

After watching Grandma love on orphans, an 8-year-old grows up and keeps his promise to adopt

'It's my ministry' — Environmental engineer James Smith, who didn't know his birth dad, is raising an adopted daughter, a birth son and three foster kids with his wife. And they're not done yet

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Nashville Tennessean

When he was a boy, James Smith just loved his Grandma Georgia.

So he looked forward to visiting her at work on the weekends while his mom attended job training classes. Grandma Georgia Salter worked in a big children's group home where children waited to be adopted or to be placed with a foster family. On the first day Smith visited, Grandma parked the boy in an office loaded with treats and a TV and told him to stay put. A few minutes later, a kid popped in for a snack. The two boys locked eyes, and the kid asked Smith, "You wanna go play?"



Smith, intrigued, hesitated for only a second before following his new friend into a big room filled with other children, some Black, some white and some Asian. Smith stared. He lived in an all-Black neighborhood in southern St.

Petersburg, Florida, and he rarely saw people of different races together.

"This ain't right," Smith thought. Still, he was fascinated and couldn't stop staring.

His new friend said he lived at the house because his mother was in jail. The other kids said their parents had died or abandoned them or were too sick to take care of them. Smith connected immediately — his biological dad had never been a part of his life, and that made him sad.



“We had an immediate bond,” he said. “I understood those stories.” Smith kept going back to that children’s home every weekend for a few months, excited to see his grandmother and craving friendship with the kids with whom he had something in common. They played games, watched TV, shared snacks and talked. After a dozen or so visits, the 8-year-old boy pledged to himself that when he grew up, he was going to adopt children who felt abandoned — kind of like he felt.

Smith, now 42 and an environmental engineer living in Murfreesboro, kept that promise. He and his wife, Tiara, adopted their first child 13 years ago. For the last two years, they have fostered different siblings in hopes of adopting more. Every day, he tries to be the dad he never had. “He is a Godly man who honors the Lord and puts his family first, a great example of how the Bible says we need to care for our orphans,” said Shan Edmondson, foster care services director for Monroe Harding, the Nashville agency that works with Smith and his family.

The journey has been heartwarming and heartbreaking. Smith said he and his wife will keep on the path for years to come. “It’s my ministry,” Smith said. “It makes me feel great, gives me great joy. Makes me proud. Gives me purpose.” And he has his grandmother — and his mother — to thank for that.

She kept ketchup for his grits

As a boy, Smith said he always felt a little different. He had darker skin and a different dad than his younger brother and sister. Smith often felt his siblings got preferential treatment. His home was safe, and he knew his parents and siblings loved him. But the home wasn’t particularly warm. “We didn’t hug, we didn’t say I love you, we didn’t have those things,” he said.

But, Smith added, he was Grandma Georgia’s favorite — she had hugs and kisses for everyone, but she’d make cakes just for him. If Smith was at Grandma’s house for breakfast, she always made his favorite — grits, eggs and bacon. And



Grandma, who didn't care for ketchup, kept a fresh bottle in her fridge because Smith liked it on his grits.

"When my grandmother did stuff for me, I milked it," he said. "I felt someone really cared for me." Smith watched her shower the kids at the children's home with affection. They often ignored other group home counselors, but when his grandmother asked them to turn off the TV, they did it right away after saying, "Yes, Miss Georgia." He was proud of how much those kids loved and respected Grandma Georgia. And Smith knew that he, too, wanted to help kids without parents.



After high school, Smith landed a full scholarship to historically black Tennessee State University in Nashville. When he came home for the summer, there was a cute little boy running around the house, Antonio, about 2 or 3. The boy walked straight up to Smith and reached his arms up. Smith picked the boy up and fell in love, never wanting to put him down.

Turns out Smith's mother, Sandra Blakely, also was influenced by Grandma Georgia: Blakely became a foster mom after her oldest went to college. That summer, Smith and Antonio were practically inseparable. Smith even brought the boy on a date, telling her, "If you can't accept him, you can't accept me."

"James always had that spirit about him that kids would cleave to him," his mother said. Smith was so taken with the boy that he considered transferring to a college closer to home. When Smith returned to TSU, he met his future wife, Tiara, at a church function, and she also wanted to adopt kids. After five years of trying to get pregnant, the Smiths decided to adopt. A family friend who worked for the Tennessee Department of Children's Services told the couple about a woman having her 10th baby.

The Smiths met their first child, a baby girl they named Amirah, at the hospital where she was born. When James Smith walked into the room, his wife already was holding the baby and said, "Here's your daddy." The baby turned her head toward her adoptive father and opened her eyes. "And that was it. I was hooked," Smith said. "It was the best day and the scariest."

Just a year or so later, Tiara Smith got pregnant with the couple's biological child, a son named Jaiden, now 11.

'I was shocked they called so fast'

With that joy came fear: “I was scared I wouldn’t be able to love another child as much as I loved Amirah,” Tiara Smith said. The fear proved to be unfounded. After a few years, both kids said they wanted younger siblings, but their parents again had problems getting pregnant. So they decided again to turn to adoption.



This time, the Smiths decided to foster to adopt in part because the state pays adoption fees that way. The first placement came shortly after they finished a three-month foster parent training program with Nashville nonprofit agency Monroe Harding. Three little brothers, ages 2, 14 months and 2 months. Be careful what you wish for — the Smiths’ older kids struggled with their new foster siblings at first.

The little ones required lots of attention from the rest of the family, taking away some of the freedom the older kids had before. And, Jaiden Smith added, “I was a little bit jealous in the beginning that those kids were getting part of my parents’ attention. But I talked to my parents about it and they helped me understand.” The oldest, Amirah Smith, said she, too, has felt jealous of her foster siblings, especially knowing her parents want to adopt them. “If I’m being honest, being the only adopted kid makes me feel special,” she said.

But the whole family felt emotionally devastated a year later when a distant cousin was awarded custody of the three little brothers in court. “That was hard,” James Smith said. “I didn’t cry in front of my family, but I definitely cried later.” The next morning, a Monroe Harding staffer called to check in on the Smiths — and to say they had two other small siblings who needed a foster home. “I was shocked they called so fast. We didn’t even have time to grieve,” James Smith said. But the family eventually said yes, and they now have a third foster child. The oldest child, Amirah Smith, said that has been a tough transition. “The first kids are gone, and then a month later, new kids? But there was that hole that wasn’t healed yet. It was all very fast,” she said.



The Smiths have grown to love their three new foster children and hope to adopt them. Again, though, a distant relative has come forward to ask the court for custody, a move, again, that floors

the Smiths. “For us, it’s a blow. Who is this person? Where did they come from? We’ve put in the work, got them in a routine, kept smiles on their faces, loved them,” James Smith said. “It’s really hard.”

Regardless of the outcome, the Smiths said they will continue to foster and to look for ways to provide a permanent home for children without one. “We are touching somebody’s life,” he said. “This is a calling. We give opportunities for children to learn how to smile and laugh. “Just to have those moments and to know that joy is worth it.”



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