

# PEOPLE OF ACTION

## Wendell E. Willis

Executive Director, MPS Foundation

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(Member since 2004)

Wendell has earned a reputation as a facile operations-oriented administrator; however, few know his other side as a talented painter and print maker. As a child, Wendell would go to his uncle's home after school. The uncle, an artist himself, nurtured Wendell's artistic ability and interest. Wendell developed some real skills as an illustrator but was most adept as a print maker. While his first works and interests were in portraiture and realism, influenced by the style of Kandinsky and Dali, he soon lent himself to the abstract

Wendell went onto earn a B.A. from Northwestern University majoring in Economics as well as Art

History & Theory. (In addition to his degree from Northwestern, he was in the Future Milwaukee Leadership Class of 2007-8, attended the Alliance Executive Leadership Institute at the University of Michigan and was part of the CDFI Leadership Learning Network sponsored by the Annie E. Casey Foundation).

When asked how Economics and Art intersected, he said:

*"Somehow I'm able to flex both sides of my brain. I'm not a highly analytical problem solver but because of my interest in Art I'm able to look at things differently and think outside-the-box for solutions. Going to Northwestern my Black parents said there was no way I was going to major in Art. It took years to get to the moment when I realized I could have business-like thought processes and still be creative."*

As a youngster and then a college student, Wendell gravitated to people who could expose him to new ideas and teach him something. Wendell took to soccer as a college student and during a summer he worked at the Medical College of Wisconsin Hypertension Lab. The director there was really into soccer and introduced Wendell to the Milwaukee Kickers Soccer Club, encouraging him to try his hand at coaching. Wendell is a stand-out soccer coach, learning much from working alongside U.S. World Cup Coach Bob Gansler. Wendell went onto coach hundreds of kids including his own.

Wendell's professional life has centered around operations. From 2015 to 2018 he served as Chief Operating Officer (COO) for the Milwaukee Public School System (MPS) under the direction of then-Superintendent Dr. Darienne Driver. In that position Wendell supervised 1,300 employees and \$400M in budgets. (MPS has 78,000 students



Wendell, his three children, and his wife Anne

enrolled in 158 schools throughout Milwaukee County. With more than 10,000 employees and an operating budget of \$1.2 billion, MPS is the largest school district in the state and one of Wisconsin's largest employers).

When Dr. Driver moved onto marriage and another career in Michigan, the COO position was eliminated. However, new Superintendent Dr. Keith Posey determined Wendell's operations' skills and non-profit management experience were well-suited to name him the Executive Director of the MPS Foundation.

Since assuming the helm of the Foundation, Wendell has increased donations by more than 30%. The Foundation's role is to provide enhancements and scholarships for the 78,000 students enrolled in MPS. (To qualify for a scholarship, a student must meet the criteria set by the donors, however, overall MPS college-bound students must demonstrate a commitment to service and be of high character).

Prior to joining MPS, Wendel served as Corporate Officer & Vice President of Ways to Work, Inc. (WtW) was a unique national non-profit CDFI lending short-term, low-interest auto loans to working families. It was absorbed into the Alliance for Strong Families and Communities in 2015.



Maddie, Max, and Halle on Carnival Night

Wendell's work history also includes operations and marketing positions at Agape Community Center, HNI Risk Services, McLeodUSA, Inc. and Blue Cross & Blue Shield United of WI.

Wendell and his wife, Anne, (an Academic Advisor at UWM) have three children, two daughters, Maddie (Madeline), 18 and Halle, 11, and a son, Max (Maxwell), 16. Maddie attends DePaul University in Chicago with aspirations to be a documentary film maker. Max is an incoming Senior at Rufus King, with an interest in journalism. Halle is in 6<sup>th</sup> grade at Maryland Avenue Montessori and is a bright, sociable girl who just may change the world.

Wendel says: "As a family we always agree and are willing to see any movie based on a Marvel Comic Book character. Going out to eat is another family favorite and everyone's first choice is always Tandem. During this quarantine we enjoyed many backyard fires and grand family walks." One night the family made a carnival in their home (you can see it on Facebook).

As an involved parent and African/American man, when asked what he tells his children about the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, Wendell had this to say:

*"I tell them it is important to know your history and understand to every movement there has to be a plan and an end game. A movement can't be in of itself. I encourage them to be engaged, but it should be grounded in something concrete. As a family we watched the John Lewis documentary. It is imperative they understand what their grandparents lived through. My parents are from the South and lived through Jim Crow. They left the South because they valued education. I also tell them it is important they understand the definitions of the terms people*

throw around. For example, U.S. Representative Alexandria Ocasio Cortez is sometimes referred to as a fascist. She's not. She's a democratic socialist. I use that as an example of understanding terms within a movement."

Wendell went onto comment about the BLM movement. "I think when you're running a movement it is important to express the poignancy, but the mission also needs to be defined. This incarnation of the BLM doesn't have a central leader, like the Reverend Martin Luther King, John Lewis, Malcolm X, and others were in the 60s. It was a coordinated and calculated movement. But then, since this movement is unilateral, maybe a lack of a central leader is good as each inroad can be more localized."



Wendell was born and raised in Milwaukee, but he is quick to point out his parents created a Southern home. He, his cousins, and younger brother, were instilled with Southern values, culture, food and points of view. That means that even today if going to church is a more casually dressed affair, Wendell and his kin would be dressed in their Sunday best. There's a formality in a Southern home not entirely understood from those of us from the North.

Wendell is a busy man, but he still finds time to contribute to civic organizations. He serves on the Board of Directors for the following organizations:

- Milwaukee Rotary Club (for years he also served as co-chair of the Partners in Education Committee)
- Northwest Side CDC
- Wisconsin Conservatory of Music
- Ascension Southeast Wisconsin Common Hospital

Wendell is a Rotarian of the highest order. "Rotary has been the one place in Wisconsin where business leaders, cross sector, and regardless of background for the most part, are singularly focused on service and improvement of the community. If someone joins Rotary for a quick fix or quick help for their business, it will not be satisfying. Rotary is a long-term commitment to the four-way test."

This writer has also witnessed the formation of lasting friendships within Rotary. Wendell Willis is one of my best.



**Editor's Note:** Rotary People of Action is a bi-monthly series written by Rotarian Barbara Velez. The August 7 edition will feature Dr. Robert Gleeson, RCM's COVID-19 authority.