

In St. Mary's, Coach's Family Celebrates

By Jessie Mangaliman

Washington Post Staff Writer

Wednesday, April 1, 1998; Page A1

In the modest one-story cinder block home in Scotland near St. Mary's County's southernmost point, Tubby Smith's large family — he has 16 brothers and sisters, 10 of whom still live in Southern Maryland, and 38 nieces, nephews, grandnieces and grandnephews — gathered yesterday at the family home to celebrate a victory by one of their own.

It was family style: in the kitchen over a cup of coffee or in the den in front of a television tuned to a sports channel.

But in some ways, this victory encompasses a larger family. That's because Tubby Smith, the winning coach of the NCAA champion University of Kentucky Wildcats, was the first African American coach of a school that once barred blacks from playing on its basketball team. On Monday, he brought honor to that school and the country, when his team, which included his son, Saul, clinched the national basketball title, defeating Utah 78-69.

"I think he's proved them all wrong," said his jubilant sister Ramona Smith, who lives in Scotland, the tiny farming community of several hundred people six miles from the Chesapeake Bay. "He's made a believer out of everybody. His coaching record speaks for itself; he just happens to be black."

"Yes, my God, we are proud of Tubby Smith," declared Frank Dove, manager of The Mixx Lounge and Grill in Dameron, a nearby community, where more than 100 of Smith's friends gathered Monday night to watch the game and toast him in his victory. A sign outside the lounge on Route 235 proclaimed: "Congratulations, Tubby Smith."

"You can't help but smile to think that Tubby, who is liked by everyone here, came from being a farm boy to what he is now. We are proud," said Dove, who opened the lounge, usually closed on Mondays, to a gathering of 100 of Tubby Smith's friends and family to watch the championship game.

"You want to talk about the coach of the year? He's my coach of the year ... for life," said William Smith, one of Tubby Smith's younger brothers who joined the crowd at The Mixx.



Guffrie and Parthenia Smith, holding a picture of Tubby Smith, still live in the five-bedroom home in Scotland, Md., where the Kentucky coach grew up.

(Mark Gail/The Washington Post)

"He's the greatest!" said Guffrie Smith Sr., Smith's father, who worked three jobs while helping to raise his family: He drove a school bus, fired boilers at Patuxent River Naval Air Station and barbered.

Guffrie, 79, and Parthenia, 72, still live in the five-bedroom home where Tubby grew up. Guffrie, with the help of his uncle, a sharecropper, built that house in 1963 so that the family could move out of a farmhouse that lacked indoor plumbing.

He might be known as Tubby — the young boy who liked sitting in his grandmother's wash bin so much that he didn't want to leave — but his southern name is Orlando.

"He was an obedient child," Parthenia Smith said. "Weekdays he went to school, and on Sundays he went to church. He was not allowed to play ball on Sundays."

But he was also a hard-working child, said Dove, who has known Tubby since he was an infant. Even at a young age, he helped his father plant fruits and vegetables in the family's five acres of land.

"The whole family is like that—a church-going, hard-working good family. That's the bottom line," Dove said. Yesterday afternoon at the Smith home, there was only one subject of conversation: Tubby.

"Every time Tubby came on, somebody hollered, 'Tubby's on!' " said Ramona Smith, a guidance counselor at Great Mills High School. "We're still flying high, and we haven't quite calmed down yet."

Neither Guffrie nor Parthenia finished high school, but from the beginning, education was one of the family's most important values, the parents said. It paid off, Guffrie Smith Sr. said yesterday, for most of his 17 children have college degrees, including Tubby.

"He called last night after the game, and he said, 'Hey, Mama, did you see me on TV?' I told him, 'The whole family is like that — a church-going, hard-working good family. That's the bottom line.'"

"Yeah, and I thanked the Lord [for the win] because I was so nervous," said Parthenia Smith, who conceded that she could not stop smiling in disbelief.

At Great Mills school, Tubby Smith scored 1,000 points in three seasons before graduating, helping unite a racially divided school in 1967 with his athleticism, according to his brother Odell, who was in Texas to watch the game Monday night.

Tubby Smith played for four years at High Point University in North Carolina. Then he coached in high school, including at Great Mills. One of his college coaches, J.D. Barnett, later hired him as an assistant at Virginia Commonwealth University. Barnett went on to the University of Tulsa, was fired as head coach and replaced by Smith in 1991.

Under Smith's coaching, Tulsa went to the middle rounds of the NCAA tournament. He went to Georgia in 1995, leading his teams to two NCAA tournaments.

Last year when Smith became the first African American coach of the men's team at the University of Kentucky, a paper there published an open letter from a black staff member warning him that the school was not ready for a black coach. "I fear for your safety," she wrote.

"There are good and bad people everywhere you go," Parthenia Smith said. "I told him that I didn't like what she said. But that made me nervous more than anything else."

"He's a good man," Smith's father said. "The boys believe in him."

Guffrie Smith, who has had quintuple bypass surgery, said he had no doubt his son would come through a champion, but the thrill of Monday night's game was too much for his heart.

At halftime, when the Wildcats were behind 10 points, Guffrie Smith stood up, paced around the living room and then shut himself in the bedroom. He came out only after the Wildcats had won.

After the game Monday night, Tubby Smith said: "It's obviously something that is special. It's probably the most noteworthy thing that has happened in our family as far as family achievements."

Smith said he plans to visit his family in St. Mary's County in the next several days.

On national television, he thanked his relatives in St. Mary's because he knew they were watching. The family gathered at The Mixx hooted and hollered, toasting champagne.

Staff writers Angie Watts and Josh Barr contributed to this report.