

Back on Track

BEFORE ROBERT SMITH GRADUATED WITH HIGH HONORS, HE TOOK A DETOUR.

the Rutgers-Newark commencement last May, few in the audience would have ever guessed that Robert Smith (NCAS'03)-graduating with high honors with a bachelor's degree in psychology-had once dropped out and lived in his car in one of Elizabeth's worst neighborhoods, where most of his peers sold drugs and carried handguns. "I couldn't get past the fact that my family needed help," says Smith.

"There were money issues, health issues, safety issues-we had every kind of problem. I felt guilty sitting in class. I needed to get a job and bring some money in," says Smith, who shocked his professors when he dropped out a week before finals his junior year.

What he found was unrewarding, low-paying clerical work that didn't amount to much. By the fol-

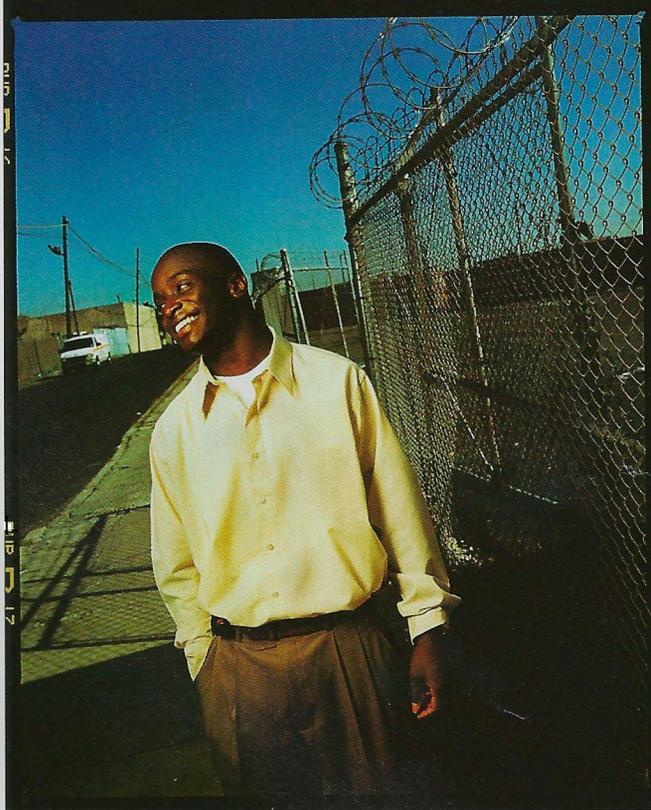
lowing fall, he and his brother were taking refuge in their car on cold nights. "Our room in the attic of the house we were staying in lacked

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insulation, and cold air came right through the holes," he says. "We slept in the car on some nights; then we moved to a seedy motel on Route 1."

Realizing that he wouldn't have much of a future without a degree-and with the encouragement of people on campus-he returned a little more than a year later and picked up where he left off, as a standout in the Honors



College. This fall, he began his master's degree in social work. Still seeking a way to relocate his family, Smith says, "I talked to a lot of kids about finding alternatives to drugs and street life. I'd like to continue to do that as a social worker in a school system someday."

ROBERT SMITH SAYS HE GOT A LOT OF HELP ALONG THE WAY. NOW HE WANTS TO DO THE SAME FOR OTHERS.