

~ Life in LAMORINDA ~

Foundation linked to Lady Gaga promotes acts of kindness in local communities

By Diane Claytor



Springhill Elementary Kindness co-chairs, Maya Smith (left) and Kelly Fleming kick off the Born This Way Foundation's BeKind21 campaign this past August. Photo provided

Sept. 11, 2001. A young Maya Enista Smith was eagerly looking forward to beginning her college days as a freshman at New Jersey's Rutgers University. Then the planes crashed, the buildings came down and the world changed. Instead of attending classes, Smith and her new college friends went to a local church to donate blood for the survivors of the World Trade Center attacks.

Smith had always had a deep belief in America but after 9/11, "it all just felt so confusing and frail." Her parents chose this country, giving up everything in their native Romania to seek political asylum in the United States. "I grew up with a strong appreciation for what this country had given my parents – so many opportunities and the ability to rebuild their lives and live the American dream," she stated.

Smith began reconsidering the career choices she had previously gravitated toward – communications or fashion design; she now wanted to find work where she could contribute to making the world a better place.

She started researching youth activism and quickly found Rock the Vote, a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization dedicated to building the political power of young people. This became the first step in her role as both an activist and passionate supporter of young people and all they can accomplish. It was also through Rock the Vote that she met her husband, David, "this dreamy California boy from UC Berkeley."

A stint working for mobilize.org, an organization founded by David Smith focusing on getting young people active in identifying and solving problems unique to their generation, moved them to Washington, D.C., where they married and lived for the next seven years – "a magical time," Smith noted. Although she loved the East Coast, a San Francisco job offer for her husband brought them to Lafayette six years ago.

A note Smith sent to contacts announcing her interest in "finding my next adventure" prompted a call from a friend suggesting Smith talk to her client, someone looking to start a new foundation focused on young people, but she couldn't reveal the client's name. Eight months pregnant with Hunter, the first of her two children, and taking her husband with her just in case,

"to make sure he wouldn't miss the birth of our first child," Smith flew to LA.

The client, it turned out, was Lady Gaga and that first meeting was with her mom and Born This Way Foundation co-founder, Cynthia Germanotta, as well as others from Gaga's team. While light on specific details at the time, Germanotta explained that the basic vision for the foundation was to build a kinder, braver world, while empowering and involving young people. "I just fell in love with the idea that Lady Gaga ... simply asked me to help build a youth advisory board so together we could create this amazing organization," Smith said.

According to Smith, Gaga experienced a lot of meanness and cruelty growing up "because she was different. She had a really hard time," Smith explained, "and she decided, from an early age, that if she ever became successful, she would use her time, talents and energy to make sure that young people thrived." And from this passion, Born This Way was created, with Smith first consulting and then leading its operations. For the past two years, she has served as the foundation's executive director. "We work in two main areas that really go hand in hand," she explained, "kindness and mental wellness."

Gaga cares deeply about the foundation and is certainly not just a figurehead, Smith reported. She leads the vision and has said that "this is her legacy to the world," Smith noted. Both women believe strongly in the power and potential of young people.

This past summer, Smith, with the absolute support of Lady Gaga and the foundation, created the Be Kind 21 campaign. "I was having all these really intense feelings about Hunter starting kindergarten, being a little kid in a big school. We talked about ways to make new friends, how to be kind and build a community," Smith remembered. Describing her feelings during a foundation staff meeting prompted a suggestion from Germanotta — let's have this conversation with all kids. Smith took that ball and ran with it.

"Research shows that an action becomes a habit in 21 days," Smith said. So the Be Kind 21 campaign was created and participants were asked to perform an act of kindness

– for themselves or others – for 21 days in September. "It actually started at Springhill Elementary School when the kids returned in August and grew like wildfire," Smith proclaimed proudly. More than 20 schools and organizations, including the city of Anaheim and all Starbucks, joined the campaign. This resulted in more than 440,000 participants performing more than 8 million acts of kindness. As Gaga said when inviting her millions of Twitter followers to join the extremely successful campaign, "Kindness is so simple and yet so powerful..."

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