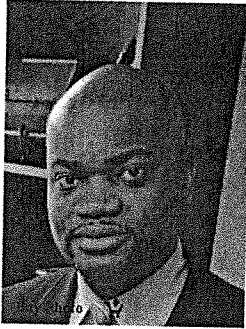


# Memphis loses strong voice with death of Tri-State Defender publisher Bernal Smith II, acquaintances say

Ron Maxey, USA TODAY NETWORK – Tennessee Published 11:30 a.m. CT Oct. 23, 2017 | Updated 12:44 p.m. CT Oct. 23, 2017



(Photo: Karen Puffer Focht/The Commercial Appeal)

He was Memphis through and through, a Whitehaven High School and Rhodes College graduate.

Bernal Smith II, who [died Sunday \(/story/news/local/2017/10/22/tri-state-defender-bernal-smith-ii-dead-memphis-tennessee-says/789229001/\)](#) at home at the age of 45, was also a passionate and persuasive voice for the city he loved.

Breathing new life into the Tri-State Defender as the weekly newspaper's president and publisher was only one of Smith's accomplishments. Those who knew him and worked with him said Monday Smith would be remembered as well for the way he empowered the city's majority African-American population through the many hats he wore.

"He was one of the few people who wore so many hats and could do it well," said Ron Redwing, president and CEO of the Redwing Group. Redwing followed Smith as president of the 100 Black Men of Memphis Inc. mentoring organization. "He cast such a shadow that many people thought he was still president (of 100 Black Men).

"Bernal understood the Memphis community," Redwing added. "He could go anywhere, from Whitehaven to North Memphis to Germantown to Collierville, and relate to people.

"His business acumen and community involvement made him a perfect role model for so many African-American boys -- and girls."

Before moving the Tri-State Defender, one of the nation's oldest African-American newspapers, toward local ownership together with an investment group in 2013, Smith's resume included finance as a special assets manager at Bank of Bartlett and a vice president of the Greater Memphis Chamber. Additionally, according to his LinkedIn profile, Smith was a partner in Olympic Financial Services Inc., offering tax preparation, short-term loans and credit counseling.

In addition to graduating from Rhodes, Smith had a masters of business administration from Union University.

Phil Trenary, the Chamber's CEO, said Smith's passing was a blow.

"He has a special place in our hearts because he was here," Trenary said. "He was a wonderful sounding board. About the time you'd think you understood something, Bernal -- as only he could -- would shed new light. It will be some very big shoes to fill."

Trenary also praised Smith's work at the Defender since taking over as publisher.

"I can't speak to the Defender before Bernal," Trenary said, "but I can definitely say that in his time there, it has been a very respected publication. It's not opinion pieces; they do the hard work, the real reporting. It's a very reasoned voice."

Andre Dean, president and principal owner of Dean & Associates consulting firm, watched his children grow up alongside Smith's.

"They started together at Idlewild Elementary," Dean said, "so we were around him (Smith) and his wife for several years until I moved to Florida and then moved back."

Dean's most recent association with Smith was through their work together on the board of the Urban League.

"Bernal was a thought leader," Dean said. "He could take ideas and move them forward, really inspire people to do more. He was a good standard bearer for what men should be doing here in the city."

Dean said Smith's death was a shock because he seemed to be doing well.

"He had lost some weight, and I just complimented him a couple of weeks ago, telling him how good he was looking," Dean said.

For Keith Norman, pastor of First Baptist Church Broad, Smith's passing represents the loss of "a consummate gentleman and a great fighter for the City of Memphis."

"We had an opportunity to talk about what he envisioned for the city at the Congressional Black Caucus several years ago," Norman said. "He was very positive and had a very positive outlook. He encouraged the participation of all Memphians, but he was very strong on African-American participation. He was a true role model and a strong voice."

The Memphis Association of Black Journalists said in a statement that Smith wisely positioned the Tri-State Defender for growth by creating new revenue streams and strategic partnerships.

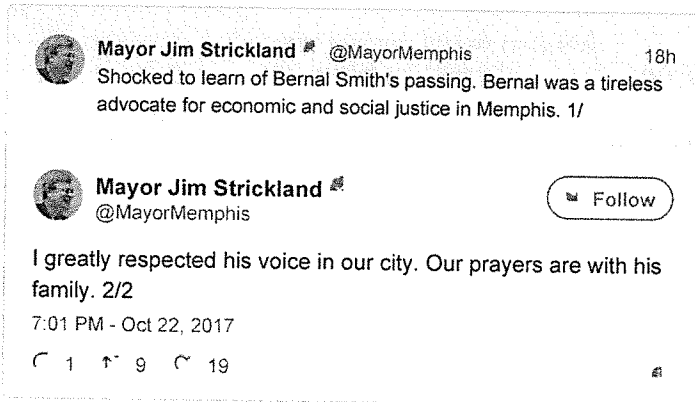
MABJ President Siobhan Riley said Smith's life stood in sharp contrast to the negative images often seen of African-American men.

"Smith made a huge impact in Memphis and loved MABJ," Riley said. "He taught our organization the importance of leadership and telling stories in a way that would bring about change in our community."

Both MABJ and Redwing announced plans for scholarships to honor Smith.

Various community leaders also spoke out on social media about Smith's passing.

Memphis Mayor Jim Strickland praised Smith as a "tireless advocate for economic and social justice in Memphis." In a follow-up tweet, Strickland said Smith's voice was "greatly respected."



Shelby County Mayor Mark Luttrell said the city and county lost "a civic leader, zealous advocate, renowned journalist, and dear friend "

Funeral arrangements are not complete.

A statement Sunday from Tri-State Defender associate publisher Karanja Ajanaku and Calvin Anderson, president of Best Media Properties, said the newspaper and its management board were "devastated."

"We learned late this afternoon that Mr. Smith has passed," the statement read. "We extend our deepest and most heartfelt condolences to his family. We ask that all take note of the family's request for privacy at this time."