

Unplanned stop led to divine calling

Palmer alumna Smith to speak at graduation

By Jennifer Phillips
Tribune Staff Writer

Attending seminary was one of the most unplanned things Dr. Robin L. Smith said she's ever done.

While driving down City Avenue one summer day donned in shorts, a T-shirt and ponytail, she decided to make a spur of the moment U-turn toward Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary, now Palmer Theological Seminary, to pick up a catalog.

She was surprised when greeted by the school's admissions director who encouraged her to fill out an application and prayed with her on the spot.

Today Smith is a highly sought after motivational speaker and relationship expert. Affectionately known as "Dr. Robin," she's been a frequent contributor on the "The Oprah Winfrey Show," provided counseling to individuals as well as corporations and authored best-selling the books "Lies at the Altar — The Truth About Great Marriages" and "Inspirational



Robin L. Smith

Vitamins, A Guide to Personal Empowerment."

Smith, who is a 1986 graduate of seminary, will speak at its 82nd annual commencement May 19 at Enon Tabernacle Baptist East. She said she's still humbled by "God's guidance" in what may have initially appeared to be just a random stop in her travels that day.

"It's a great reminder to me that God is working even when we don't know it," Smith said.

A native of Philadelphia, Smith's father also studied at

Eastern Baptist prior to entering medical school and becoming a physician.

Smith, 44, said she always had an interest in the "helping professions," considering fields such as pediatric medicine and psychiatry before settling on psychology.

While attending LaSalle University she was a psychology pre-med major, but also took a number of electives in religion and philosophy.

After college she taught gymnastics for a year and describes her decision to attend seminary as "one of the most, if not the most," divine interventions that has occurred in her life.

While at Eastern Baptist she took courses in New Testament, Systematic Theology and Church History, studied the work of theologians such as Saint Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, as well as Biblical prophets such as Jeremiah and Ezekiel and civil rights leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr.

Smith said people are sometimes surprised that she remains true to character — whether

appearing on "The Oprah Winfrey Show," at a Fortune 500 corporation or preaching from the pulpit.

"What I am more than I am anything is a minister," said Smith.

She added that she's as honored each time she steps in to a pulpit as she is making a television or radio appearance:

"I'm humbled by both opportunities equally."

Although the venues where she counsels and motivates may be different — from Fortune 500 boardrooms to Philadelphia's Youth Study Center and churches — people often face the same issues, Smith said.

She refers to an Ethiopian Proverb: "He who conceals his disease cannot be cured," mentioning how people often cover up "wounds" without understanding why. A common "wound" she's seen across the board is low self-esteem.

"It's the fear that I'm not enough. I've got to do something to keep up with the Joneses. We look for some external solution to a spiritual problem," Smith said.

Prior to attending LaSalle,

Smith graduated from Penn Center Academy. She also attended the Germantown Friends School for a number of years.

After receiving a master's degree from Eastern Baptist, Smith earned a Ph.D. in counseling psychology from Temple University. She's been affiliated with psychological services at Swarthmore College, is a former member of the Board of Directors of Albert Einstein Medical Center, Belmont Hospital and Eagleville Hospital, a drug and alcohol rehabilitation facility. She's also served as an adjunct professor at Palmer.

Over the years Smith has been affiliated with Presbyterian, Church of God, Pentecostal and other congregations and currently attends a Baptist church in the city's Germantown section.

In her spare time she enjoys running, swimming and spending time with her Portuguese water dog, Kalle.

She said it's critical to stay balanced and make time for herself and loved ones in spite of a busy schedule often filled with travel.

"You can't cultivate your spiritual life running on an empty tank," Smith said.