

Marie Collins Wilson

The *UN*sinkable

By CHARLES EUCHNER, BA'82

*W*hen Marie Wilson talks, she leans forward, opens her eyes, and sways with her audience, whether it's one person or a crowd of 1,000. On this bitter-cold night in Manhattan, speaking at a party at Sotheby's, she rocks behind the podium. She stretches her arms out, punches and chops the air, throws her head back in laughter or mock surprise, twists her eyes to convey annoyance, holds her hands together as if praying.

Her hair perfectly coiffed, wearing a vibrant black suit with an electric pink shirt, wrapped in a huge scarf filled with reds and pinks and oranges, she looks like she could be the president.

Appearances, she says, matter. Electing a president requires redefining America's vision of what a president looks like.

Wilson, '62, is founder and president of the White House Project, started in 1998 to increase women's leadership in politics and corporate life. The nonpartisan project, working to advance a diverse critical mass of women into leadership positions, combines everything Wilson has learned over the years—networking, civil rights, women's rights, leadership, research, training—to inspire women of all generations to confront their fears and get involved in politics or become more visible leaders at their companies.

*Grassroots, grit, and visions
of Madame President.*

**Government, contends
Wilson, will only respond
to the problems of women
and families when women
provide leadership along-
side men.**

DANIEL DUBOIS

As a Vanderbilt student during the Civil Rights Movement, she became involved in the signature issue of the 1960s when the university expelled James Lawson for staging sit-ins at Nashville's lunch counters. The Lawson case offered important lessons that Wilson carries with her to this day: Recruitment and training are essential. You can't count on elites to lead change. History can be hurried up with persistence, discipline and stubbornness.

Wherever she goes, Wilson emphasizes this point: Government will only respond to the problems of women and families—

she says, pointing to recent elections of women in Chile and Nigeria.

Point 2: To win a fair share of leadership positions, women need to change the image of what a president looks like. That's why Wilson pushed Hollywood for years to do a TV show depicting a woman president; the acclaimed (but short-lived) *Commander in Chief*, starring Geena Davis, was finally produced. That's why she pushed Mattel to produce a new doll depicting the curvaceous Barbie as president. That's why the White House Project gives annual awards to culture changers for positive depictions of women

directory of women policy experts called SheSource.org.

Wilson learned how to do politics as the only child of a working-class Atlanta couple. Growing up in public housing in her early childhood, Marie learned how to create networks by watching her mother. She learned how to hold things together from her father, who buffered her mother's mood swings. And she learned about injustice from their African-American housekeeper, her constant companion.

From a young age Marie worried about surviving without a man in the house. She

anger, and Marie and Al had to buffer her from her own rage. "My mother was a beautiful, smart woman who had grown up orphaned in different homes, very hard and very poor," Wilson remembers. "She had never been parented, so she didn't know how to do it. She worked for people who should have been working for her. I knew when she got angry it wasn't about me. I tried to please and keep things calm, and rub her back. My father would say, 'We just need to do this.' It was teamwork. She was a woman worth protecting."

After the storms, life was an adventure. After work and school, they went swimming,

was refused a bid to the sorority. She studied philosophy and, for the first time, read the daily newspaper.

Marie and another student, Lamar Alexander, got involved when the university expelled James Lawson from the Divinity School. Lawson had come south at the suggestion of Martin Luther King Jr. Lawson recruited and trained hundreds of protesters in nonviolent tactics. When they staged sit-ins at Nashville's lunch counters, Lawson's troops became the biggest and most disciplined of the movement's protest groups.

Collins and Alexander took a stand for

power of culture to make change. We had people sing together who couldn't talk together."

While completing her B.A. at the University of Delaware, she organized a youth center. She also got an education in the northern dimensions of racial inequality. Young women got pregnant at early ages. With limited options, they found succor in making babies.

For years she and countless other women served the men in the movement. But the ideals of the movement did not extend to women. The cause espoused equality, but she couldn't choose her own career or control her body. Like many children of the Civil



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living wages, health care, child care, public safety—when women provide leadership alongside men.

She spends most of her days with political and corporate elites. She raises money, plots awards dinners for film and TV stars, travels overseas for inaugurations, moves easily among leaders in Washington, confers with academics on polling and other research.

Wilson is the quintessential nonprofit leader. She tosses off arguments with a Southern drawl flattened by the years she lived in Iowa. She draws from a vast store of policy research. Before a radio interview and public speech, she hones her talking points with a young staffer. They speak in code. "You might want to do the courage thing at the end of the speech," the staffer, Lindsay Clinton, says.

"Oh, that's perfect!" Wilson says. She scribbles a note on a memo. The Marie Wilson talking points on women in American politics go like this:

Point 1: Women in America hold more positions of authority than ever before, but still trail other nations. "Do you know we're 69th in the world in women's leadership?"

leading in film, television, theater, art and advertising.

Point 3: The only way to give a woman a real chance to get elected and succeed as president is to create a vast pool of progressive women in elected office. If a president comes from a shallow pool, she will become a token who must "be man enough for the job" to survive. The deeper the pool, the better the choice of presidents and the greater her support structure. That's why the WHP trains women across the country. In a little more than a year, the program trained 800 women to run for political office.

The White House Project backs up its activism with research, commissioning five research pieces and four polls. The most-quoted research explores the imbalance in guests on Sunday morning chat shows. Only 14 percent of the guests were women on programs like *Face the Nation* and *Meet the Press*. Wilson sighs at the invisibility of women, quoting Marion Wright Edelman, president of the Children's Defense Fund: "You can't be what you can't see." To combat the problem, the White House Project has compiled a

remembers waiting for her father to get home from World War II, always knowing he might die in combat.

When Albert Collins returned home, he took a job as a typesetter. Marie's mother, Myrtle—known to everyone as Collie—worked as a dental assistant and later became social director at Peachtree Presbyterian Church. A game of "Six Degrees of Collie Collins" could link Atlanta's political, business and church elites.

With both parents working, young Marie developed a close relationship with Liz Brown, the housekeeper and nanny. (Even working-class families employed housekeepers in those days.)

"We had that intimacy that's very characteristic of the South," Marie remembers. "Liz was the one I came home and told my stories to, and showed my drawings to, and got under the bed with when lightning came. She put tobacco on my bee stings. She was the one I cried with." Liz taught Marie how to work hard and to find sustenance in spiritual life.

Collie Collins occasionally lashed out in

picnicking, walking. They danced and sang. Wherever they went, people knew them.

The center of Marie's life was the church. When Al and Collie and Liz didn't have enough to give Marie, people from the church gave more. They were all accepted for who they were. What mattered was that they showed up.

Popular in high school—cheerleader, homecoming queen, a top student who got a scholarship offer from Duke—Marie took a stand when boys took their cars to black neighborhoods and terrorized people. And she didn't like the school's cliques. She sided with the plain-looking girls in their ages-old struggles with the Heathers.

She went to Vanderbilt because of a crush on a student she met on a weekend visit. She fit in right away, pledging the Kappa Alpha Theta sorority, where she rose to vice president.

If high school taught her about race and cliques, Vanderbilt taught her about class and politics. When her friends talked about their debutante balls, she was confused. *Debut? What's that?* Eventually, she tired of polishing silver and got angry when a friend

Lawson. (Alexander, BA'62, would later become governor of Tennessee, U.S. secretary of education, presidential candidate and U.S. senator.)

"I remember Marie very well," says Alexander. "She was elegant and smart and committed and well respected, and those are not the words that usually come to mind about a 20-year-old college student. We didn't think much about what people would be doing in their 40s and 50s back then, but it's no surprise that she's been so creative and innovative in her work for the status of women."

Marie Collins left Vanderbilt in 1962, after completing her junior year, to join her future husband, Eugene Wilson, in the Civil Rights Movement. He took a position as choir director at West Presbyterian Church in Wilmington, Del.

"I couldn't be a minister," she says. "All I could be was a Christian educator, and that didn't appeal to me. Here was a man who was going to do the work of justice. Why not do that with him? The choir was someplace people could make a common cultural connection. We worked on what I work on now—the

Rights Movement, Marie Wilson had never applied the movement's principles—equality of opportunity, respect for difference, removal of formal and informal barriers—to women.

After a couple of years, Marie and Eugene left for Pittsburgh. Her doctor's advice on birth control notwithstanding, she was pregnant for the fourth time in five years. She already struggled to keep the household together on her husband's meager church salary.

She vividly recalls sitting in a bathtub in their Pittsburgh home almost four decades ago, wondering whether she should venture into the Hill District scarred by race riots. If she wanted an abortion, she would have to go to the black neighborhood where illegal abortionists worked.

"The Hill District is burning," she remembers. "I've had pleurisy and I'm not well. I can't take care of these children, and we have no money."

Roe v. Wade, the landmark Supreme Court ruling protecting a woman's right to have an abortion, was still years in the future. There was no guarantee that the procedure would be safe.

She decided against the abortion—the prospect of their children losing their mother weighed heavier than the additional burden of another child to feed—but Wilson felt a roar as she contemplated her choices. Remembering the moment now, she lets out the same sound as the lion at the beginning of MGM films.

“All of a sudden, I’m sitting in that bathtub thinking, ‘This is not fair to women! Wait a minute!’” Her voice rises, the drawl of her native Atlanta still alive. “I should be able to determine how many children I can take care of. I know what children need.”

She didn’t discuss her moment of truth with her husband or anyone else. She didn’t know how to connect her insight to something bigger. The idea that “the personal is the political” had not become a rallying cry for feminism. But Marie Wilson’s life had changed forever.

After a year in Pittsburgh, the Wilsons moved to Des Moines, Iowa. Marie continued her community work. She lobbied the state legislature for the American Association of University Women. She earned a master’s in education at Drake University and ran

that. It’s not what do women want; it’s what *can* women want?”

Then, another epiphany: Elaine Szymoniak, the only woman on the Des Moines city council, called her in 1983 and asked her to run for an at-large seat. Being the only woman on the council was starting to grind Szymoniak down. She needed a colleague. “Do it or I’ll quit,” Szymoniak told her.

Wilson beat 10 men for the council seat and dreamed of running for statewide office someday. Then the Ms. Foundation for Women advertised for a new president. Friends dared her to apply.

Marie and Eugene Wilson had split up. She was building a new life, living in a new house, contemplating her own deepest desires. She landed the Ms. job, left Iowa after 15 years, and settled in New York. She brought her son Martin, while her son David finished school in Iowa. The other children had already moved on to college.

When Wilson took over the Ms. Foundation, the “founding mothers” still dominated the organization. To Jean Hardisty, Wilson’s greatest strength was that she could stand up to strong-willed women like Gloria Steinem

foundation’s budget from \$400,000 to \$8.6 million, with an endowment of \$16 million.

In 1993, as an initiative of the Ms. Foundation, she started the Take Our Daughters to Work Day, which now brings 16 million young people to their parents’ offices every April. The idea was like a lot of Marie Wilson’s ideas: Change people’s practices by changing their perceptions.

Research showed that girls start to slip behind boys during early adolescence. They begin to question their own brains and reduce their goals, while boys embrace greater ambitions. Part of the problem, research by Jill Kerr Conway showed, was that parents told their daughters little about the challenges and rewards of work. Boys heard about the excitement of careers, while girls heard about how tired the parents were when they got home.

Take Our Daughters to Work Day encouraged girls to take a day off from school to go to work with a parent or family friend and see for themselves the opportunities outside the home. Seeing women in a different place could help them to imagine themselves taking charge in government, corporations, small businesses, schools.



One Ms. Foundation board member calls Wilson “the greatest rainmaker we ever had.”

from the site where George Washington was inaugurated as the first president, Wilson sits at the middle of a makeshift conference table at the Wall Street office of the White House Project. The organization has outgrown its space—and will move by the next week—so staffers meet in the lobby area. Wilson lets the 10 other women and one man do most of the talking.

At one point Wilson waves the front page of the *New York Times* to underscore their crusade’s relevance. For the first time in American history, one headline reports, 51 percent of all women live without a spouse.

Another *Times* story reports Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice’s pragmatic approach to Egypt and the Middle East. Wilson considers Rice a prime candidate for president. She recoils at Rice’s role in the Iraq war, but says she’s a “work in progress.” Whatever else, Rice has contributed to a sharpening image of women with power.

Wilson gets a report from a weekend training session in Wyoming. Women hold almost a quarter of the legislature’s seats but have been shut out of key leadership and committee assignments. Those grassroots lawmakers might include a future presidential candidate. But if they can’t confront the male power structure, they won’t rise through the system.

The White House Project has helped teach women from both parties how to position themselves better in the legislature. As the most viable woman candidate for president, Hillary Clinton is clearly Wilson’s favorite. But she talks up other women—especially Arizona Gov. Janet Napolitano and Maine senators Susan Collins and Olympia Snowe—as viable candidates for at least the vice presidency. In her dream scenario, Clinton gets the Democratic nomination for president and one of the Maine senators gets the Republican nomination for vice president.

Someone at the meeting mentions that Illinois Sen. Barack Obama has announced his intention to run. Obama, who would be the nation’s first black president, could pose Hillary Clinton’s greatest barrier.

Deep breaths around the table follow a period of jolting silence.

“OK, so what happened with those legislators in Wyoming?” someone asks to break the pause. Back to work. ▼

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the university’s women’s programs. She worked for the Iowa Bankers Association.

When Wilson recruited women to go to Drake, she didn’t outline tips for juggling school, jobs, parenthood and housework. She called women in front of the room and challenged them, like a preacher, to confront their fears: “Come stand with me, and tell me what’s holding you back.”

The problem went beyond logistics. The problem lay deep in the psyche.

“We are scared of women’s desire, women’s wanting,” Wilson says. “Freud was wrong on

and Marlo Thomas.

“I remember saying that if we hired Marie, things are going to change dramatically around here,” says Hardisty, a Ms. board member and the president of Political Research Associates. “Everyone laughed and said, Well, that might not be such a bad thing. We were breaking with tradition by hiring her. She became the greatest rainmaker we ever had. More important, she turned the foundation into a force for the movement, as opposed to just a funder.”

Then Collie Collins’ daughter put her own networking skills to work. She increased the

The program originally was open to girls from 9 to 15 years old. Boys were added in 2003, with the more inclusive goal of challenging all kids’ stereotypes about who does what and where.

At the Ms. Foundation, Wilson also funded a number of research projects and started a fund to support organizations that meet the needs of women with HIV/AIDS. She developed programs for public safety.

And she rebuilt her personal life. She met Nancy Lee, vice president for business development for the New York Times Co. “I ended

up loving a woman,” she says. Wilson and Lee are still together, living in a cozy East Side Manhattan apartment and spending a couple of weekends a month in Woodstock.

Bella Abzug, who loudly represented New York in Congress and once ran for mayor, pushed Wilson for years to train women for electoral politics. But when Abzug pushed in her gruff New York way, Wilson declined in her elegant Southern way.

Eventually, though, Wilson had another epiphany: “If we don’t get these women into power, we’re going to spend all our time fighting regressive legislation. I would give anything if I had listened to Bella, because the truth is we will never change anything unless we get women in public office.”

Now everything in Marie Wilson’s life is oriented towards getting women into leadership, including the U.S. presidency.

Not everyone believes that electing a woman should be the Feminist Movement’s primary goal. “I’m interested in electing the best president for women’s issues, not just a woman president,” says Aileen Hernandez, chair of the California Women’s Agenda. Still, Hernandez applauds the idea of recruiting record numbers of women for offices at every level of the system.

At a weekly staff meeting just blocks away

THINK BACK



Your halcyon Vanderbilt days –
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on white silver sands.
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