

JCJC student finds hope, new career through MIBEST

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JCJC welding graduate from the MIBEST program, Norman Smith shows JCJC MIBEST welding instructor, Tracy Warden a piece he has welded.

(Photo: Special to the American)
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He excelled in athletics and describes himself as being an “OK” student, but getting involved with the wrong crowd landed him in jail. Thirty-year old Norman Smith was the Laurel High School quarterback, wide receiver and the pitcher for the baseball team. When he became a discipline problem in 10th grade, he lost the privilege of playing sports and eventually quit school.

“Since I couldn’t play sports, I didn’t want to be at school. I wanted to do my own thing,” admits an older and wiser Smith.

He tried to get his GED through a Laurel program but he felt it moved too fast. The only other option for him was to get a job.

“I worked at Howards as a forklift driver for a couple of years before I got arrested hanging out with the wrong crowd,” Smith explained. “I was used to county jail but spending five-years in Parchman (state penitentiary) gave me a reality check. I never thought I’d end up in the state pen but being with the wrong crowd got me locked up.”

This time, when he was released in August 2016, Smith’s cousin, Ronald Simpson of Texas inspired him to try school again. With an eight-year old daughter, Zylayah to care for, Smith came to Jones County Junior College to get his High School Equivalency (GED). His test scores revealed he was eligible for the new pilot program, MIBEST or Mississippi Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training.

While working on his high school equivalency, Smith was also working on a new skill. After finishing his high school diploma within two months, he began the welding program

in October. The Laurel resident earned a certificate in welding before Christmas and is now enrolled in the career and technical welding program at JCJC. As he continues to discover a new future, Smith said he wants to share his story in hopes of influencing others who may be tempted to “do their own thing.”

“I can’t mess up this time. I’ve already lost a lot of time with my daughter. It caused me a lot of pain because I lost a lot of my friends’ and family’s trust,” said Smith. “I didn’t see myself getting this far. With my teachers helping and inspiring me, I know I can accomplish this because I have done it.”

JCJC welding instructor, Tracy Warden is one of Smith’s instructors who saw his potential and initiative to get ahead.

“Everyone has done things they’re not proud of or has messed up. Norman earned my respect early on. He has positively influenced everyone in the class and he helps them. If someone needs help, we can help but they have to set priorities and be willing to learn and work,” said Warden.

Warden gives credit to Smith for the award-winning Homecoming float design that included a metal tornado, which is the Laurel High School mascot.

“The goal of the MIBEST program is to be a reliable student and be willing to learn. You may not be the best welder, but you have to be willing to learn. Norman is like a calculator solving math problems. He’s also a good welder.”

Norman’s plans include working at a Laurel construction company while earning his degree in welding at JCJC. After graduating in May, Smith hopes to get a job welding on a pipeline.

“JCJC’s high school equivalency program and the MIBEST program opened up a door for me to get a better job. I have my education and a better financial future now,” said Smith.

The MIBEST program at JCJC is a free program combining adult education, workforce training and career and technical education, while also providing support services to increase family-sustaining wages among high school dropouts and non-traditional students in Mississippi. Some of the MIBEST career training programs include welding, health care assistant, commercial truck driving, commercial and residential maintenance, business office systems and health care data technology. For more information about the MIBEST program contact MIBEST director, Wendy Evans at 601-477-2228, or Jennifer Hughes at 601-477-3287.