



## Nurses' Station



Linda Smith, BSN, RN, MBA

# Divine Inspiration

Many minority nurses are concerned about making health care education more accessible to low-income students. But how many nurses actually start their own college? Linda Smith did—with a little help from above.

by Scott Williams

"I wanted to create an opportunity for entry-level education in nursing and allied health, and I wanted to create an avenue where individuals are able to continue their education."

Linda Smith, BSN, RN, MBA, remembers the exact date and time that she decided to start her own health care college. It was 1:05 a.m. on July 31, 1991, when Smith says God called her by name.

Smith, a native of San Bernardino, Calif., and founder, president and CEO of Four-D College in Colton, Calif., says she had recently gone through some difficult times and had asked God to help her use her skills as a nurse to make a major difference in someone's life. She sat down on that late July night and began to write.

"The mission statement that hangs in Four-D College is what I wrote that night," she explains. "I wanted to create an opportunity for entry-level education in nursing and allied health, and I wanted to create an avenue where individuals are able to continue their education."

Today, Four-D College graduates between 200 and 250 students a year from its licensed vocational nurse (LVN) program and several other allied health programs. The college is accredited by the Accrediting Bureau for Health Education Schools (ABHES) and the Department of Education. The vocational nursing program is accredited by the Board of Vocational Nurses and Psychiatric Technicians (BVNPT).

Cynics might dismiss Smith's story of divine inspiration. But even the most jaded unbeliever would have to admit that the things Smith has accomplished over the past 14 years are phenomenal and that the unexplained ways in which events have unfolded are, at the least, unusual—and at the most, possibly even miraculous.



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### A Stroke of Luck

After writing the college's mission statement that night, Smith next wrote the words "Four-D Success Academy," the name she first gave the school that has gone on to graduate more than 5,000 students and currently employs a staff of 60. The four D's stand for the *Desire* to achieve, the *Determination* to follow through, the *Drive* needed to maintain consistent efforts toward success, and the ability to *Deliver* by reaching one's goals.

Soon after, Smith, who has been a registered nurse for 29 years, quit her job and began developing a certified nurse assistant (CNA) program that she planned to teach. She had done a little teaching before starting Four-D College, but not on the scale she would soon reach. She planned to convert her garage into a classroom until a state official told her that California law required her to hold classes in a building separate from her home. So she contacted a real estate agent friend and said she wanted to rent space in Claremont, on Foothill Street, and at the outrageously low rate of 50 cents per square foot.

Claremont is considered an oasis in the area. It's a well-kept community and one that Smith lived in and wanted to be close to. But office space on Foothill Street was running \$1 to \$1.25 per square foot and her real estate friend doubted she would find what she wanted.

Two weeks later, the friend returned, astounded by the news he was about to deliver. He had found the 1,000 square feet of office space on Foothill Street at 50 cents a square foot, and the owner had even agreed to repaint the interior, install new carpet and put air conditioning units in each room. He also gave Smith four months free rent.

"The gentleman had never met me or talked to me," she says. She met him right before moving in and thanked him for the free rent. "He just looked at me and said, 'OK.' I don't think he had an explanation [for why he had agreed to do it]."

In September 1992, Four-D College enrolled its first class, which consisted of two students. The free rent came in handy, because Smith had no revenues for the first three months. Two weeks before her rent was due she received her first payment from the county for a student she was training. She taught her two students in the morning, developed programs in the afternoon and did community outreach and marketing to attract more students. Six months later she had outgrown her space.

She moved the school to a larger location and by 1995 decided she needed even more space. She ended up in Colton in a 5,000-square-foot building where the rent was more than \$5,000 a month. "I went there knowing I was going to have to work 10 times harder doing what I needed to do to make this work," she recalls.

### Counting Her Blessings

Fast forward to 2000. Because of the college's continued growth, it was again time to move to a larger facility. Smith says she prayed for a 30,000-square-foot building with freeway access, parking for students and nearby restaurants. She also wanted it to be large enough to accommodate a childcare center, because difficulties in finding affordable childcare options were causing many of Four-D's students to drop out.



In one instance, Smith herself paid a student's rent for six months. The student graduated as valedictorian, passed the boards and got a job.



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Smith not only found a building, she decided to make an offer to buy it. She had tried to borrow money from banks in the past and had been turned down. Then she remembered a brightly colored flyer she had recently received in the mail. It said: "If you need a million dollars, call this number."

She needed a million and more, so she called and left a message. A short time later, a loan officer from a bank called and they made an appointment to meet. Smith says she once again turned to prayer for help. "I walked into his office, he looked at my papers and in two minutes he said, 'Linda, I think we can do this,' and I almost fell off of my feet."

The building would cost \$1.6 million and Smith needed to come up with \$200,000 on her own. The college had only \$50,000 in its accounts and things were looking bleak. Then someone from the bank called to say the February 2000 closing would have to be delayed because of problems with the paperwork. "That was a big blessing for me because I did not have the money at that time," she says.

In April, she attended a religious conference and decided to step into the main hall to listen to a speaker who was addressing a group of 1,500 to 2,000 women. "When I walked into the room," Smith relates, "she stopped speaking and pointed to [me]. She said, 'You in the back of the room, in the white suit and the salt-and-pepper hair. God has a word for you. God told me to tell you that you have been a true and faithful servant and your blessings are coming.'" Smith says the woman told her that she would receive a blessing in 21 days.

Twenty-one days later, on April 24, 2000, Smith got a call from the bank telling her she had qualified for the loan. And by June of that year, Four-D College had moved to its present location at 1020 E. Washington Street in Colton.

This time, even Smith herself was a little nonplussed by this latest "miraculous" occurrence. "It's hard for me to explain how this happened," she says.

### Helping Students Succeed

Four-D College is the first and only African American-owned vocational college in California that is licensed to teach vocational nursing and other allied health programs. In addition to the LVN program, the fully accredited college helps prepare students for careers as medical assistants, dental assistants, pharmacy technicians, medical billing specialists and health claims examiners. Four-D also has CNA and home health aide pre-certification programs and offers 30 continuing education courses on subjects like cardiopulmonary disease, congestive heart failure, IV therapy and more.

Both Smith and her college have received many awards and honors through the years. To cite just a few examples, in 1997 Four-D College was named the Outstanding Business in San Bernardino County by the Private Industry Council, as well as Outstanding School of the Year by the City of San Bernardino. In 2001, Smith received an award from the San Bernardino Black Culture Foundation honoring her for her contributions to the African American community. And in 2004, she received the Wells Fargo/Turning Point Living History Maker Entrepreneur Award.

Helping people get off welfare was one of Smith's primary goals in starting Four-D College. The school now has an enrollment of around 330 at any given time. The student



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body is roughly 40% African American, 20% Hispanic and 20% Caucasian. The rest of the students are Samoans, Asians and people of other ethnicities. Between 80% and 90% of Four-D students qualify for financial aid.

Smith says her students face a host of problems that make graduation difficult. Some are on welfare. Others come from broken homes. Some live with an abusive mate, while others have difficulty meeting family obligations. And then there are those who have poor study habits, lack basic math and reading skills or aren't willing to apply themselves. According to Smith, most programs at Four-D College experience a dropout rate of 10% to 20%, while the dropout rate in the LVN program is around 30%.

Therefore, the college has developed a number of programs designed to help students overcome these barriers to success. Four-D offers such support services as an on-site childcare center that cares for 50 kids a day, financial aid, tutoring for students who need to improve their basic math skills and an "Encouragement Committee" to help struggling students.

When a student is referred to the committee, says Smith, "that student is told they're not coming in for disciplinary issues. They're coming in because we want to find out from them what is going on and how we can help them improve their attendance or their academics."

The Encouragement Committee often finds that students are having problems with issues such as finances, marital difficulties or transportation. The school helps by providing counseling, paying for car repairs, providing gas money or assisting with whatever else is needed. In one instance, Smith herself paid a student's rent for six months. The student graduated as valedictorian, passed the boards and got a job.

"We have to show our students that we really do care about them and that's the cost of doing business," Smith emphasizes.

She believes students should not only be taught what to do but why they're doing it. If you teach a student theory, she says, their work will have more meaning and they'll perform better. She also believes that the faculty's attitude is critical in helping students succeed.

"I know that what a faculty member says and does to a student can have a lifetime effect on them," she explains. "I strive very hard with my faculty to make sure that the message we send to the student is a positive message. You can have as negative and devastating an effect on an adult as you can on a child if you don't think they can do well."

It's important to send positive messages to students in nonverbal ways as well, Smith adds. She makes sure the Four-D campus is clean and well maintained, and the faculty dresses in a professional manner. Students are not allowed to use profanity and everyone is expected to show respect for one another.



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### Doing It All on Faith

Looking back over the years, Smith says she has endured many hardships to make Four-D College a success. She remembers one five-year "storm," as she puts it, when financial difficulties and other troubles almost defeated her. Owing hundreds of thousands of dollars can literally drive you crazy, she says. "Only my husband and children know the tears and screams I let out in this house because I didn't know how I could hold out anymore," Smith remembers.

But these experiences, like everything else in Linda Smith's life, have been part of a faith-building process. "My CPA recommended to me at least three different times that I should close the doors because I had no revenues," she says. "I looked at him and said, 'don't you ever tell me to close again, because you don't know the God that I know.'"

These days, Smith is focusing more on opening doors than closing them. She plans to establish a second branch of Four-D College this year, and a third within the next two years. She sees her efforts as simply a continuation of the desire she has had since age five when she first realized she wanted to become a nurse: "I just knew in my own spirit that I wanted to grow up and help people." ■

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**Scott Williams** is a free-lance writer based in Corpus Christi, Texas.

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