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Gerald K. Smith: Youth group CEO changed lives

Gerald K. Smith

BY NIRAJ WARIKOO • FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER • SEPTEMBER 3, 2008

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Gerald K. Smith, a respected community leader who dedicated his career to helping youth and led a Detroit group that has helped thousands of children, died Saturday at St. John Hospital in Detroit of complications from a brain tumor. He was 67.

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Mr. Smith served as president and CEO of YouthVille Detroit, previously known as the Detroit Youth Foundation, a group that seeks to help young people through mentoring and activities.

"He was devoted to helping young people make our city a better place," said Carol Goss, president and CEO of the Detroit-based Skillman Foundation. "He will be

greatly missed. All his life, he was for making positive changes for the poor, the disenfranchised. There are many young people who have made improvements in their lives -- going back to school, getting jobs -- because of the influence that Gerald had in their lives."

Mr. Smith grew up in Ohio and graduated from Ohio University with a bachelor's degree in history and government education. He earned two master's degrees, one from Xavier University, the other from the University of Detroit Mercy, and a doctorate of education in administration and supervision from Wayne State University.

He began his career as a social worker in Cincinnati, where he helped

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troubled young people. He then worked in Cleveland, training high school graduates to enter apprentice trade programs.

Mr. Smith was once executive director of Franklin-Wright Settlements Inc., an agency that helps youths, senior citizens and neighborhoods. And he was previously deputy director for family and neighborhood services for Wayne County. In 2000, Detroit Mayor Dennis Archer selected Mr. Smith as the seventh member of the Detroit reform school board. Before his work with YouthVille, Mr. Smith was regional director of the Kellogg Youth Initiative Partnership in Detroit.

"He was a wonderful gentleman, a Christian brother who loved this community and young people," said the Rev. Edward Branch, pastor of Third New Hope Baptist Church in Detroit and a board member of YouthVille. "He loved staying busy and working on behalf of this community."

Based in Detroit's New Center area, YouthVille serves more than 300 children ages 11 to 19, helping them grow through various programs.

"His commitment to the youth was like no other," said Judith Jackson, vice president and COO of YouthVille. Survivors include his wife, Ann C. Smith; a son, Kevin, and two grandchildren.

Visitation will be 1-9 p.m. Friday at Swanson Funeral Home, 14751 W. McNichols St., Detroit.

The funeral is scheduled for 11 a.m. Saturday, with a family hour preceding it from 10 to 11 a.m., at Hartford Memorial Baptist Church, 18700 James Couzens, Detroit.

Contact **NIRAJ WARIKOO** at 248-351-2998 or warikoo@freepress.com. Staff writer Peggy Walsh-Sarnecki contributed to this report.

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