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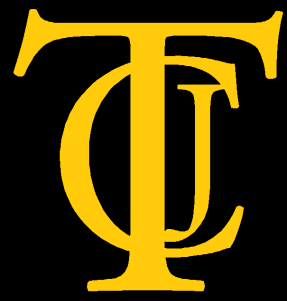
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Tyler, Texas



## Heroes & Friends

By *Chené Smith*

It's hard to believe that I am flying out to Cedars Sinai Medical Center, Hollywood, Los Angeles to start my surgery residency in June! It's just one in a series of amazing journeys that will take a South African transplant one step further.

I come from a small country the size of Texas, the state I have been proud to call home since our family relocated here. There have been so many facets that have helped me to grow. South Africa, the U.S., Texas, Texas A & M Health Science Center, UT Tyler, All Saints, a few anonymous and precious Aggie Alumni and benefactors, and of course TJC, a community college that provided me with an education so good, that it became the platform for the rest of my career. It nurtured me and gave me the self-confidence to know that I could achieve anything.

Coming to America from Pretoria, South Africa as a 13-year-old girl was a shock in many ways. We left behind a comfortable life and almost all our money. My mom (step) and I, laugh now about her picking me up in that beat up '92 Cavalier that always announced its arrival loudly. To make the radio work, I had to bend down and hold some wires together! Being the outsider at a prestigious school was lonely and difficult, but special teachers helped ground and shape a frightened student. In retrospect, being amongst families who had already made it and were well established opened my eyes to the possibilities. I had wonderful teachers at All Saints who helped me through difficult times.

Graduating from All Saints as the 2001 valedictorian, popular opinion held sway that I would not attend a community college. I'd been offered prestigious scholarships but couldn't take advantage of them. Our family was still in the process of obtaining our green cards and that disqualified me. Also, most people don't know that when you relocate from South Africa, the policies and exchange rate cause a family's finances to shrink to almost nothing. While I managed to earn enough to pay for my undergraduate degree I wound up having to take out loans I will have to repay to make it work. But...the big thing was... we did make it work and TJC offered a student whose dreams were in jeopardy a Presidential Scholarship and, with it, a first and substantial step toward fulfilling those dreams.

A strong desire and determination to obtain a

medical degree and specialize in reconstructive surgery began the day after my fourth birthday when my mother died from breast cancer. Extensive surgery had taken its effect on her body and I remember her being sad about being called disfigured. Her legacy was a daughter who sewed, cut and stitched anything she could find from an early age. I knew that I wanted to give others the chance she never had. My desire to follow a medical career bloomed into a passion for general and reconstructive surgery. Next month, I will begin my residency in general surgery at one of the nation's top hospitals.



What I thought might stunt my growth in terms of my visions for medical school turned out to be exactly the opposite. TJC took me under its wing, nurtured my enthusiasm for learning and provided me with incredible teachers and friends. I came to TJC because of the cost and stayed because of the quality.

Many people overlook the fact that TJC has produced more All-USA Academic team winners than any other two-year college in the country and I'm proud to say that I was one. Professors like Dr. Idalia Trent did all they could to help me. TJC was challenging but it gave me wings, confidence and encouragement. With my strong start, I moved on to UT Tyler and became the first person in 30 years to graduate with a 4.0 GPA in biology. I got to stay close to home, feel connected, stay focused and flourish.

By the time Texas A&M offered me a spot at their medical school, I could breathe again. Texas, I discovered, has a big heart that I have learned to love and respect. Tyler is a 'can do' city with great people, great schools and two great public colleges. Thanks again TJC and UT Tyler. My hope is that East Texans will recognize the gem they have in their own back yard and fund many more students, letting people see that we have 'the little city and the community college that can...and does!'

*TJC Hero and Friend Chené Smith was an honors graduate of TJC who majored in chemistry and biology before transferring to UT Tyler, where she was also an honors graduate. Juggling work and school, Chené worked three jobs to help pay her way through college. She has been accepted for a residency in general surgery at world famous Cedars Sinai Medical Center. Chené hopes to use her gifts to give back to this country and to honor her birth country by helping people in third world countries who cannot otherwise afford the surgery necessary to allow them to live normal lives. In Chené's words, "This will honor both my birth country and my adopted country. And finally, by being able to perform both the healing and reconstructive surgery, I will be honoring my mother."*