

ALREADY THE PATRONESS OF  
OU FILM STUDIES,  
JEANNE HOFFMAN SMITH  
CASTS A WIDE NET  
TO FOSTER THE  
CREATIVE PROCESS  
WHEREVER  
IT CAN BE FOUND.



BY LYNETTE LOBBAN

When Jeanne Hoffman Smith was seven years old, her grandfather paid her five cents a verse to memorize Thomas Gray's woeful 18<sup>th</sup>-century epic, *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*. Somewhere between the "The curfew tolls the knell of parting day" and "Grav'd on the stone beneath yon aged thorn," Smith not only learned the value of a nickel, but also a considerable measure of "stick-to-it-ive-ness," both of which have served her and a great many others for decades.

A social worker and philanthropist, Smith grew up in a cultured home in Oklahoma City, the only child of Grace Thatcher and Roy Hoffman Jr. Her mother was an accomplished pianist, who often accompanied Jenny Harris Oliver, the poet laureate of Oklahoma from 1940-43, during her performances across the state. Her father was a Chandler banker turned Oklahoma City oilman after coming home from World War II, where he had served as an intelligence officer. Hoffman, who was more generous than wealthy, instilled in his daughter the philosophy to "Leave more wood on the wood pile than was there when you came." The Oklahoma native has contributed ricks of time, energy and financial support to benefit the University of Oklahoma and Oklahomans at large ever since.

Smith was in her 40s, recently divorced and with two older sons away at school, when she decided to complete the education she had begun at Smith College and Oklahoma City University. With a few possessions and her nine-year-old daughter in tow, she moved to Kentucky to begin work on her master's degree in clinical social work. Upon graduation from the University of Louisville, she returned to Oklahoma to work at Central Mental Health in Norman before establishing her current practice in Oklahoma City in 1977.

# Creativity's Poster Child

Despite an inheritance that would have prompted many to close shop and buy a home in the Hamptons, Smith chose instead to keep her day job and share her good fortune with others. Like her mentor, the late pioneering Oklahoma newswoman Edith Kinney Gaylord, who established the Inasmuch Foundation, Smith believes one has an obligation to use personal resources compassionately.

"Edith had so much to say on that subject," says Smith. "I learned to appreciate the value of thinking carefully about what is important to me and how I was going to use what I had to the best of my ability. What better place to do that than a university?"

One result of Smith's careful and creative thinking has been the evolution of film programs at OU, OCU and the Oklahoma City Museum of Art. A glance at her community affiliations yields as many film committees as professional mental health boards. She says she became aware of the transcendent power of film through a personal experience.

"My father served in World War II, and I always had a prejudice against the Japanese," says Smith. "When I was a teenager, I saw a Japanese film, and it completely changed my perception. I couldn't help thinking, 'These people are just like us.'"

As a psychologist she has found films a useful tool in her private practice. "A film will get people to open up, to talk in a way they might not otherwise feel comfortable," she says. "You can tell a lot about a person by how they relate to a character in a film."

In 1997, Smith established the Jeanne H. Smith Professorship of Film and Video Studies at OU. Arts and Sciences Dean Paul Bell says the endowment gave the college the means to conduct a national search and find someone to take the program to the next level. That person was Andrew Horton, who is now director of the program.

"This professorship is a classic example of how a single gift can electrify a program," says Bell. "Andy came in and provided outstanding leadership as well as bringing OU national and international recognition. Through his connections in the industry, he has brought in writers, producers and directors from all over the world, along with the Society for Cinema Media Studies."

Horton, who came to OU via Loyola University in New Orleans, remembers getting to know Smith on his annual pilgrimage to Greece. Each year he chooses a different film genre and takes students to the islands of Kea and Crete for international study.

"In the fall of 1997, Jeanne went with us," recalls Horton. "The theme that year was comedy, and I was so nervous because here was the person for whom the position is named, and she's coming along, and what if it's not funny?" Horton says his fears were soon put to rest.

"Not only is Jeanne bright and proactive and a visionary in so many ways, she knows how to have fun," says Horton, his eyes smiling. "After a wedding within our group, we all spent the night in a monastery on the Island of Kea. There was a priest there who was famous for playing bagpipes, and Jeanne joined the rest of us, dancing the night away to bagpipes on a Greek island. We had a wonderful time."

Now Smith helps other students who wish to study in Greece. "Jeanne offers a number of \$500 scholarships, which means students must fund part of the trip themselves," says Horton. "She understands the value of not giving them a free lunch but to offer instead a free dessert, and let them figure out the rest."

Another offer Smith extends is the Heidi Karriker Scholarship, which helps students defray the cost of attending workshops nationwide. Smith is also

instrumental in bringing speakers to campus, from the Global Screenwriters Conference to Women in Film.

Dean Bell says Smith's ongoing relationship with the film and video studies program made arts and sciences the natural choice when she wanted to discuss an idea for her next major project. "Jeanne was fascinated by the creative process," says Bell. "She wanted to find a way to recognize creativity *in progress*, rather than to reward the finished product. She talked to President Boren about creating a prize, and we all thought the College of Arts and Sciences was best place to house it."

The result was the Thatcher Hoffman Smith Creativity in Motion Prize. The prize does not fund the project but rather rewards the creative process behind it. Since its inception in 2003, interest in the biennial prize has skyrocketed. During the first call for submissions, the college received 163 proposals, the second time more than 400.

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Two of Smith's biggest fans are Andy Horton, director of Film and Video Studies (left) and R.C. Davis-Undiano, executive director of *World Literature Today*. The three frequently collaborate on projects for the OU community.

"I had to bring them in crates," recalls Vivian Glore, who worked as the dean's administrative assistant and is now director of administrative affairs and alumni relations for the OU College of Public Health. "The prize has captured people's imaginations in all walks of life. Although Jeanne loves poetry and film, she understands that people express creativity in different ways, and the range of proposals reflects that."

The first year was a learning experience for Smith and company. "We were to give the prize in April and had our first committee meeting in January," she recalls. "I thought it would be a good idea to have a speaker instead of just handing out the prize and immediately thought of Judith Viorst, who is both a poet and psychoanalyst."

On a whim, Smith called Washington, D.C., information and asked for a listing for Milton Viorst, Judith's husband, who is a well-known political writer. To her surprise, the operator gave her the number, and Smith called Viorst on the spot. When a woman answered, Smith launched into her project, explaining about the creativity prize, her admiration of Viorst and the need for a speaker at the award ceremony.

"That all sounds lovely," said Viorst, when she could finally get a word in. "But really the only reason I answered the phone is because I thought you were [National Public Radio talk show host] Diane Rehm. I'm scheduled to be on her show this morning. Can you call me later?"



An avid traveler, Smith referees a game of miniature golf at Disneyland between her grandsons, Andrew (left) and Elliott Eaton, on a trip to Anaheim, California.

Which is just what Smith did, and in April 2003 Viorst came to Norman as guest speaker for the first Creativity in Motion Prize award ceremony. The \$40,000 prize went to Elizabeth Ingraham, an associate professor of art and art history at the University of Nebraska. Her project featured a series of life-size, fully dimensional female "skins"—complete with hands, head and feet—that embody such mental states as longing, desire, guilt and regret. Designed to be touched by the viewer, the skins are made of materials as diverse as velvet, neoprene rubber and cotton chintz. Ingraham said the skins explore how expectation, desire and convention form "casing," which become so familiar they seem like one's own skin.

"The great thing about creativity is that once you set it in motion, it ripples," says Smith. "Like tossing a pebble into still water. After Elizabeth won the prize, someone in Durango contacted her who wanted to write a play about her project." In 2005, the prize went to Steven Levi, a writer, historian, teacher and software designer from Anchorage, Alaska. Nearly a year after receiving the award, Levi is still ebullient about the concept and its creator.

"Jeanne Hoffman Smith changed my life," effuses Levi. "I am just one guy with a laptop in Alaska. I couldn't even get my friends to critique my Web site, and suddenly here was this group of people who had not only gone to the site, but had given it a hearty vote of approval."

Levi won the prize for his interactive software program, "Thinking Outside of the Box," designed to teach students how to solve problems creatively through the use of historical references. In coming months, he will attend three educational conferences across the United States. One of the conferences, a U.S. Military Command and Control Research Program, will feature the theme of "out of the box thinking," where Levi will be presenting and discussing one of his papers. He said none of this would have been possible before winning the Creativity in Motion Prize.

Recognizing the extraordinary in the ordinary is a central goal





Smith (left) introduces sculptor Elizabeth Ingraham as the winner of the inaugural Creativity in Motion Prize in 2003 for her three-dimensional art portraying human emotions.

of the prize, says its creator. "This was just the kind of thing I wanted to encourage," she says, "to give a prize to people who don't normally win prizes."

Smith reads every one of the proposals herself and sends handwritten notes to the applicants who do not make the final cut, even though arthritis can make writing a painful ordeal for her. One year she rented a room at a Norman bed and breakfast and did not return to her Oklahoma City home until she had finished the task four days later.

Smith's love of poetry and literature also has resulted in a warm relationship with *World Literature Today*, OU's internationally renowned publication, which features interviews, poetry and fiction from around the globe. Robert Con Davis-Undiano, executive director and Neustadt Professor, says Smith has served



Ingraham displays one of her sculptures of female "skins," which embody mental states such as longing, desire, guilt and regret.

on the Board of Visitors at *WLT* and has "contributed immensely" to the new reader-friendly format the magazine has adopted.

When the need for new office space and a conference room became apparent, Smith provided funds for renovation and refurbishing. Davis-Undiano says the conference room is used "all of the time" for student events at *WLT* and has been made available to many other OU organizations as well.

In addition to her many intellectual and academic pursuits, Smith volunteers with the poor and homeless each week through a church outreach program in Oklahoma City. She helps those in need locate resources to pay a bill or find a hot meal.

"That's the real world, and I don't live in it," says Smith. "I want to keep in touch with all of humanity, not just the middle class. I want them to acknowledge that they have value as human beings."

Never content with a good idea when it can be better, Smith is now working to set up a "creativity bank," a companion to the CIM prize, where finalists from the top eight or 10 proposals can list their projects online through the arts and sciences Web site. The site would serve as a matchmaker between people with ideas and people willing to invest.

"Jeanne is all energy and light," says Bell. "She is the model of 'creativity in motion.' She is the poster child."