



A Celebration of Life for

Karen Denise Smith-Butler

July 2, 1971 ~ September 15, 2025



Monday, October 6, 2025

Family Hour: 10:00 a.m. | Service: 11:00 a.m.

From the Heart Church Ministries®
4949 Allentown Road | Suitland, MD 20746



Obituary

The beloved first child of the late Edward Smith, Sr. and Barbara Smith, Karen “Dede” Denise Smith-Butler was born July 2, 1971, in Washington, D.C.

Along with her sister Kia and brother Edward “Eddie,” Karen was raised in Southeast, D.C., and attended Anne Beers Elementary School, Jefferson Junior High School, and Howard D. Woodson Senior High School.

As a proud Warrior of Howard D. Woodson, Karen was a light beam of joy. She demonstrated leadership at a young age, mastering the gifts of business operations and networking. Karen found her voice as an orator and esteemed writer under the tutelage of exceptional teaching greats in humanities whom she honored: Mr. Kenneth Friedman, Mrs. Pamela Poles, the late Mr. Rufus Horton, the late Ms. Janet Young, and the late Ms. Charmaine Turner. Even at a young age, Karen fostered deep connections with people and leveraged her joy of language and expression to develop compelling debate skills and strong persuasive muscles. By her senior year at Woodson, because of her presence and compassionate expressions, she was affectionately referred to as ‘Oprah Winfrey’ by teachers and friends. When the teacher wanted an exquisite reader, Karen was called. When the teacher desired the room to be quiet, Karen volunteered to take control. While at Woodson, many silently admired Karen, a.k.a “Oprah,” as she rose to the leadership ranks in various organizations in Student Government and the Foreign Exchange.

After graduating with honors from the Humanities Academy at Woodson, Karen attended Hampton University in Hampton, Virginia, and graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in English in 1992. Thereafter, she began her lifelong career as an educator and advocate for children in underserved communities. She joined Teach for America that summer and moved to Houston, Texas, where she taught at Jack Yates High School. Jack Yates was the first of many school communities fortunate to benefit from Karen’s deep commitment to children and their right to live successful and productive lives. Karen spent the next eight years as an elementary school teacher. She served two years teaching fifth grade Language Arts at From the Heart Christian School, formerly Full Gospel Christian School, in Camp Springs, Maryland. In 1986, Karen joined From the Heart Church Ministries (FTH) and was actively involved in the life of the church through the Y.A.P.P. (Youth Against Peer Pressure) Ministry, for youth ages 12-21, the Helps and Prison Ministries, and the FTH Adult Choir. During this time, Karen earned her first master’s degree in secondary education from George Washington University.

In 2000, Karen’s reach and impact were amplified in her roles as a coach and teacher trainer with Teach For America - DC, as she supported more than one hundred teachers in achieving early success in their classrooms. Then, with a vision and a desire to focus her efforts in one school, from 2005-2008, Karen became a transformative leader of Ballou Senior High School, in Ward 8 in Washington, D.C. A school desperately in need of love and discipline, Karen’s “no nonsense” leadership style empowered students and staff for success. As principal, Karen fiercely led a long-awaited turnaround—academically and culturally, resulting in significant cultural improvements in the school community and shrinking the achievement gaps. Under her leadership, Karen organized a resourceful community

business partnership in Ward 8, called 'Friends of Ballou.' Because of this partnership, \$1200-\$7000 in scholarships was given to graduating seniors and underclassmen with academic achievement. During this time, she earned her second master's degree in educational administration from Trinity University.

Karen's career led to many more opportunities to impact the lives of countless children and scores of colleagues with whom she developed strong and endearing relationships. More than a co-worker, Karen built community and closeness everywhere she went. Karen served as senior managing director at a national nonprofit, where she led and managed a cluster of regions, improving teacher support and student outcomes. She also served as a chief academic officer at a network of schools in the Northeast region and on the national team of CT3. For the last five years, Karen led her own consultancy, "Challenged to Change," which she founded to support senior-level leaders in making the individual and organizational changes needed for them to achieve personal and professional success.

The power of Karen's life was best manifested by (and through) her love and adoration of the Lord, Jesus Christ. To say that she was simply a disciple of the Lord Jesus understates her profound witness and conviction in the Lord. Karen was unrelenting in her focus on salvation and her Christian walk. She came to Christ at a young age and was deeply committed to living the Word of God, not just knowing it. Countless souls have been brought to Christ because of her profound and grace-centered witness. Most were led to the Lord, not just because of what Karen might say, but because of how she lived.

In September of 2019 at her dear friend Nikki's wedding, Karen was introduced to Nikki's husband's close friend, Fred Butler. Their first date was to Disney World in Orlando, Florida, and thereafter, a magnificent, adventurous, God-centered relationship blossomed. After a few years of dating, Fred and Karen ventured to Philadelphia to attend a football game where Fred surprised Karen and proposed. Of course, she accepted. It was even featured on the Jumbotron. The couple immediately began their life together by doing what they both loved, traveling the world. Though married a fairly short time, they had the opportunity to visit Jamaica, Belize, Ecuador, Venezuela, Argentina, Japan, and several other countries (16 in total) as their love for each other was nourished by every country they were able to experience together. Making their home in Louisville, Kentucky, Fred's hometown, Karen and Fred found a beautiful church home with an incredibly supportive and God-centered church family where they were building friendships together. Karen was an exceptional coach and a source of unwavering support for friends around the world, just as she was for the leaders she guided in her professional life.

With her faith as her foundation, Karen will always be remembered as an extraordinarily influential daughter, wife, sister, mother, educator, friend, and leader whose transformational impact leaves a tremendous legacy. As her health started to decline, she remained bright in spirit and strong in her faith despite the frailty of her body, she desired that God would get "all the glory," in her life until the end. Karen fought a good fight of faith and finished her course.

She passed peacefully on Monday, September 15, 2025, with her beloved husband, Fred, by her side. She leaves to cherish her memory, her devoted husband, Fred Butler; mother, Barbara Smith; her sister and brother, Kia Smith and Edward (Rayna) Smith; nephew, Khari; nieces: Amari, Salei, Niani, and Lanai; foster daughters, Yolanda and Monique; and a host of aunts, uncles, cousins, dear friends, and colleagues.



Order of Service

Invocation

Congregational Hymn *“It Is Well”*

Scripture Reading

Old Testament: Psalm 91:1-7
New Testament: John 10:10

Prayer of Comfort

Selection *Mr. Robert Person*

Acknowledgements

Remarks

Theresa Spriggs, Aunt
Amari Smith & Khari Smith, Niece and Nephew
Nikki Lanier, Friend
Candace Kenyatta, Employer/Friend

Obituary (Read Silently)

Song of Preparation *Sister Christal Long*

Message of Hope *Reverend Michelle L. Owes*

Call to Christ

Benediction

Recessional






Dear Karen,

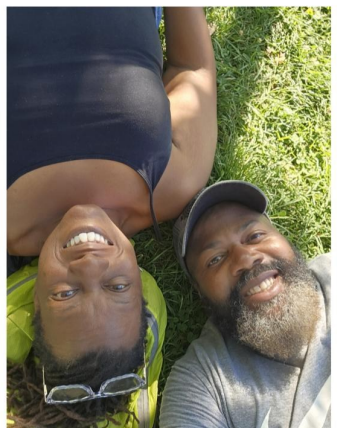
As cousins, we share a bond built on love, laughter, and memories that will last a lifetime. As the oldest of our crew, you set a shining example of how to live a full, adventurous, and godly life.

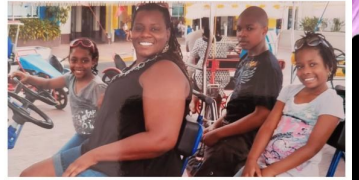
We will always remember the warmth of your laugh and cherish the moments we shared — from family gatherings to everyday conversations about your global travels, entrepreneurial pursuits, and your faithful walk with the Lord. You were a natural-born leader who stood firmly in your beliefs, always advocating for others as well as yourself.

You were a bright light in our family and made each of us feel as though we shared a special bond with you. Although you are no longer here in the physical, we rejoice knowing that you are at peace, resting in the presence of the Lord you so faithfully served. Your love, strength, and example will forever remain in our hearts.

~ With love always, Your Cousins









It Is Well

When peace like a river,
attendeth my way,
When sorrows like sea
billows roll;
Whatever my lot, Thou hast taught
me to say,
It is well, it is well with my soul.

Chorus

It is well, with my soul,
It is well, it is well with my soul.

My sin, oh the bliss of this
glorious thought,
My sin, not in part, but the whole,
Is nailed to the cross and I bear it
no more,
Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O
my soul!

Chorus

It is well, with my soul,
It is well, it is well with my soul.

And, Lord, haste the day when the
faith shall be sight,
The clouds be rolled back
as a scroll,
The trump shall resound and the
Lord shall descend,
Even so, it is well with my soul.

Chorus

It is well, with my soul,
It is well, it is well with my soul.

Acknowledgements

The family of Karen Denise Smith-Butler gives all glory and honor to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, who is our refuge and strength in this season of loss. We acknowledge with deepest gratitude the countless expressions of love, kindness, and support extended to us during this time of bereavement.

To every family member, friend, co-worker, client, neighbor, and cherished companion from childhood through adulthood who has shared in our sorrow and lifted us with your presence, prayers, and encouragement—we are truly humbled and strengthened by your love.

Your calls, visits, meals, messages, and every gesture of compassion have been reminders of God's faithfulness and the community of care He surrounds us with. As we walk forward, we ask that you continue to keep us lifted in prayer, that the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, may guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

*With heartfelt love and appreciation,
The Family*

Flower Bearers

Family and Friends

