



## **Growing Up with Racism: A Conversation with Andre Smith, Father of a Murdered Son**

*By CDPL Staff*

*I lived on an Army post until I was in fourth grade. It was completely integrated. My best friend was white. That was the only world I knew. And then, in fourth grade, my mother moved us to Washington Terrace in Raleigh. It was my first time seeing segregated schools, segregated water fountains... There was a chain link fence that divided the black community from the white community. I remember looking at that fence and just grappling, just struggling to understand. I didn't know where I fit.*

Andre Smith has spent much of his life searching for a home in a world infected by racism. His first response was anger. In high school, he and some other kids started calling themselves the "Black Panthers." They would walk into the cafeteria at their newly integrated school and sit down at tables filled with white students. He had verbal arguments and fist fights and, after teachers branded him a troublemaker, dropped out of school.

As he grew older, he went in the opposite direction, searching for utopian communities free of racism.

*In the 1970s, I was in my 20s, a hippie with a white girlfriend. We hitchhiked from Raleigh to Hamlet to visit my grandfather. He lived out in the country on a farm. When we got there, my grandfather was so scared. He said, 'Boy, get in here.' He said, 'You see all these pine trees? They hang people from these trees'... Why I didn't get strung up, I don't know. Any of that could've happened to me, because I was very vocal and I didn't speak in whispers.*

Later, after he was married and had two children, Andre became a Buddhist. In 2006, he began volunteering at Nash Correctional Institution, teaching incarcerated men meditation and helping them manage the anger that once threatened to poison his own life. At the time, Andre had a son, Daniel, who was defiant and outspoken, just as Andre had been at his age. One night in December 2007, Daniel got into a confrontation with a man who was angry that Daniel had accidentally spilled beer on him in a Raleigh club. Daniel refused to apologize, and the man stabbed him to death. Daniel was 21.

Prosecutors often say that the death penalty is needed to bring "closure" to the families of murder victims, or to show that their lives matter. But in the years since his son's death, Andre has come to see prisons and the death penalty as just another way that

America throws away Black men. He became a vocal opponent of the death penalty, and he remained a weekly volunteer in the prison until Covid-19 put his work on hold.

*We're so quick to judge them and say they can't change, and so they're stuck in this place with this one label and, even if they do begin to change, no one can see them. But I know people can change. I've seen change in myself, and I've seen it in these guys I work with in prison.*

*I want to take this guy who did this to my son and give him an opportunity to do something with his life. I want that for him. Let him live and allow people to come and help him become a better human being. I bet this guy can do something good. I bet he already has done something good.*

*My father was an alcoholic and an abuser, but he was also a good dad at times. I tell these guys, 'There was a time when you were good to someone. That means there's goodness in you. That's a seed; let's work with that.' This is how we change the world. Not by taking someone's life. When we do that, we stay stuck. Nothing changes.*

*Andre Smith is an activist and a teacher of meditation and anger management. Through the [Kadampa Center](#) in Raleigh, NC, he has worked with incarcerated people for more than a decade, and through Murder Victims' Families for Reconciliation, he advocated for enactment of the NC Racial Justice Act.*