



Dr. Herbert Smitherman

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'The Jackie Robinson of P&G'

by Victoria McAfee

Herbert Smitherman was born March 23, 1937, to Rev. Otis C. Smitherman and his wife Alberta. An only child, Herbert grew up in Birmingham, Alabama, in the tight-knit African-American section of town known as West Princeton. Opposers of the civil rights and voter registration movements burned his father's church, but it was rebuilt.

Regardless of the obstacles, the Smithermans encouraged their son to get as much education as possible. Smitherman recalled a time his father took him to a construction site and showed him a worker with a jackhammer breaking up concrete. Rev. Smitherman said, "If you don't get an education, this is where you will end up." Dr. Smitherman jokingly said, "I've been reading books since that day."

Although the Rev. Smitherman's family was poor, Herbert went on to fulfill his parent's dreams. He attended Tuskegee Institute where he obtained both his B.S. and M.S. in chemistry and met his future wife, Barbara. He went on to teach at Texas Southern University and received an officer's commission in the army, where he served for two years at Fort Hood and Fort Benning. After his military service, he completed his doctoral degree at Howard University in 1966, with two of the couple's six children (including five sons) already born.

Dr. Smitherman applied for jobs at several chemical companies and was hired at Proctor and Gamble (P&G) as the first African American with a Ph.D. at the company. As a physical organic chemist, Dr. Smitherman worked at P&G for the next 29 years. He was a part of development teams that improved Crest toothpaste, Biz stain remover, Folgers coffee, Bounce fabric softener, Safeguard soap, Crush soda, and many other P&G products. Smitherman's new formulations and inventions led the company to increase its profits and fame.

Dr. Smitherman's son Christopher nicknamed him the "Jackie Robinson of P&G" because he used his position to open the door for so many other African Americans. He saw himself as a bridge builder, assisting other minorities to make progress in this field. While employed by P&G, he pioneered a recruiting program for minority undergraduate and graduate students pursuing degrees in science, chemistry, and chemical engineering. He assisted in the creation of the Black Technical Ph.D. Group and The National Organization for Black Chemist and Chemical Engineers (NOBCHE). The organizations allowed black scientists

and engineers to receive a paycheck for their work along with promotions, awards, and scholarships.

After retiring from P&G, he joined the staff of Wilberforce University, serving as Assistant Vice President of Academic Affairs and a professor of chemistry. After Wilberforce, Dr. Smitherman desired to influence young people in math and science. He started a high school, Western Hills Design Technology, and was the principal there for nine years. He also developed a weekend program for inner city middle schoolers. The scientists and mathematicians in the local area volunteered to tutor the students.

Despite his busy career, Dr. Smitherman took time to actively be involved with his children wherever they were involved—he served as a Boy Scout leader and a Little League baseball coach. He also was a member of a neighborhood association and Stepping Stones, and tutored at several schools. He completed OSHA re-requirement training to become a safety manager to assist his son Albert, who owns a construction company. Another son, Dr. Herbert Smitherman, Jr., now practices internal medicine in Detroit and is Vice Dean of Diversity and Community Affairs and Associate Professor of Internal Medicine and the Karmanos Cancer Institute at Wayne State University. Son Christopher is a Cincinnati, Ohio, city councilman actively involved in community affairs just as his father was.

Dr. Smitherman had learned early in life that Sunday was a special day of the week spent going to church and focusing on God. His parents did not allow him to go to movies, play sports, or even play board games on Sunday. Dr. Smitherman showed his family that you prepared for Sunday even on Saturday night, with shoes shined and special clothes laid out for the Lord's Day. When the family joined Bellermine Chapel in Cincinnati in 1968, Dr. Smitherman made sure his children were involved in the church youth groups and projects. When the church once asked if his children would be at a particular event, he said matter-of-factly, "They will be there." Not going was not an option in the Smitherman house.

Barbara Smitherman thanks God for the 51 years they were married. She says that her husband faced death with tremendous faith in his Lord, worrying more about her continuing welfare than about himself. When he passed away, his funeral service on October 9, 2010, at the church was packed not only with P&G employees and friends but with the people he met every day in the community. His wife says he made "long" shopping trips because he was a "people person"—he always stopped in the grocery store and every place else he went to talk with people and listen to their stories. You were never a stranger for very long to Dr. Herbert Smitherman.



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