

Webster Five Celebrates Women's History Month Profiling Women's Accomplishments in our Community



Michelle Smith, Executive Director, AIDS Project Worcester

Michelle Smith has dedicated nearly 30 years of her life to AIDS Project Worcester, a vital organization addressing the needs of those infected with the HIV/AIDS, Hepatitis C, and other sexually transmitted infections, as well as focusing on education, prevention, and advocacy across Central Massachusetts. Michelle started as a caregiver, experience she values and wields in her leadership and advocacy roles. This Women's History Month, Webster Five celebrates Michelle for her devotion and for using her strong voice on behalf of those who are ill.

What inspired you to become executive director of AIDS Project Worcester?

I started my career as a direct care provider. I was fortunate to join an agency that saw my leadership potential and cultivated it by developing positions to build my skills. Entering the management tier after establishing a strong foundation as a case manager was vital in supervising staff. The correlation of having direct care has greatly influenced my experience with contract management, policymaking, and advocacy. I was inspired to continue on the leadership path which guided me to my current role.

What is the biggest challenge you've had to overcome?

Assuming the role of executive director after the sudden death of Joe McKee (APW's former executive director). In addition to his death being a significant loss for me, stepping into the role of ED had its own set of challenges. While mourning, I focused on caring for an agency in mourning. As I settled into the ED role, I quickly learned that as a woman leader, particularly a woman leader of color, I have had to roar twice as loud as my male counterparts in order to be heard. It is still difficult at times to navigate in the human services sector where the majority of leaders are white males, but that serves to strengthen my voice and conviction.

What is your mantra?

My mantras of late have been: "Remember to breathe," and "Always water your own garden." I also always live by the golden rule, "Treat others how you want to be treated."

To learn more about Aids Project Worcester, visit: <https://www.aidsprojectworcester.org>