

# WOMAN

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**GOING FOR  
THE GOLD  
WITH LOCAL  
GIRL SCOUTS**

## MAYA SMART

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LITERACY ADVOCACY**

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NO BULL  
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# **WRITING A NEW CHAPTER: MAYA SMART IS TACKLING INEQUALITY ONE BOOK AT A TIME**

The first lady of UT basketball fights to bridge the literacy gap outside the 40 Acres.

**BY JENNY HOFF**

**PHOTOS BY RUDY AROCHA**

**HAIR AND MAKEUP BY CARIN GONZALES**

**SHOT ON LOCATION AT AUSTIN CENTRAL LIBRARY**





**T**his story begins with a curious little girl named after a legendary author, an only child growing up in Akron, Ohio, who treasured a lyrical book about a man who brought rain to the drought-stricken Kapiti Plain in Kenya.

It was this book, *Bringing the Rain to Kapiti Plain*, checked out continuously during the course of her childhood, that marked the beginning of Maya Smart's love affair with libraries.

"I liked the rhythm, the way it flowed. And the illustrations mirrored this image I was growing up with," she says, pointing to a pastel drawing hanging on the entry wall of her light-filled Tarrytown neighborhood home. The picture depicts two men in traditional Ghanaian clothing blowing cow horns. "My mom brought this back when she was studying abroad in Sierra Leone, and it was always on our wall."

The picture Smart proudly displays in her home is more than just a souvenir from a college kid's journey to another country; it's part of a greater story, one involving another little girl, another only child, who grew up in the segregated South of the 1950s and '60s, whose first time on a plane involved a visit to Africa while attending her first mixed-race school as the first person in her family to go to college.

Smart's mom, Margaret Payne, says even with segregated libraries and limited access to books, it was the written word that showed her what was possible, what her future could look like.

"My dad only finished eighth grade, but he was a big reader," Payne recalls. "He had a friend who worked as a janitor at a white school. When books were discarded there, he would bring them to us and my dad would read with me. That was when I developed my passion for reading."

Payne credits her successful career in higher education in no small part to that passion. She firmly believes when a person can read confidently, he or she can achieve anything.

It's a love she passed on to her daughter.

"As a little girl, Maya wasn't interested in dolls or games," Payne says, laughing. "She just loved books."

Smart's story—and the story of her mother and grandmothers, one of whom was the daughter of sharecroppers and didn't learn to read until she was an adult—set the scene for the woman Smart is today: a passionate literacy advocate, a tireless volunteer who currently works with nine nonprofits, including sitting on three boards, and a loving mother to a little girl named after an African American author who made history, Zora Neale Hurston, author of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

"Hearing those stories growing up about access to books and information shaped who I've become and my interest in reading," Smart says. "I think a lot of people take their advantages for granted, not realizing their success is due largely on where they were born and the kind of access they had."

As the first lady of University of Texas basketball (her husband, Shaka Smart, has been head coach since 2015), Maya Smart uses part of her time and influence to make books available to children throughout the state and help libraries diversify their collections so all children can see themselves in the stories they're reading. Inquiring about opportunities to get involved before even setting a foot in Texas, she hit the ground running when she arrived, participating in Leadership Austin's Experience Austin program to better understand the issues shaping the community, and immediately became actively involved with the Texas Book Festival, for which she now acts as vice-chair on the board of directors and chair of community outreach.

"She has such a passion for literacy and literature, especially for low-income kids and getting books into their hands," says Sarah Queen, the current chair of the Texas Book Festival, who had already heard about Maya Smart's community involvement in Richmond, Va., before the Smarts moved to Austin. "She really listens and asks probing questions, the kinds of questions everybody should learn the answers to."

While Maya Smart prefers researching and strategizing for the multiple organizations she supports (the soft-spoken advocate describes herself as 1,000 percent introverted), some of her most joyful experiences come when she interacts with the children she is trying to help.

"Through the Reading Rock Stars program, we bring authors to Title I schools and give each child an autographed copy of their book," she says. "You should see their smiles when they hold it in their hands. For many, it's the first book they've ever owned."

As she recalls those moments, Maya Smart's own face lights up with a smile.

"That's the part that's really moving, to see a child get their first book and clutch it to their chest," she says.

While books can help transport a child to a new world and open up his or her imagination, Maya Smart says what makes the program most impactful is the opportunity for children to meet the authors, ask them questions and see someone they can relate to in their efforts to conquer their own dreams.

"It's their first time meeting someone who has published something," she says. "It becomes real and more personal. They see the possibility."

It's a possibility her own mother wanted to ingrain in her by naming her after celebrated author Maya Angelou, a woman known not only for her talent, but also for her strength.

"She was a resilient woman," Payne says. "I named her that because I also wanted her to be resilient. No matter what happened in life, being an only child, she would be strong and be able to move forward."

Living up to her namesake, Maya Smart is always on the go and ready to roll up her sleeves to tackle a problem. Earning top grades in high school, she attended Harvard University, where she earned an undergraduate degree in social studies. Driven by her love of the written word, she then went on to Northwestern University to earn a master's degree in journalism. Right before moving to Chicago for grad school, a friend set her up on a date with a man who was then the assistant basketball coach for the University of Akron, Shaka Smart.

"I thought, 'This is someone with a terrific heart, intelligence and great character,'" Shaka Smart says, describing his first meeting with his wife of 13 years. "She definitely thinks of others more than herself."

Shaka Smart says he and Maya Smart once read the book *The Four Tendencies*, and notes he would describe her as an obliher, one who has no problem meeting the expectations of others and will go above and beyond when working within a group to take on the bulk of the work. However, according to the book, an obliher will also forsake some of his or her personal goals.

"I have been working on my own book for more than two years," Maya Smart admits. "My volunteering definitely competes. It has a more immediate impact."

Marrying Shaka Smart shortly after graduating from Northwestern, Maya Smart opted for a freelance journalism career that would allow her to move around as her husband's career advanced. She's since written hundreds of business articles, taught classes to budding journalists, interviewed numerous bestselling authors for Austin-based *Kirkus Reviews* and maintains a blog, *mayasmart.com*, where she aims to deliver "life-changing reads to world-changing women."

Though the couple has lived in five different cities together in 13 years, in every community, Maya Smart has also found ways to get deeply involved and make an impact wherever she can. She encourages all people who can to do the same.

"I think it's important for people who do have a lot of advantages in terms of income, education and employment to see the needs of people in other areas," she explains. "It's mostly just listening and asking questions and going in with that openness to really just try to learn rather than just swooping in to say, 'I'm here to save the day.'"

Despite Austin's boomtown success, Maya Smart says through her involvement, she's seen a great disparity in the capital city, especially in terms of where children grow up and the kind of access they have to resources. In short, the zip code they live in plays a large role in the trajectory their lives will take. It's a problem she is trying to help rectify through multiple projects with varied organizations, including the Texas Book Festival, which she says is more than just a fun weekend in October when readers can meet their favorite authors, noting it's a year-round organization dedicated to opening up the world of literature to more children and adults throughout the state.

"We granted more than \$100,000 to 41 public libraries across 36 Texas counties this year," Maya Smart says. "Those dollars will be used to expand collections to better serve the needs and interests of local patrons, such as increasing the numbers of Spanish titles, books by multicultural authors and books with large print for visually impaired readers."

One of the libraries Maya Smart was actively involved in helping bring to fruition through her former role as treasurer with the Austin Public Library Friends Foundation is the world-famous new Austin Central Library, which opened in 2017 and was voted a finalist for the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions' Public Library of the Year prize.

"I'm most passionate about public libraries because they are the only place where everyone is totally welcome to walk in," she says. "You don't have to have any special credential or qualification to go into a public library and read books, sit down, have a cup of water or do whatever you need to do."

Maya Smart also dedicates her time to multiple other organizations, including the UT Libraries advisory council, Girl Scouts of Central Texas, Junior League of Austin, Links Incorporated, which her mom has also been a member of for 30 years, and St. David's Foundation, through which she's worked to address maternal-mortality rates in Texas.

"I'm most passionate about public libraries because they are the only place where everyone is totally welcome to walk in."

Page 47: Go Silk So Long and Lean dress, \$408; Senso suede sandals, \$163; Lady Grey Careen earrings in smoke grey lucite, \$180; Lady Grey warp cuff in smoke grey lucite, \$245.

Page 48: Drew Alina halter top, \$165; Drew Harlow skirt, \$225; Alias Mae wedge sandals, \$220; Jenny Bird lion cuff, \$74; Jenny Bird earrings, \$178.

Page 51: Krisa swing tank, \$121; Jakett perforated leather jacket, \$538; J Brand Alana high-rise jeans, \$228; Kaanas slides, \$170; Ruby & Violet lariat, \$220; Nicole Romano flower stud earrings, \$158.

Page 52: Laveer Dylan jumpsuit, \$298; Schutz slides, \$165; Jen Hanson hoop earrings, \$298; Paula Rosen beaded necklace, \$188; Paula Rosen star necklace, \$198; Paula Rosen orb necklace, \$468.

Cover: Beachgold skirt, \$147; Lady Grey red lucite bangle, \$144; Elizabeth Cole red flower earrings, \$60.

All clothing available at Estilo, 2727 Exposition Blvd., [estiloboutique.com](http://estiloboutique.com).

“She cares deeply about equity,” says William Buster, executive vice president of community investments with St. David’s Foundation. “She is very measured and precise when she asks questions. She doesn’t discuss an issue in general terms. She wants to know who is disproportionately affected. She’s helped lead us to be more intentional in what we are ultimately trying to achieve.”

For Maya Smart, helping her community has never been a question of if but rather of how. It was a responsibility she was taught to take on since childhood.

“My mom has influenced me the most in giving back,” she says. “Witnessing her consistent commitment to volunteerism for a lifetime left an impression. I try to help someone in need in some way every day.”

If Maya Smart’s story were written as a saga, we, as readers, would meet three generations of women, all emboldened by the written word to move their family and communities forward, women who first earned their success through education and hard work and then used their positions to help lift others up and show them what’s possible. It’s a real-life saga Maya Smart is continuing to write.

“My daughter, Zora, also influences my giving,” she says. “I know she is watching and we make sure to find kid-friendly volunteer opportunities to allow her to participate as well. She’s already won a Super Service award from her school each year for her volunteer hours.”

In Maya Smart’s position as part of a highly successful family leading the University of Texas basketball team to victory and earning the love of diehard Longhorns, she could take it easy and spend more time on personal projects and self-care while just writing a few checks to philanthropic organizations. Instead, she works full time to better the community she’s adopted, to give a voice to the underserved and carry on her family’s legacy of always giving back.

“It’s not about position. I think it’s about intent,” she says. “Instead of trying to do everything, just focus on what you’re passionate about, where you think you can help the most.”

Of course, with a famous author as her namesake and another author as the inspiration for her daughter’s name, Maya Smart does plan to eventually finish her own book, not as a vanity project, rather as another way to help others. Her topic is the role parents should play in reading with their children. It’s a subject close to her heart, one that changed her mother’s life and the story of her own.

“Parents are incredibly influential in the lives of their children,” she says. “Children see everything we’re doing, and when you make an effort to increase their access to books, they soak all of that up. They know our priorities by what we do.”

## MAYA SMART’S TIPS FOR READING, VOLUNTEERING AND PROMOTING LITERACY AT HOME

### CURRENT BOOKS ON HER READING LIST

***The Power of Attention: Awaken to Love and Its Unlimited Potential With Meditation*** by Sarah McLean, “a how-to guide for people interested in training their attention so they can live with greater purpose and power.”

***If Women Rose Rooted*** by Sharon Blackie, which “shows how grounding oneself in the stories of ancestors and in the local landscape makes us better stewards of our lives, communities and the planet.”

***We Live for the We: The Political Power of Black Motherhood*** by Dani McClain, which “explores how to raise black children to live with dignity and joy in an unjust, often hostile world.”

***Set the World on Fire: Black Nationalist Women and the Global Struggle for Freedom*** by Keisha N. Blain, which “profiles influential but little-known early 20th century black women who agitated for the rights and dignity of people of African descent.”

### ONE OF HER FAVORITE LOCAL AUTHORS

“Natalia Sylvester, author of *Everyone Knows You Go Home*, is a fresh voice in fiction who is just as dynamic off the page. Her writing gives elegant witness to the full lives, loves and struggles of marginalized people by grounding dramatic, occasionally supernatural events in everyday, ordinary, human detail. And her work to foster conversation, forge community and create supportive spaces for women writers of color in Austin is just as necessary and influential. She’s a quiet leader in a gathering storm of rising women’s voices.”

### THE ONE THING PARENTS CAN DO TO INCREASE THEIR CHILDREN’S LITERACY

“Read. Parents need to get smart about when and how reading skills develop. Kids don’t learn by osmosis, so religiously reading to them, though wonderful for countless reasons, doesn’t cut it. I recommend that parents read books about early cognitive development and the science of reading to get a feel for the repertoire of skills that go into reading and the range of ways parents can foster them through conversation, home rituals and direct instruction.”

### THE BEST WAY TO START SUPPORTING YOUR LOCAL COMMUNITY

“I Live Here I Give Here is a great local resource for people interested in deepening their community involvement. It offers numerous programs that can help Austinites discover, connect with and support causes they care about. It raises awareness of community needs and the organizations addressing them and trains and mentors volunteers to serve with intention and impact.”

### HOW TO TAKE BETTER ADVANTAGE OF AUSTIN’S LITERARY OFFERINGS

“Bookmark the BookPeople, Austin Public Library and Texas Book Festival sites to stay up to date on author and reading events. Book talks, signings and clubs are great ways to connect with other lit lovers and get strong recommendations for your next great read.”