

A statement about Michael Smith

We are respectfully submitting this history as we, his family, experienced it. We hope it is helpful.

Deborah Valentine Smith

I recently attended an excellent webinar on the African American History of Acupuncture by Dr. Tenisha Dandridge, hosted by Acupuncturists without Borders.

The history of Lincoln Hospital and Lincoln Detox in the 1970's was of special interest to me, as I participated in much of it and may have a unique perspective, as I was married to Mike Smith at the time. While I appreciated much of the history shared in this Webinar, I can't agree with a couple of the statements about Mike.

The statement in Dr. Dandridge's presentation that "he did not approve of the politics brought with the free clinics," makes it sound like Mike did not approve of the free clinics themselves. Mike's history as a medical student and doctor was all about free clinics. Mike started working with the Black Panther Party when he was a medical student in San Francisco in 1967. We both volunteered in their free health clinics in Williamsburg and Harlem when we moved to New York in 1968. His commitment to free health care started with the Panthers, carried through the free door-to-door screenings with the Young Lords in the South Bronx, and on into Lincoln Detox. Mike's medical license was threatened several times because of his involvement in this "radical" activity. Later, as a medical director at Lincoln, his medical license was threatened again because of his resistance to the Health & Hospitals Corporation's attempts to dilute the program. One such struggle was around the program's commitment to training "non-doctor" ex-addicts to administer acupuncture, which was at the heart of the program. He was regarded as a traitor to the brotherhood of the medical profession for supporting and performing such training.

Mike and I both were members of Think Lincoln, an organization that included hospital employees, community members, Young Lords, and even some members of the youth gangs in the South Bronx who witnessed the atrocity that was Lincoln Hospital during

this time period. Think Lincoln put out information to bring attention to the conditions at Lincoln and the lack of true health care, acted as advocates in the emergency room, held rallies, and did door-to-door testing for TB, anemia and lead poisoning. During the takeover of Lincoln, the Think Lincoln “civilians” kept a presence while the Young Lords carried out the occupation. For many years I kept a pair of ‘chukka sticks’ that a Young Lord asked me to hide in my very large purse as we all moved away from the hospital after hearing the police helicopters coming in. In her account of Think Lincoln, Clio Silvers mentions working with “radical doctors.” Mike was one of those.

The presentation also says that Mike was an intern at Lincoln. Mike completed his internship at Harlem hospital in 1969. So at the start of his history with Lincoln, he was a licensed MD – although he never insisted that people use his title – and from 1969-1972 he was a resident in the Department of Psychiatry at Albert Einstein College of Medicine. During his drug addiction rotation in his psychiatric residency, Mike was placed at Logos, a “therapeutic community” (“TC”) in the South Bronx affiliated with Lincoln Hospital. During his time there, some of the residents, protesting the TC methods, left Logos and formed The Spirit of Logos. This group then separated into two groups. As the African-American and Latino members did not wish to take on the additional work of educating white people about racism, it was decided that a separate organization – named White Lightning – would focus on that task. Gil Fagiani described the group as being “influenced by the activism of the Young Lords and viewed drug addiction as the result of racism and poverty rather than individual pathology.” Mike supported the exodus from Logos (again, to his professional peril) and we moved to the Bronx in order to be more involved in their activities. A major project of White Lightning was education around the corruption of drug companies and their contribution to drug addiction. This included the development of methadone, which is more addictive than heroin, but is considered “treatment” because it is government controlled.

Because of his experience with Logos and the victim-blaming “treatment” for drug addiction at the time, Mike chose to focus on treating drug addiction through different methods. Through his affiliation with the Black Panther party and other sources, he had heard about the use of acupuncture in place of drugs like anesthesia and set out to find out if it could be useful for treating addictions. At the time there were no accessible

schools of acupuncture, so he created his own “independent study,” which involved seeking out people to learn from. He learned about a Japanese acupuncturist, Dr Omura, who practiced ear acupuncture with electrical stimulation. I remember his description of the use of the Kidney point in the ear to help calm people’s fear and anxiety and diminish withdrawal symptoms so they could recover without drugs. He met Sensei Wataru Ohashi who taught him about “acupuncture without needles,” which was what he was calling his Shiatsu treatment. He also met and studied with Oscar and Mario Wexu in Canada. At the time Mike met them, the Wexus were well-known for practicing acupuncture on race horses. The exam he took with them was to verify his self-taught program.

In her presentation, Dr. Dandridge states, “It’s time to take Mike Smith off his pedestal.” We agree, as he never wanted to be there. He was doing what he saw as his job. He had a mission to empower people through supporting their control of their own healthcare. He did it in spite of enormous professional opposition. He, along with many supporters of Lincoln Detox, kept the program open in spite of repeated attempts to discredit it, often through discrediting him personally.

Joanna Smith and Jessica Hutter

In addition to our Mom’s statement above, which we wholeheartedly support, we wanted to add that our father always believed in supporting communities and training programs directly. He believed that they did not need a detached overseeing force, but knew themselves how best to apply the training and support provided. Throughout his life he, often quietly, would provide direct support (in many forms) to programs and communities all over the world.

We submit this statement, not to recenter the discussion on Mike Smith, but to provide additional facts from those who actually knew him for consideration in the topic.