

In 1999, John Wayne Wilson was a withdrawn, disabled teen-ager, assigned by the state to live at Holston United Methodist Home for Children. Today, he's living on his own, attending college, and he says to people,

'Look at me now'



Before Wilson left Holston Home in September, the staff threw him a housekeeping shower. "I hit the jackpot, didn't I?" he said, opening gifts.

By Holly Craft

John Wayne Wilson, 19, continues to write chapters in the success story known as his life.

Before he left to live on his own in September 2003, Wilson spent four years at Holston United Methodist Home for Children in Greeneville, Tenn. He was assigned there in 1999 by the state due to problems in his home life. "I also had a few disabilities," he said.

When asked to describe himself, Wilson responded, "Unique ... no one like me."

Wilson doesn't dwell on the negatives in his past and only briefly describes why he was placed into state custody. Now living in Louisville, Tenn., with a job at a Knoxville supermarket, he knows he has done well for himself. His career goal is to become an astronaut.

Adopted at birth, he never knew his biological parents. He thought of his adoptive parents as his only parents. They were supportive while he was at Holston Home. "They came to every meeting," Wilson said.

According to Wilson, the four years he spent at Holston Home helped him socialize and express himself appropriately. During his stay, he developed friendships with the staff and other children. He considers them a part of his family. "My mom always makes me say 'extended' family," he said.

Wilson grew up with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder and his disability provided enough ground for therapists and relatives to build a whole mountain of doubt against him. But, discouragement from others only encouraged him.

"I got tired of people saying I couldn't do it," he said. "I



John Wilson recently visited Holston Home for the annual children's Christmas party.

wanted to prove them wrong."

Nearly 20 years old now, beginning college and focused on entering the military, Wilson is contradicting what many people told him.

"They said I couldn't make it off medication," he said. "They said I couldn't make it through school."

He shrugs, grins sheepishly and says, "Look at me now."

Miles from home

Wilson recalls the first time he stepped foot on the Holston Home campus, on Dec. 9, 1999. He asked the social worker, who brought him the farthest east he had ever been, where he was. "You're at Holston Home," he was told.

At first, he was withdrawn. "I was in shock because I didn't know where I was," he said. Although he was in custody of the state prior to the move to the children's home, Wilson had never been to Greeneville. "I was 80 miles from home without my parents," says the Oak Ridge native. But soon after his arrival, Wilson opened up and became a model of good behavior, easily made friends and did well in school, Holston Home staff members said.

During the latter portion of his stay at Holston Home, Wilson participated in the Preparation for Adult Living (PAL) program. According to Holston Home spokespersons, he was one of 20 young adults who go through the PAL program each year. Each participant lives with a roommate in the Brumit Center, in apartments that were built in 2000. They learn to fend for themselves, with the help of staff who coach them along the way. At the end of their stay in PAL - after staff has determined that they are capable of living on their own - the money PAL residents paid in rent is returned to them in the form of "seed money" that helps them get established on their own.

Today, Wilson lives alone in his own apartment and works at Food City. He recently started his first semester of college at Pellissippi State Community College. He receives financial aide, which both he and his mother are excited about.

Wilson stays in touch with his friends at Holston Home, talking to them almost every day. He visits when he can.

"They give me hugs and are always saying what a good job I'm doing," he said. During Christmas, he took a trip back to see everyone and join in the holiday festivities.

Through his last two years at Holston Home, he attended Greeneville High School, almost made the honors list, and developed a strong yearning to do as much as he could with the school's Jr. ROTC.

"My dad inspired me to go into the military," he said. "He was in the Army for one year and the Navy for 20 years."

As for John, he focused on the Air Force. He never missed a day of training and volunteered at every opportunity to stay active in the organization. In time, he had two cadets ranked underneath him.

His desire to join the military inspired him not only to lose weight, but to discontinue the use of his medication. Doctors prescribed medication to Wilson for his learning disability and they thought he wouldn't be able to function without it.

"I couldn't go into the military with my weight and being on medication," said Wilson, who has lost 20 pounds since last May. "I've done the impossible from the doctors' point of view," he said.

Awards & ambition

Four months before his high school graduation, Wilson's father passed away. Wilson was sorry his dad didn't get to see the graduation ceremony, when he received the Veteran of Foreign Wars Award for his accomplishments.

"I love shiny medals," he said with a big grin. "I was so shocked I got the medal that I walked off stage without getting my certificate. I must have stared at that award for three days."



In addition to attending college classes, Wilson has a job at a Knoxville Food City.

Wilson loved the Jr. ROTC so much that he didn't want to graduate. ("I begged them to let me stay.") He still goes to his former leaders for advice. Today, as a member of the University of Tennessee ROTC program, Wilson answers to a 5 a.m. wakeup call. He doesn't seem to mind.

"ROTC is preparing me to be a commissioned officer in the Air Force," he said.

Majoring in architectural engineering at Pellissippi State, the young student hopes to join the Air Force after college. "Twenty years in the Air Force is basically a career," he said. "I hope to make Major before I retire."

Wilson has a goal to eventually become an astronaut after his military duty is complete. He wants to go into the Space and Missile Division of the Air Force to gain experience.

'They give me hugs and are always saying what a good job I'm doing.'

"Hopefully I can make it into space," he said.

Between ROTC, classes and work, Wilson is so busy that he is rarely at home. But he still finds time to write stories with space themes ("I'm a big Star Trek fan," he says), play his keyboard, paint and sketch, and dabble in photography. He likes to develop his own black and white photographs. "Art is my strong point," said Wilson.

At school, astronomy, understandably, is one of his favorite subjects. He also likes to read about ocean liners and shipwrecks and is very interested in naval technology. "I want to create a river submarine, like the Hunley."

Still, Wilson says he will need to earn respect from those who do not believe he can accomplish all of his goals. He compares himself to Carl Brashear, his story made popular by the movie "Men of Honor." Brashear struggled to earn respect in the military due to, not only the color of his skin, but a physical disadvantage. "He strived and made it," said Wilson.

Despite the adversity Wilson has experienced, he has figured out a way to stay positive.

"I try to keep a smile on my face," he says. ■

Holly Craft is a free-lance writer who lives in Maryville, Tenn.

Henderlight urges churches to

March Forth for Children

By Anita Ayers Henderlight

In 1996 the bishops of the United Methodist Church launched a new project focusing on children and the poor. The Bishops' Initiative on Children and Poverty continues to date, the longest period for any Episcopal Initiative.

In a 2003 updated Initiative document, bishops call on all United Methodists to continue in ministry with children, their families and communities to build what they have defined as a Beloved Community. "The Beloved Community represents the possibility of a truly inclusive human family that embraces everyone but holds in



especially high regard the lives and gifts of the most vulnerable: children and the poor."

In response to the Bishops' Initiative, Holston Conference has implemented Change for Children, prayed for and communicated with legislators through advocacy efforts, started hosting children's issues forums, and provided continuing education resources related to these topics for congregations.

On March 5-6, a special event called "March Forth for Children" will be held at Cokesbury Center in Knoxville, Tenn. Sponsored by the Children's Ministry Team, the conference is a significant step in providing training for Holston people who love and care for children. Nineteen workshops will be offered over a two-day period. Bishop Ray Chamberlain Jr. will be present to help launch the event, and a Bible study will focus on Isaiah 1:17 - "...learn to do good, seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan..."

General Board of Discipleship staff members Mary Alice Gran, Carol Krau, MaryJane Pierce Norton, and Deb Smith will join "Safe Sanctuaries" author Joy Melton and Holston Home leaders Art Masker, Marian Hensley, and Keith Bailey, among others, to lead the workshops.

Sessions include: "10 Things Every Teacher Needs to Know"; "Advocacy is a Verb"; "After the Last Bell Rings"; "Building Curriculum for Children"; "Safe Sanctuaries"; "The Spiritual Development of Children"; "Giggles & Wiggles - Recreation with Kids"; and more. For details, visit www.holstonkids.com and click on "Advocacy," call (865) 690-4080, or e-mail anitahenderlight@holston.org. Registration deadline is Feb. 15. ■