the boys and girls club. (Powell serves on the National Executive Board and Clinton is honorary chairman.)

"I haven't finished it yet," Smith sheepishly says of Powell's book, as if he needs an excuse for not finding the time.

But most of all there is his mother.

"She's always been a great source of love and encouragement," he says. "There were a lot of barriers she had to break down, and she broke through them - most of the time herself."

When the pressures of being a teen-age wonder become too great, Smith says he can lose himself in movies - He could watch "The Color Purple" a million times.

He also has learned to let go of some activities in order to devote more quality time to others.

He hopes one day to be a political analyst for broadcast news, but he does not rule out a career in politics. No matter what he does in the future, he says he will remain involved with the Girls Club Family Center, where he works as a registrar and does volunteer work, and hopes others will find inspiration there.

Already, a nighttime program at the club that also serves boys has attracted more than 100 teens, and Rawson has submitted a grant application through the national club to open up a satellite unit in a housing development.

"He's been a role model here to our Boy's Club members," said Rawson. " He came here when he was 8 years old, and he's participated almost on a daily basis since then."

For Americans who still sit passively by and wait for a better time, Smith and others like him seem to have a message.

"I'm sure we can learn from each other."

*Enterprise Editor Marie Grady supervised "Community Spirit" stories in addition to long-term and in-depth projects. This article first appeared on March 24, 1997.*