

## Author and Activist Kemba Smith Visits Waxter Center

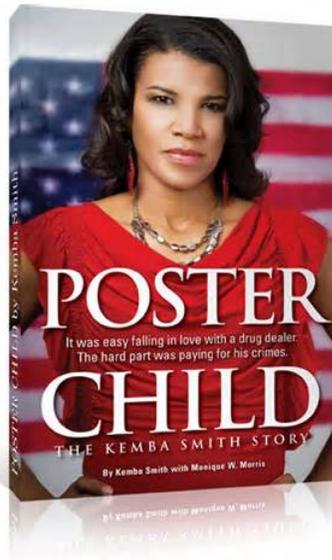
February 10, 2014

“Take your life back.”

This was the concluding thought that author and drug-reform law activist Kemba Smith offered 15 students, Department of Juvenile Services (DJS), Juvenile Services Education (JSE), and community representatives at a Thomas J.S. Waxter Children’s Center program kickoff assembly on Monday, February 10. Waxter is a DJS facility in Laurel, Maryland for detained female youth.

The program, “**What’s L-O-V-E Got To Do With It?**,” is a 12-module subcomponent of the Pen(itentiary)or Pencil (POP) national mentoring initiative created in partnership between the National Alliance of Faith and Justice (NAFJ) and the Kemba Smith Foundation (KSF). According to program literature, “the release of the curriculum will pilot in school- and community-based violence prevention and diversion program efforts” including “National Teen Dating Violence Prevention Awareness and Black History Month.”

“What’s Love Got To Do With It?” will be incorporated into educational programming at Waxter. Program resources include Ms. Smith’s 2011 memoir *Poster Child: The Kemba Smith Story* and *Race to Incarcerate: A Graphic Retelling* illustrated by Sabrina Jones and written by Marc Mauer based on his 2006 book *Race to Incarcerate*.



Ms. Smith’s presentation was rooted in her memoir. According to the KSF biography of Kemba Smith, Ms. Smith was an incoming freshman at Hampton University in 1989. She “fell in with the wrong crowd and became involved with a drug dealer...a major figure in a \$4 million dollar crack cocaine ring, and drew Kemba right in the middle of his life with physical, mental and emotional abuse disguised as ‘love.’”

Ms. Smith, “after enduring this turbulent four year relationship in 1994...was sentenced to 24.5 years and serviced 6.5 years in federal prison. She also gave birth to her first and only son while incarcerated. Fortunately, Ms. Smith regained her freedom after President Clinton granted her clemency in December 2000.”

What’s love got to do with it? “It has everything to do with it,” said Ms. Smith. “Loving yourself is the goal of where you want to go in life.”

“God has me out here sharing my story for a reason,” Ms. Smith continued. “You *can* do things differently.”



“Sometimes we put all of ourselves into somebody else,” Kemba Smith said to Waxter students. “Focus on you—right now you can’t help anybody else.”

Ms. Smith suggested that young girls need to look for the “red flags” in relationships. “How do you recognize those red flags if you don’t love yourself?” Ms. Smith asked. “You need to know you deserve better.”

Ms. Smith asked the students to make distinctions between “criminally minded” and the impact of “bad relationships” as well as perceptions of weakness versus the need to share. In prison, Ms. Smith said that the chaplain ministry “kept me strong.”

“Everybody has a story to tell,” Ms. Smith said. “Talk to somebody—a counselor.”

“You’ve got to let that emotion out,” said Ms. Smith.

“Don’t allow the street to take you down a path that you know will be self-destructive,” Ms. Smith said. “You can get caught-up just by association.”

“Education is a priority,” said Ms. Smith. “Your focus should be your education and where you want to be in life.”

Beth Hart is director of the JSE program for the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE). According to Ms. Hart, “Ms. Smith’s message was relevant and provided the girls at Waxter with a perspective born out of first-hand experience and knowledge.”

Further, “Ms. Smith’s presentation gave the girls hope that their futures could be more positive and brighter and ultimately that their choices impacted more than just themselves,” said Ms. Hart.

According to one Waxter student, “I believe Kemba learned from her mistakes and that all friends or boyfriends are not loyal.”

Another student commented that “Kemba is a living example that people who are living in that situation can get out of that lifestyle and become successful.”

“Make sure you don’t give up,” Ms. Smith said.

The Washington, D.C. area is one of four national locations targeted to launch **“What’s L-O-V-E Got To Do With It?”** in 2014. The NAFJ launched POP in 2005 and is currently implemented in programs across 11 states. The Cheltenham Youth Facility (CYF) in Cheltenham incorporated POP into its educational programming in 2012.

“The success of the program at CYF and the activities it involves are uniquely relevant to our students,” said Ms. Hart. “We will determine possible program expansion based on the educational and programming needs at each of our sites.”