

## MILLER'S OBRIE SMITH: Spreading the Blessings

**A**bility, determination, confidence and compassion. These characteristics, more than any others, have helped Obrie Smith through each major step in his life. The St. Louis, Missouri native is a product of hard-working parents who were unable to finish elementary school. However, through parental support coupled with a passionate desire to succeed, Obrie Smith defeated the odds and has gone on to become Director of Corporate Communications at Miller Brewing Company in Milwaukee.

Although Smith has attained what some would consider the pinnacle of corporate achievement, he is not only striving for more career milestones but remains constantly aware of the importance of spreading the blessings. Since joining Miller Brewery in 1978, this highly-motivated executive has helped to channel dollars and resources to America's Black communities for the overall betterment of its businesses as well as private citizens.

Obrie Smith has always been an exceptional human being. A diligent student, Smith was a member of the National Honor Society while in high school. He took a number of accelerated courses while developing a special keenness for math. After graduating summer high school in the top of his class in 1959, Smith had set his goals toward becoming a math teacher and eventually a high school principal.

Although he really had no money to speak of, Smith enrolled in Harris Teacher's College. After the first semester, however, he determined that the school's curriculum was not in line with what he was seeking. A high school friend had enrolled at Lincoln University in Jefferson City, Missouri. Wishing to change schools and remain with his friend, Obrie Smith also enrolled at Lincoln.

Smith began as a Chemistry major at Lincoln and worked his way through college by doing jobs that included, working in the cafeteria, cleaning professors' homes and testing gasoline and fuel oil for the State of Missouri. The many jobs and extracurricular activities with which Smith was involved subsequently caused him to change his major to math. Determined to succeed by "whatever it took," Smith switched to math because the course schedule was less conflicting. He went on to obtain a Master's Degree in Secondary Education for Principals.



Obrie Smith

Interrupting his ambitions to be a math teacher was a stint in the Army. Smith began as a Second Lieutenant, was promoted to First Lieutenant and after duty in Germany, was sent to Fort Campbell, Kentucky as a Company Commander. Smith never went to Vietnam, but spent 53 weeks in Germany.

Of Germany, he comments how the very next day after his arrival he was able to find lodging with a German family. He related that both he and his wife were treated very well. However, upon returning to Kentucky he could not find a place for he and his wife to live. Due to the indifference of apartment owners around the Fort Campbell post, Smith was allowed to live in the non-commissioned officers' quarters in Fort Campbell.

Of this incident Smith reflects, "...I thought how ironic...the country where I was born...the country I'm serving right now, where people say pull yourself up by your own boot straps—and I couldn't find a decent place to live and in Germany I did."

After leaving the service Smith decided that he no longer wanted to teach. "New opportunities were arriving for Blacks," he stated, "and I resolved that I wanted to explore them."

With his departure from the service eminent, Smith began writing a number of companies regarding employment prospects. Of the companies contacted, General Motors responded most favorably. Subsequently, GM hired Smith, and after working six years in the St. Louis plant, sent him to Harvard Business School to attend its Executive Management Training Program.

Obrie Smith worked for GM until 1978. Always maintaining an eye for advancement, Smith decided to test the job market in July of that year. By October he had job offers which included Polaroid, Southland Corporation and Miller Brewing Company. Miller, however, offered the most concrete advancement opportunities, so Smith joined that company as Manager of Community Relations.

Smith continued to climb the corporate ladder at Miller and in his present capacity as Director of Corporate Communications he has taken on broad responsibilities that include management of all External Corporate Communications, Public Relations Brand Communications, corporate contributions, tour program, and Miller's Community Relations Program. One of the most significant facts regarding Obrie Smith's duties is that they expand beyond the Black area. In contrast to many companies where blacks are relegated to interact exclusively with minority groups, Smith's role embraces the full range of managerial responsibilities which include and are not limited to: staffing, staff development, budgeting and control, planning and coordination, departmental and company policy formulation, and the development, implementation and evaluation of Miller's public relations programs and activities. In addition to Smith's primary responsibilities, he continues to maintain a special interest in Miller's involvement in the black community.

In helping Blacks, Smith spearheads a number of Miller's programs designed to put something back into the communities in which the company operates. He has a special interest in education and is chairman of the Business/Industry Cluster Program at North Carolina A&T in Greensboro, North Carolina. In fact, one of the conditions that he requested before joining Miller was that the company permit him to foster his relationship with North Carolina A&T on Miller's behalf. With full corporate support, Smith developed the first scholarship program in the Philip Morris family for students at A&T, Grambling, Southern, Alcorn and Albany State.

To increase the number of Black engineers, Miller established an internship program in which a scholarship is offered to outstanding engineering students, after completing their sophomore year.

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