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Commission for Blacks

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Mandatory Drug Sentences Spark University and Community Action

KNOXVILLE -- The Black Faculty & Staff Association (BFSA) at The University of Tennessee, Knoxville, is hosting an audience for the Kemba Smith Youth Foundation. The Foundation, along with the NAACP Youth and College Division, and Families Against Mandatory Minimums (FAMM), are co-sponsoring a first-of-its-kind speaking tour to educate students and parents about the dangers of mandatory drug sentencing laws that threaten America's youth.

"We realize that what happens to our children in Virginia can happen to our children in Knoxville," said Attica Scott, BFSA chair. "We cannot walk around with blinders on waiting for injustice to hit home."

Harsh mandatory prison sentences and their use in the war on drugs have been ineffective in reducing drug use or related crime, but very effective in locking up large numbers of young people, especially African-Americans. According to the U.S. Sentencing Commission, young people between the ages of 18-25 comprised 25.3 % of federal drug trafficking and 36.2 % of federal drug possession convictions in 1995-96. The Sentencing Project found that one out of every three African-American males between the ages of 20-29 in the entire country, including suburban and rural areas, was under some form of criminal justice supervision in 1994.

These startling statistics underscore the need to warn students and parents about the risks they face for even tangential involvement with people who use or sell drugs. The parents of a former college student who is now behind bars will deliver that warning during a campus and community sponsored event entitled, "Youth at Risk: Mandatory Drug Sentences and the Next Prison Population." Kemba Smith, the daughter of Gus and Odessa Smith, is spending 24.5 years in prison for her peripheral involvement in nonviolent drug offenses.

"Our families are being destroyed by the ravishing effects of drugs in our communities," said Scott.

"Members of the BFSA decided it was time to step up and speak up about mandatory drug sentencing laws and how it is politically beneficial to take away the best years of a child's life."

The "Youth at Risk" program is Sunday, February 8 at 2:00 p.m. at Mt. Olive Baptist Church.

The BFSA was founded in 1973 to provide a forum for discussing issues of concern to African-Americans at UTK. The BFSA promotes a broad understanding of local and national issues in higher education that directly impact faculty, staff, and students of color at UTK. The BFSA also seeks to find linkages as to how those issues affect the Knoxville community. The BFSA strives to ensure a positive and productive environment for all people.