

**Elizabeth Wilson, Mayor Emerita and Commissioner for Decatur, GA**  
*Trailblazer Extraordinaire*



“The Decatur Education Foundation announces the establishment of the Mary Elizabeth Brown Wilson Scholarship to honor the life and work of Decatur Mayor Emerita Elizabeth Brown Wilson for her dedication and sacrifice to the cause of justice. Ms. Wilson played a key role in the desegregation of the Decatur public schools and libraries during the 60’s. Driven by principle, Ms. Wilson was relentless in her non-violent protest against injustice and inequity in her community. Her actions changed the course of history and served to ensure that every child in the City of Decatur has an equal opportunity to receive a quality education.”

These inspirational words were written in 2008, and they clearly support why those who know Elizabeth Wilson consider her a true trailblazer and role model. However, the only way to really appreciate this individual and what she’s accomplished in her life is to follow her journey from the beginning. That journey began in the small town of Greensboro, GA.

*The early years when black was black – and equality was just a dream*

Elizabeth was born in 1931 to Hollie and Mary Brown. She was the 3rd of 9 children, and the first of 5 girls - therefore some said, the “in charge” sister! Mr. Brown was a farmer, or at that time in rural Georgia, a “sharecropper.” Today, Greensboro is known for its proximity to Lake Oconee and some very affluent golf communities. But back then, it was just a small farming community of hard-working families.

Growing up, Elizabeth recalls, “I really did go to a one room school house which was built by my father and other men. The school was next to our church and together they represented the center of our community. ”

“I like to tell my grandchildren that I also walked 5 miles to school every day, across pastures, through the woods, and over the creeks – come rain or come shine. One of my favorite memories was when I got a new pair of high top shoes, which I really didn’t like at all. One day on the way to school, I had to take off those shoes to cross a creek that

was swollen with rain water. Unfortunately, it seems that those high tops were lost in the high water ...but lucky for me, I never had to wear them again!"

"Of course another memory comes to mind -- seeing the school bus pass right by my siblings and me as we were walking to school. The white kids would often call us names but the bus never stopped to pick us up. And when we got to our school, our books were second hand, or hand-me-downs, often missing pages or whole chapters. But that didn't deter us, we just kept right on reading and trying to learn what we could."

"Despite having little education themselves, our parents insisted that my siblings and I get a basic education. I know that they were very proud of me when in the spring of 1949, I graduated from high school," Elizabeth said.

*The "big city" beckons – first a job, then a family, then life*

While she may not have had a lot of choices after high school, Elizabeth made up her mind to leave Greensboro, hop a ride in a pick-up truck with a friend, and head to the "big city" of Decatur – a place she had heard about but had never visited. Actually, her decision was simple: with 6 younger children still at home, she wanted to get a job and help her parents. And while she dreamed of going to college, she sacrificed that dream and started her "grown up life" - first in a small café and later, "sitting" (or being a nanny) for a local doctor.

"The truth is," Elizabeth said, "I learned a lot in that role helping with the doctor's three children. Whatever they were studying, I studied too...and I tried to absorb as much of it as I could."

In the ensuing years, Elizabeth's personal life in Decatur evolved into marriage to a man from her home town and raising their four children. Mentioning her children brings a big smile to Elizabeth's face. Her oldest son, Richard, is distinguished by being one of the first African American students to attend the integrated Decatur High School and was the first one to play basketball there. He's also a Vietnam Veteran, and lives near Decatur.

Elizabeth also has two daughters. Her beloved Angela passed away in 1993, but during her life, she was a devoted teacher who taught in elementary school as a reading specialist. Angela's pride and joy was her son Michael, who was only 14 when he lost his mother. Fortunately, however, Michael had a grandmother who overnight became his second mom. Michael's now 30 and also lives near Elizabeth.

Angela's younger sister is Leslie and she, too, has made her mother extremely proud. Leslie is the first person in Elizabeth's family to receive a Ph.D. and she did it before she was 30! Today she works at the Atlanta Speech School as a child psychologist.

Leslie has also given her mother a granddaughter, one of four grandchildren that dote on Elizabeth. In fact, all four grandchildren want "Granny" to prepare their special dinner for each of their birthdays. This has become a favorite Wilson family tradition – and naturally, everyone loves "Granny's cooking."

Last but not least, Elizabeth's youngest son is Carter Wilson. In October, 2009, a brand new, state-of-the-art gymnasium and auditorium have just been completed at Decatur High School. Guess who Elizabeth is rushing off to see being honored at the opening of the new facility? It's Carter – now the Athletic Director for DHS and head coach for the boys' basketball team!!

*Milestones and other accomplishments along the way*

It's clear listening to Elizabeth talk about her children and grandchildren that they are the center of her personal universe and the source of great pride and love. But that's not the whole story.

“In 1962,” Elizabeth recalls, “the year that Leslie was born, I was a mother with three children in school and I had become involved in the GA Council on Human Relations. This was an early initiative to help bridge the gap between blacks and whites. At that time, not a single black citizen in Decatur or DeKalb County, GA had a library card.” “It just made sense that our children should have access to the library and to all of its resources and so, a group of us ‘ladies’ – two white and two black – decided to test the waters. We had no idea what would happen and we had no intention of causing a big stir. We simply came up with a plan and went for it!”

“Before the big day, my white friends did a layout of the library,” Elizabeth explained. “One of them would be on the inside and the other – well she would drive the ‘getaway’ car!”

“The day we ‘did it’ – we entered the library and immediately all eyes were on us - the only two African Americans there. Our friend was over in the children's section and we went over to her and picked out a few books. As we approached the desk for check-out, the librarian was clearly nervous, but she asked if we had a library card and of course we said ‘no.’ Then she gave us an application and we left.”

“Honestly,” Elizabeth went on, “that was all there was to it. We completed our applications and the next time we went back, we checked out our books...and the rest is history.”

“But there was another seminal incident that same year, this time it involved our boys going to summer school in Atlanta rather than in Decatur where we lived. We didn't have the backing of the NAACP, we weren't organizing a march, and we didn't want any trouble with the press. A group of us simply decided to make an appointment with the superintendent and go ‘test our case.’”

Elizabeth just happened to be pregnant at the time when she and her group finally met with Dr. Renfroe. They proceeded to state their case to the superintendent, and he politely declined their request. But, that wasn't the end of it. Even though Elizabeth was suffering from “all day morning sickness” and was afraid at any minute she might do the unthinkable, the meeting continued throughout the day. She and her friends simply

weren't leaving until they had a proposal to go to the school board. The proposal they wanted was for a summer school program at the all-black school.

And what they wanted, they got! The school board approved their summer school request. Shortly afterwards, 20 black students – some might say “pioneers” - including Elizabeth's oldest son, were transferred into Decatur High School. Integration was now a reality.

“Sure,” Elizabeth pointed out, “there was name calling and our kids didn't get to participate in all of the school's activities. But at the end of the day, the world had changed and they were a part of a new era.”

Elizabeth also has vivid memories of when Richard played basketball as the only African American on the team. She was determined to be there to support him and see him play. She would take her smaller children and head for the game, only to find that there were few seats available. However, as soon as she would approach any opening on the bleachers, suddenly the entire bench would be vacated! Fortunately, that didn't stop Elizabeth from enjoying the game and cheering Richard on – even if she and her kids were the only African Americans except for the janitor.

“Actually I only missed one of Richard's games that year,” she said,” and that was the game with Cross Keys High School. I received a call from his coach saying that I should not go to this particular game because my kids and I might not be safe. As much as I wanted to go, I decided to stay home and I just prayed for Richard's safety.”

“You know, this was just the world that we lived in and I knew a different world was coming. One example of what was coming was when Richard - who had been nicknamed ‘Cool Breeze’ by this time - came home very excited one day. He said, ‘Guess what, Mom? I won the Spirit Award!’ This was really special. An African American student won an award-- in a desegregated school! I knew then, times were indeed changing.”

#### *A political life emerges*

In the mid-80's, several prominent citizens of Decatur decided that it was time for an African American to serve as a commissioner...and Elizabeth Wilson was in their sights. Not that she had her sights set on that – in fact, just the opposite. She was backing another woman. But J. Robin Harris and others clearly had other ideas and the end result was an election campaign and a WIN for Elizabeth!

Years later, when Mike resigned, he once again backed Elizabeth - this time for Mayor. And so, between 1993 and 1998, Elizabeth was known as Mayor Wilson – a title many people still bestow on her over a decade later!

One of the things she's most proud of during her tenure was that the '96 Olympics not only came to Atlanta, they came to Decatur as well! Elizabeth had gone to West Africa in the mid-80's and was therefore delighted when Decatur adopted two “sister cities.”

During the Olympics, the City of Decatur hosted representatives from their West African sister cities. In addition, Decatur also had the distinction of providing the intake facility for all of the American athletes from across the country.

The City of Decatur and the Mayor also hosted the Irish delegation and joined them in celebrating the first Irish gold medal win – not to mention all the fun that was had at the old courthouse made to look like an Irish pub!

“Those were good years for me and for Decatur,” Elizabeth says, “lots of growth. Of course there were difficult times as well -- like zoning issues for instance. But I made certain that everyone’s position was heard – even if it meant long hours past our normal day. But all in all, we added more parks, sidewalks, and buses than ever before – and it made our community a better place.”

#### *On leadership, retirement and beyond*

Elizabeth left public office in 1999 and while she has served periodically as a business development consultant, she has mainly devoted her time to family and friends. Not surprisingly, she has remained a community advocate and activist, especially helping her senior neighbors “do what needs to be done.” In fact, that is exactly how Elizabeth defines leadership.

“I don’t really know how to describe myself as a leader,” she said, “but other people say that I am. All I know is that I have always just seen things that needed to get done, and I do it. I see needs, like the Community Health Center I helped to start when we had none.”

“The center went from virtually no funding and one or two staff volunteers to a budget of \$6 million and a multi-disciplined staff including doctors, nurses, social workers, a nutritionist, a contract dentist and an ophthalmologist! The impact in the community was huge and hundreds of people benefited from preventive care.”

“I look back on this effort, and I know that I didn’t have a business plan - but I just thought it would work, and it did!”

“Today, in 2009, what I try to do is identify what the seniors in my community need. I call it ‘seniors helping seniors.’ We get busy doing what we can do ourselves. Recently, we organized a very successful yard sale and the proceeds helped to pay some of the extra tax assessments.”

#### *Her legacy*

To see what the citizens of Decatur really think of their former mayor, you only have to go to the center of town and look for an 11-foot sculpture called “Celebration.” The sculpture was done by Gary Price and features a huge globe with children holding hands and flying “Peter Pan style” around it. An inscription on the based of the piece reads:

*“Imagine a world without limits, without boundaries, without prejudice and blame. Imagine an existence full of self-confidence, self-esteem and not only*

*tolerance but love for others regardless of color, socio-economic or any other standing. To me that is what the future holds. That is what children represent and that is the type of world I would like to help others imagine so it can come to pass.”*

This sculpture, and a small replica, was presented to Elizabeth Wilson in 1999 at the time of her retirement from public office. In 2002, it was dedicated to her in the presence of hundreds of dignitaries and ordinary citizens in honor of her contribution to the city and to future generations.

Clearly, Elizabeth Wilson, Decatur Mayor Emerita, is a leader by anyone's definition. Her legacy is well established but she's not resting on her laurels. On any given day, you may find her at various locations in her adopted home city, informally meeting and greeting, and looking around for unmet needs. If she spots them, expect to see her going to work – helping to ensure that those needs are met.

And what about that dream of hers – a college education? Well, she may not have matriculated through four years of higher education, but she certainly has earned an equivalent degree in life - and her accomplishments speak for themselves. In 2008, in recognition of her life's work and her legacy as a trailblazer against injustice and inequality, Agnes Scott College – also located in Decatur, GA – presented Elizabeth Wilson with an honorary doctorate degree.

Congratulations, Elizabeth, you've earned it!

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