

Scarlett Wilson

Date: 8/16/2008

Tough and aggressive, yes, but the 9th Circuit solicitor has lighter side

By Bill Thompson

The Post and Courier



Wade Spees

The Post and Courier

Scarlett Wilson, the first woman to hold the office of 9th Circuit solicitor, takes her job seriously but says people would be surprised at her sense of humor and how much she likes to laugh.

About Scarlett

Born: 1968.

Parents: Millie Dudley and D.I. Wilson.

Away from work, what are your passions?: "Playing the guitar. It's my nemesis, and it will probably be a lifelong battle. Otherwise, spending time with my nieces, who are just the absolute lights in my life."

Have you found a balance between your professional and private lives?: "No. It's not something I struggle with. I don't think it's balanced, but ..."

Dream getaway: "It really doesn't matter where. I just want to have a spectacular sunset."

What gets you enthused in life?: "Music. If I can see a singer-songwriter strumming the guitar or playing the piano, I love it."

What drives you batty?: "My pet peeve is the sound bite, when people aren't interested in listening to the whole story."

Scarlett Wilson looks wistfully at her guitar, parked decorously on a stand in a corner of the living room. Her sigh is almost inaudible.

"I'm a total left-brain."

The lawyer has not yet become the accomplished musician she hoped to be. But a portrait of Elvis (yes, on velvet) hovering above her on the wall looks down benignly, not with accusation. "Don't worry, darlin'," he seems to say, "not everyone grows up to be Les Paul. You'll become who you're destined to be."

Thank you vurry much.

Wilson's destiny, to date, has resonated not from the hollow well of a stringed instrument, but from within the courtroom. As 9th Circuit solicitor, the Mount Pleasant resident invests her days in the solemn business of prosecuting crimes.

Now, on a relaxed summer day and with the laughdispenser at full throttle, can we just get past this notion of her being so serious?

For many in this cockeyed era, perception is reality. But Wilson says there's one notion some have of her that couldn't be more wrong.

"I hate to speak for other people because I could be wrong about their perception," says Wilson. "But I get the feeling sometimes that I'm seen as being mean or mean-spirited, and I think that totally misses the mark. Certainly, I think I've earned the reputation for being tough and aggressive as a prosecutor. But as far as mean-spirited, that's just not there. That might be the double-edged sword of being tough and aggressive. It doesn't worry me too much."

Still, when her family sees her on TV, they've been known to remark, "Why are your eyebrows so close together? Why do you have this frown?"

"And I say, 'Well, I'm talking about very serious stuff. It's not something you want to be smiling and cheery about.' But I think people would be surprised at my sense of humor, which is a little bit off, and by how much I laugh and like to laugh. It's a big part of my life."

Life lessons

Viewers of "Oprah" saw a softer side of the solicitor in 2006, when Wilson and her sister, Tara Barr, appeared on the show to relate their experiences with Bertha Barcus, the family's housekeeper for so much of the sisters' youth in Hemingway. To honor her memory and her

influence on their lives, the sisters had donated a stained-glass window to Hopewell AME, the church Barcus and her husband attended before their deaths.

Expressing her feelings to Oprah Winfrey and the audience was a moving experience.

"It was quite emotional," Wilson recalls. "It was fun, and it was exciting, but it was very emotional. Perhaps because so many of these things had not been verbalized. Tara and I had talked about those things before, but not in front of an audience."

The gratitude and love Wilson harbors for Barcus is palpable. There was never a question of having to bridge a racial divide.

"That's just one of the things I'm so grateful for. I do feel so fortunate to have grown up in a small town and with such a sense of community. I had great parents who taught me well and were great role models, but Bertha really walked the walk. This whole business about race, she didn't talk about it at all, but she loved us like we were her own. And she didn't have to do that. Feeling that, and knowing that, shaped the way I grew up and shaped the way I am now. I think: 'I could have been somebody different without her.'

"There have been times in my career when people didn't expect to be treated fairly by me or give them my full attention. But when they saw me pour myself into it and saw me work like crazy to get results, and then I see them come around, it lets me know I've served Bertha."

'Perfect storm'

Barcus helped build on a foundation begun by Wilson's parents.

"I think I had a perfect storm of parents, in that my mother worked and had a business. My grandmother did as well. They weren't working because working was cool; Mom was working so that she, along with my father, could send my sister and me to school without us coming out with (the burden of) student loans. Seeing her do that, seeing her being a leader in our community that way, was very important to me. But she never discussed anything like that. She is a classic Southern woman — a steel magnolia."

Also without saying it in so many words, her father let his daughters know they could do and be anything they wished in life.

"That was very clear to me very early on. He spent a lot of time with us showing us how to do things that probably weren't typical, and I think all these things have served me well. I did not know about limitations."

Wilson's mother grew up in Charleston Heights, and both parents enjoyed traveling. So Wilson did not have a wide-eyed awakening when she left Hemingway for the wider world. On the contrary. What she wanted to be, from a very young age, was a lawyer — because the coolest people on soap operas were always lawyers.

"I grew up watching the soaps from way too early on with Bertha. As I got a little older and into high school, I saw that this was a way I could be self-employed like both parents, and if I had children, I could go to all the games and activities like my parents did."

In 1989, Wilson graduated from Clemson University, where she flirted with the notion of majoring in finance. A brief foray as a bank teller erased that idea. She earned a degree from the University of South Carolina School of Law in 1992 and trained her eye on the solicitor's office.

"I had the same idea many people seem to have coming out of law school, which is that I would get experience at the solicitor's office as a prosecutor and then go out and make money. But I fell in love with it. I've never looked back. It wasn't that (other ways of practicing law) were not appealing; it was that what I was doing was so appealing to me. I felt my calling. And I feel so lucky. Some people go their whole life without knowing what their calling is or what they want to do. At 25, 26, I knew."

The investment

After a year clerking for S.C. Circuit Judge Don S. Rushing, followed by 18 months as a 5th Circuit assistant solicitor and a stint (1995-2000) with the U.S. attorney's office's Violent Crimes Task Force, Wilson became chief deputy solicitor for the 9th Circuit solicitor's office in 2001, in which capacity she continued prosecuting violent and complex crimes.

After the death of her boss, Ralph E. Hoisington, in June 2007, Gov. Mark Sanford appointed her 9th Circuit solicitor. On Aug. 3, 2007, the S.C. Senate confirmed the appointment, making her the first woman to hold the post in the state.

Having defeated opponent Blair Jennings to win the Republican nomination for 9th Circuit solicitor in June, Wilson is all but assured a four-year term in office in the absence of a Democratic challenger for the November general election.

Wilson's triumph was bittersweet in that she lost a dear friend in Hoisington.

"I'm in this position because of that loss. I think it will make me that much more devoted to it. What I hope (citizens) are invested in is my independence. When I say that, I mean that while we work with the defense bar and can build better relationships with that so our system works more efficiently and is more productive for everybody, we have to be separate and apart from them, and to some extent from law enforcement as well. We work hand in hand and side by side with law enforcement, but we also review its decisions. To a lesser degree, there has to be an independence from them.

"I hope that's one thing they are looking for from me. I hope they are also expecting fairness from me, making sure we treat people — victims or defendants — the same. But just because there needs to be consistency, that does not mean we have cookie-cutter justice."