



Bills' George Wilson passionate about community service

http://www.usatoday.com/sports/football/nfl/2010-08-31-bills-georgewilson-serves-community_N.htm

By Jon Saraceno, USA TODAY

Updated 9/4/2010 4:35 PM



 [Enlarge](#) By Allison Hojowski Buffalo Bills safety George Wilson with Dave Banks during the SAT/ACT Prep Workshop taught by Medaille College of Buffalo NY at the Northwest Buffalo Community center.

PITTSFORD, N.Y. — On a cool August afternoon, George Wilson took the time to walk the talk.

This wasn't about his exalted status as an NFL player, his role as a captain for the [Buffalo Bills](#), or an appearance in a [Mary J. Blige](#) music video earlier this year.

No, his chat with a group of boys along the bleachers at St. [John Fisher](#) College was his way of doing something constructive to help protect, and intellectually nourish, one of the most at-risk groups: young African-American males.

The inspirational 29-year-old strong safety was making good on a promise he made last spring. His newly established George Wilson S.A.F.E.T.Y. Foundation (Saving Adolescents from Everyday Trials of Youth) is a commitment of time, money and selflessness.

"Community service is a passion I have," he says.

His timing could not be better.

A study released this month by the Schott Foundation for Public Education re-emphasized the glaring need for more intervention nationwide on behalf of African-American males, even as economic resources for public schools shrivel.

Worse for Buffalonians, only three school districts in the nation ([Cleveland](#), Detroit and Dade County, [Florida](#)) posted lower results for African-American males than the city's 25% public high school graduation rate.

In January, Wilson was honored by the team as the franchise's NFL [Walter Payton](#) Man of the Year winner. The award is given for a player's combination of on-field and off-field contributions to the Western New York community. Among his good deeds were his "George's Jungle" sessions for Buffalo public high school students.

Bills coach [Chan Gailey](#) uses two words to describe Wilson.

"Unbelievable guy," he says.

In 2008, the White House presented Wilson with the President's Volunteer Service Award for his support with fitness programs for youth. Last spring, he hosted a life skills camping retreat in Nashville that promoted self-esteem and leadership.

In recent years, the Bills safety has been a guest at the University of Kentucky's [Martin Luther King Jr.](#) Cultural Center, where his "Accusations, Allegations and Acceleration: How to Stay on Top of the Game" talk addressed, among other things, media portrayals of African-American athletes.

Wilson's "That's Life" six-week mentoring program this year featured topics that included the value of an education, resolving conflict, avoiding the lure of gangs, financial planning and making healthy nutritional and lifestyle choices. He took the group on visits to the University of Buffalo and Medaille College, where they were taught the importance of SAT/ACT prep work.

The motto for the workshop: "Failure is not an option."

For their graduation from the "That's Life" program, Wilson treated the boys to a fancy local restaurant, the Buffalo Chophouse, outfitting them in shirts and ties.

"I never thought there would come a day where someone (of his stature) would step up to the plate the way he has and do this for our young people," says [Tony Williams](#), director of operations for the Northwest Buffalo Community Center. "George is one of those people who is grounded; he never forgot where he came from. He understands the importance of making sure young people who are like he was growing up have a fair chance at success.

"I wish there were more athletes doing this rather than hanging out down in South Beach."

As a result of Wilson's encouragement, some teenagers got jobs this summer. At least one young man has enrolled in college. Another one, Diamond Solomon, plans to pursue a post-secondary education in business management.

"Some people think football is all about the money," says the 17-year-old senior at McKinley High. "But some people, like George, play because they love the game. And some people, like George, come back to the community and inspire."

Last spring, the player also established bank accounts for 17 boys ages 13-17. On a trek to [Ralph Wilson Stadium](#), Wilson demonstrated the value of exercise and proper nutrition. He plans to expand his efforts to Fayetteville, Ark., where he attended college. Future "That's Life" seminars will include girls.

"These kids are from the city, they had never been out to the Bills' facility (in suburban Orchard Park)," Wilson explains. "To see the looks on their faces, I knew I had to do more. I promised them that if they finished the after-school program, I would invite them to training camp and treat them to a game this fall."

For Wilson, raised in a single-parent household, community service and positive role-modeling are not mere options. They are mandatory.

Wilson knows all too well it is most often about opportunity for young people, that confronting and slaying seemingly impossible odds takes perseverance, a team-first attitude and trust.

"Coming from a small town in Western Kentucky, my whole journey, I am able to say that I'm living my dream each and every day," he says. "I am able to share that journey. I used to question myself — "Will I ever make it?" — because it was taking me so long.

"Sometimes, opportunity is disguised as hard work. I am a career underdog, so I just try to show (young folks) that anything is possible if you are willing to work."

The sojourn for the self-motivated player from Paducah, Ky., where he hosts a free football youth camp, has been challenging and highly instructive.

Wilson posted a 3.7 GPA in high school, but says he spurned a scholarship offer from nearby Western Kentucky University because he believed he could play in the SEC.

No one else did. At least no one willing to offer him a free (or partial) ride.

So Wilson packed up his meager belongings, including a great big bag of hope, and headed off to the University of Arkansas. He walked on.

Despite a rash of injuries, the possession-style receiver with the aggressive blocking style started three seasons, twice leading the Razorbacks in catches, finishing as the school's second all-time leader in receptions.

"I rolled the dice and bet on myself at Arkansas," he says. "I knew I could play at that level. That first year, we had to pay for part of school. It definitely was a sacrifice that my mother and I made."

His initial rejection by major-college football programs would serve him well down the road.

NFL teams thought so little of Wilson that they passed on him in the 2004 draft.

Spurned again, he nevertheless signed with the [Detroit Lions](#) as a rookie free agent. Released, he caught on with the Bills, joining their practice squad that same year. Finally promoted to the roster in 2006 for the final game, Wilson was strongly advised the following spring by then-Bills coach [Dick Jauron](#) to switch positions.

Potential pros often go this route; few are successful. Often, it is the end of their dreams.

"I had to make a career decision: Am I going to stay on offense and try to fight for a job, or take this risk and try to sustain my career?" Wilson recalls. "It was a tough decision. I went with my gut. I was all for it once I made the decision. I sold out."

Wilson never did snag an NFL pass. Well, at least one intended for him.

In his first NFL start in '07, the safety picked off [Dallas Cowboys](#) quarterback [Tony Romo](#) on [Monday Night Football](#) returning the interception for a touchdown. That same season, he returned a fumble for a score against the [Miami Dolphins](#).

He had demonstrated early on that he knew the value of a takeaway. Ultimately, though, it is the giving nature of George Wilson that sets him apart from most of his peers.