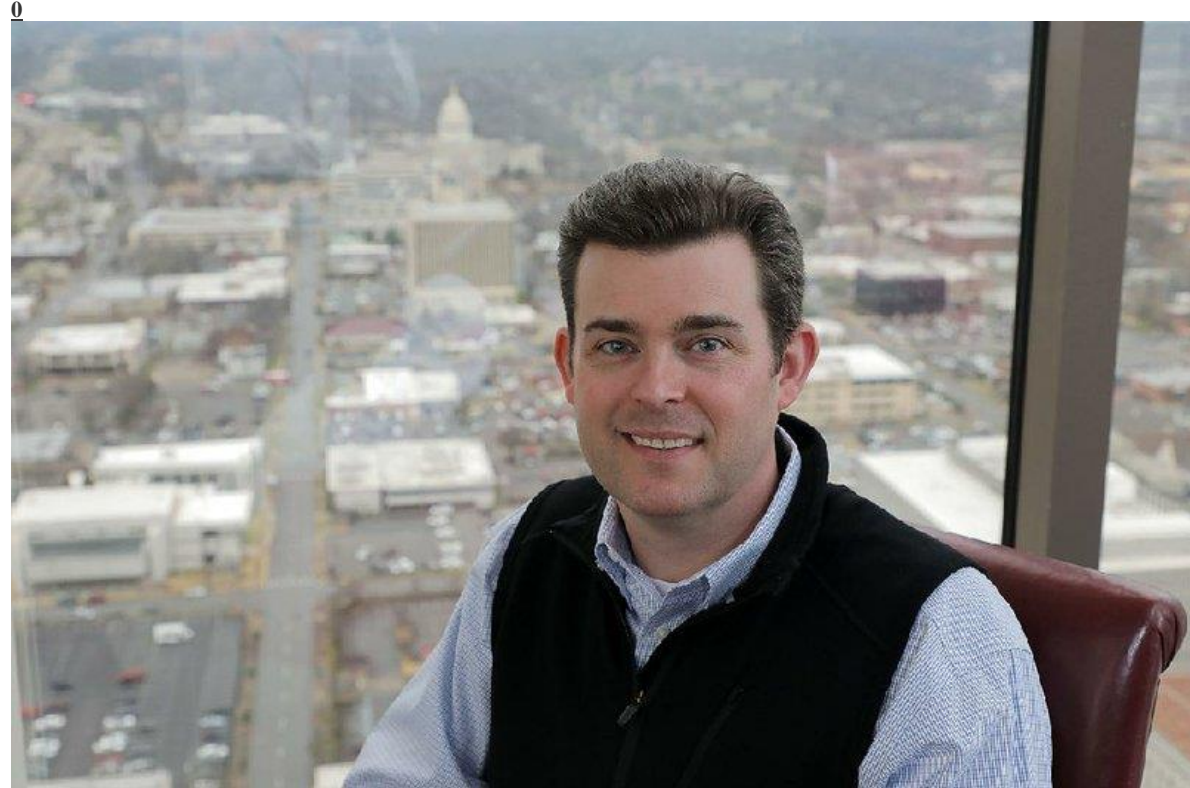


HIGH PROFILE: Perry Lee Wilson, a corporate lawyer who is chairman of the board of trustees at Lyon College and its biggest advocate

<https://www.arkansasonline.com/news/2019/mar/24/perry-lee-wilson/?features-profiles>

by Frank Fellone, special to the Democrat-Gazette | March 24, 2019 at 2:09 a.m.



“He has all the attributes you want not just in your lawyer but in your friend. He’s more than a professional acquaintance, but a friend and a confidant. There are very few people you can do that with, who will tell you what you need to hear rather than what you want to hear.” — George Dunklin

Lives are told in stories. Here’s a small story from Perry Wilson, who also has plenty of big stories at the ripe young age of 45.

He was a student at University of Arkansas at Little Rock’s Bowen School of Law, and clerking for Larry Jegley, then and now prosecuting attorney for the 6th Judicial District. As a second-year student, Wilson could actually try cases, and did in the matter of two juveniles who, walking past a parked Little Rock patrol car with its windows open, hosed it down with their super soaker water guns.

The police were not amused; the boys were charged with disorderly conduct.

Defending was Sam Perroni, one of the state's most prominent attorneys, and one of Pulaski County's 800-pound legal gorillas.

Wilson won, and although the case was reversed on appeal, it was a victory for someone whose goal was to be a "big-time litigator."

Litigate he has, but not so much anymore. At the Barber Law Firm PLLC of Little Rock, Wilson prefers to bring people together, to facilitate business deals, the kind of law, he says, that makes everybody happy.

As the managing member of the firm, Wilson has many interests outside the law. He's chairman of the board of trustees at Lyon College in Batesville and chairman of the board of directors of Economics Arkansas, an educational nonprofit whose mission is to help teachers incorporate economics into classroom learning from kindergarten to the 12th grade.

In the latter position, Wilson will complete a circle on Tuesday when he presents an award to Warren Stephens, chief executive officer of Stephens Inc. The honor — Leadership in Free Enterprise — was previously given to Wilson's father, Michael Wilson of Mississippi County, in 2016. Perry Wilson accepted the award, posthumously, for his father, who died at 65 in 2008.

To be geographically specific, Michael Wilson was of the municipality of Wilson, a company town if there ever was one, given that the Wilson family's roots there date to around the Civil War.

Not so much anymore. In 2010, the Wilson family sold its many thousands of acres of farm land, and numerous historic buildings in Wilson to Gaylon Lawrence Sr. and his son, Gaylon Lawrence Jr., of Sikeston, Mo. For northeast Arkansas, the sale was an earthquake. For Perry Wilson, it was the right thing to do, and constitutes one of those big stories.

Another of those big stories is Wilson's belief in Lyon College, saying he believes it offers the best liberal arts education in Arkansas. Many of its students are their family's first generation to go to college, and for those kids, he says, Lyon is transformative.

But ... "Lyon was on the path to closure. I would say so. If it kept doing things the same way, it was closing. Now it's on the right path in an extreme success mode." Donald Weatherman, the previous president, "turned the ship in the right direction, and Joey is the engine we put in the ship."

Joey is W. Joseph King, Lyon's president who was recruited by the board and Perry Wilson.

"Perry was a very aggressive salesman on behalf of the college," King says. "He knew who he wanted and made it happen. He knew what the college needed, someone who could do some things to make the college more sustainable financially. I was an entrepreneur. I knew how to read a balance sheet."

"Joey knows what a college can and should be," Wilson said. "He's creative and also thinks like a businessman."

1,200 BY 2023

Lyon's goal, Wilson said, is to go from the current 700 or so students to 1,200 by 2023. To that end, there is a "massive infrastructure project on the horizon." Lyon aspires, Wilson says, to be like Sewanee in Tennessee, Davidson College in North Carolina, and Washington and Lee University in Virginia.

King says Wilson is an ideal board chairman in terms of commitment. Being chairman is not an easy task, he says, because any board has strong egos.

"He does his homework," King says of Wilson. "Being a lawyer, he never enters into a situation where he hasn't prepared. Depending on a board chairman's background, they may not have that commitment. The nightmare is a board chairman who wants to run the place but doesn't have the skills or disposition to do that.

"Perry is mostly hands off but hands on when he needs to be. He respects the role of faculty and alumni, and has a high level of expectation when it comes to the service of a trustee. He expects you to make every meeting, and to make a substantial financial commitment."

Wilson calls himself a "board restructure guy." Lyon's board under his leadership has been cut in half, he says, "not to exclude anyone, but to be nimble enough to make dramatic change."

Something similar has happened to the board at Economics Arkansas, its executive director, Kathleen Lawson, says.

"Perry has changed the way the board operates," Lawson says. "The board is different — we've gone from 78 members to 49 members."

The Wilson family also has a long connection to Arkansas State University at Jonesboro. ASU's top graduating senior is given the Wilson Award. And the oldest building on campus, now home to the College of Osteopathic Medicine, is Wilson Hall.

ASU President Charles Welch said a rumor circulated a few years ago that Wilson Hall would be torn down.

"People got worked up," Welch says, "but we just needed the right use for it. It worked perfectly for the osteopathy school, and it's one of the most tech-advanced buildings we have now."

Perry Wilson remains committed to ASU, Welch says.

"The Wilson family also understands and appreciates the impact ASU has on northeast Arkansas and the Delta. That's near and dear to their heart, having raised generations there. Perry has been the one in the family to maintain that connection." George Dunklin, whose family operates Five Oaks hunting lodge in Humphrey, came to know Wilson through legal matters, a relationship that has grown from there.

"Perry is very intellectual, hardworking, a quick learner, a quick wit," Dunklin says.

"Also a caring person who cares about his clients and his friends. He has all the attributes you want not just in your lawyer but in your friend. He's more than a professional acquaintance, but a friend and a confidant. There are very few people you

can do that with, who will tell you what you need to hear rather than what you want to hear.”

Joey King describes Wilson as honest and open-minded.

“He also has very high standards ... he doesn’t come into anything with mediocrity as his focus. He’s a really good person, but a very intense person. For some people, that can be challenging, but everyone appreciates the good-heartedness.

“He is in no way an entitled person. He comes from a storied family in Arkansas, and as you know that can go either way.”

MANAGING CHAOS

Perry Wilson’s way was influenced by his father, Mike Wilson, who told his son — cut your own swath.

As a student at Southern Methodist University, Perry Wilson took a course in microeconomics. He didn’t like it. His father’s view was that the world always needed lawyers and accountants — and if Perry didn’t like economics, he sure wouldn’t like accounting. His path took a liberal arts trajectory, which he advocates, especially in the context of Lyon College. For those students, Wilson says, the jobs of the future haven’t been created yet. A liberal arts background, he believes, prepares those students for any eventuality.

After graduating from the Bowen School of Law, Wilson worked two years as a deputy prosecuting attorney, working in juvenile court, Little Rock District Court, then known as municipal court, and eventually moving into circuit court.

“I got to see a side of humanity I never would have seen without that job.”

Being a deputy prosecutor, he says, “teaches you how to manage chaos.”

Wilson worked in circuit court during the state’s meth boom, and says he tried a meth case every two weeks. One week he had a jury trial on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday.

“When I came here I had more jury trials than half the lawyers here. The more you do it, the better you get.”

A state law at the time imposed a mandatory 10-year sentence on felony meth convictions. That led to few plea deals and lots of trials, Wilson says.

“Some very creative defenses were put up.”

The basic ingredients of making meth can often be found around the house. The prosecution would offer up the evidence, and defense lawyers would point out that the ingredients were everywhere.

Wilson’s rebuttal: “Yes, I do have all this stuff around the house — but I don’t have it all in one box.”

As Wilson pursued his legal career, he continued to serve — for Arkansas State University, for the Bowen School of Law, for the University of Virginia’s Arkansas selection committee, and as a co-trustee of the Mississippi County Doctors Discretionary Fund.

The latter was an effort to help students from northeast Arkansas become doctors and then hopefully come back home. Success, Wilson says, was mixed.

“That doesn’t mean we shouldn’t have tried. It’s so hard to get people to come back to the Delta. They see it as depressed and with less opportunity.”

Wilson hasn’t gone home to live, either. Neither has he been back to his namesake town since the sale of Lee Wilson & Co. in 2010.

‘IT’S BITTERSWEET’

“It’s bittersweet. It’s not our town anymore. But I’m extremely proud of what the Lawrences have done. It’s 10-fold what it used to be, and I’m really proud of that.”

After his father’s death, Wilson says he spent the next three years splitting time between his law practice and the family business, trying to learn as much as he could about the latter.

“When Dad was alive we would talk about selling the business because the family was getting too large,” Wilson says. “When the percentage of family not actively involved in the business exceeds the percentage that is, you’re in trouble.”

He won’t say much more, still bound by a confidentially agreement.

While he’s mum on the sale, Wilson will talk about his and wife Jennifer’s 3-year-old son, Evans.

Evans has a rare genetic disorder, fumarate hydrate deficiency, which impedes development of the brain. How rare? A geneticist at Arkansas Children’s Hospital estimated a one in 400 million chance, Wilson says. Turns out Perry and Jennifer have a genetic marker for the condition.

Evans has “a helluva personality. He expresses much happiness when he sees either one of us.”

Speech, occupational and physical therapy is provided to Evans at Pediatrics Plus.

“We will give him every opportunity we can,” Wilson says. “It doesn’t matter the outcome, we’ll give him every opportunity.”

Having Evans helps Wilson approach all people with empathy.

“I do not know what hell that person is going through.”

ECONOMICS FOR KINDERGARTNERS

Economics Arkansas, which proposes to support education for real life, dates to 1962, when it was established by Arch Ford and Bessie B. Moore. Its mission is to provide resources for teachers K-12 to teach economics, personal finance and the free enterprise system.

Perry Wilson was hooked at his first board meeting.

“You have not lived until you sit in front of kindergartners giving you a presentation on what scarcity is,” Wilson says. “It’s amazing the way teachers break these concepts down to where even kindergartners can understand them.”

In this case, the teacher told the kids one morning to take their seats. Minus one seat.

Lawson, executive director of Economics Arkansas, says of Wilson: “He’s a champion of the work we do.”

The organization's 2018 report shows it works with 40 school districts in 68 counties, educating more than 33,000 students.

"We want to do everything we can to integrate economics into the classroom," Lawson says.

"I wouldn't be involved if I didn't believe in it," Wilson says.

Back in Batesville, Joey King observes that his contract as president of Lyon College, running through 2022, dovetails with Wilson's term as board chairman. Also with the timing of the strategic plan. Also with the college's 150th anniversary.

"He's committed to serving through my contract," King, 48, says, "so effectively we have an agreement. It's not the norm to have a president and a chairman in their 40s. He and I would be significantly younger than most board chairmen and presidents by 10-15 years."

Wilson's relative youth generates energy and a fresh perspective, King says.

"I never have to worry about Perry being tired. He's always on."

"Because Perry in his mid-40s there's a lot of potential and promise in his future," King adds.

"This isn't looking back on a life well lived.

"I don't know if he has other ambitions. It would not surprise me if he did, because he certainly has the capabilities."

SELF PORTRAIT

Perry Wilson

DATE AND PLACE OF BIRTH: March 8, 1974, Memphis

FIRST JOB: Cleaning out horse stalls for my grandfather. Eight years old. He paid me one silver dollar per week.

FAVORITE JOB: Deputy prosecuting attorney for Larry Jegley

BEST ADVICE I EVER GOT: The most fulfilling work you do in your life will be the work you do outside of your "job."

WORST ADVICE I EVER GOT: I like to think I'm pretty good at spotting and ignoring bad advice, but I remember someone once telling me I was wasting my time devoting so much energy to charities and nonprofits. That person was clearly misguided.

BOOK ON MY NIGHTSTAND RIGHT NOW: Switch by Chip and Dan Heath

MY FATHER ONCE TOLD ME: Cut your own swath in life.

THE LAW IS: A very small part of the overall practice of law.

I LOVE TO HUNT: With a bow.

WHAT EVERYONE SHOULD KNOW ABOUT ARKANSAS: It would amaze most folks how full of innovators Arkansas really is. From entrepreneurs to educators, we really do have a wealth of talent in this state.

MY WIFE WOULD DESCRIBE ME AS: Busybody/clean freak.

MY FAVORITE MEAL IS: Dessert — chocolate soufflé.

THE FOUR GUESTS AT MY FANTASY DINNER WOULD BE: Only need one — my Dad.

ONE WORD TO SUM ME UP: Decisive.



Photo by Arkansas Democrat-Gazette/JOHN SYKES JR.

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