

# Reginald Wilson: A Black American Socialist (1927-2020)

Reginald Wilson, the prominent African American psychologist and educator, civil rights activist and socialist, and a member of the *New Politics* board, died on December 13, 2020 at the age of 93. His was a quintessentially Black American story of the twentieth century, if a particularly illustrious one. From his role as a Tuskegee Airman to his activism with C.L.R. James' *Correspondence* group, to his founding of the first Black ski club, to his academic career he was a remarkable individual. A socialist for 75 years, he serves as a model for us today.



Reg's parents— Oliver Leon Wilson and Nancy McCrimmon Golden—were from the South, his father born in Louisiana and his mother's birth place unknown. They were part of the Great Migration, going north to Detroit where they settled in the Black Bottom neighborhood on the city's near east side, a neighborhood that was demolished in the 1960s and replaced with Lafayette Park.

His father left the family when he was young and his mother raised Reg and his three brothers by giving piano lessons and taking in laundry. A very religious woman, she raised her boys in the church and they grew up in the choir, singing in churches in Detroit as well as in Windsor just across the border in Canada. The family had a shed in the back yard and Reg, who from the time he was seven or eight years old knew he wanted to be a pilot, built a toy plane out of crates on top of the shed and remembered thinking, "One day I'm going to fly

my ass off!"

American entry into the Second World War in 1941 gave him his chance. At the age of 18, Reg enlisted in the Army. While stationed in Texas, recruiters came to his base looking for candidates for a program to train Black pilots. Reg took the test, passed, and became part of the U.S. Army Air Force. He was sent to Tuskegee, Alabama, to be trained, becoming one of 1,000 Tuskegee-trained pilots, the storied Tuskegee Airmen. While in Alabama he and a group of his fellow trainees went out on a boat in the Gulf of Mexico with a portable radio, what they all saw as a luxurious experience. While there they heard the song, "Straighten up and Fly Right," and it became one of Reg's favorites. He remembered that the Tuskegee instructors were very demanding. "We had to be better than the white pilots," he said. Upon graduation, he was sent to Europe and saw combat in Italy, though like many combat veterans he was reluctant to talk about those experiences.

Reg recalled that at the end of the war, when he returned to the United States and came down the ship's gangway, he was greeted by an officer telling them, "White boys over here. N.....s over there." "I knew then," said Reg, "that I would have to fight for the rest of my life."

After working briefly in a Ford plant in Detroit and finding the work grueling, Reg decided he wanted to go to college. Most Black veterans, living in the South, were unable to take advantage of the G.I. Bill because of the region's Jim Crow laws. But living in Detroit, Reg was able to enroll in Wayne State University where he would eventually earn a B.A., an M.A., and a Ph.D. Wilson told a reporter in 2007 that the bill enabled him to attend college after leaving the Air Force in 1947. "The GI Bill was absolutely responsible for making it possible for me to go to college," Wilson says. "My family was very poor before the war, and even after the war." Wilson explained that two champions of the GI Bill were not considered friendly to the aspirations of African Americans.

Mississippi Congressman John Rankin, an avowed segregationist, and Senator Bennett Champ Clark, an anti-New Deal Democrat, "were among the unlikely and deeply conservative sponsors of the most revolutionary and racially empowering piece of legislation to affect American higher education in the twentieth century."

Reg was involved in the civil rights movement at that time and remained an activist throughout his life. While participating in all of the usual civil rights protests over housing, employment, and access to services, in 1958 he was also one of the founders of the nation's first Black ski club. Finding a cool reception from the university ski club, together with his friends Frank Blount and William Morgan, Reg founded the Jim Dandies, taking their name from LaVern Baker's 1956 hit song "Jim Dandy to the Rescue." Because most of the ski areas were located on federal lands, they did not face discrimination on the slopes, though they found it nearly impossible to find housing for Black skiers. After *Ebony* magazine featured the club in its March 1962 issue, the Dandies received inquiries from around the country, forming ties to other Black skiers. Floyd Cole of Denver invited the Jim Dandies to travel to Colorado and some 50 Black skiers rode the lifts and slid down the slopes of the newly opened Vail, Winter Park, Loveland, and Berthoud Pass ski areas. After gathering around the resort fireplaces to socialize, they decided to work on training young Black skiers with an eye to the Olympics.

Through his civil rights engagement, in 1959 Reg connected with *Correspondence*, a leftist newspaper inspired by the politics of C.L.R. James, that is, anti-capitalism, anti-Stalinism, and pan-Africanism. James and Marty Glaberman, who had come out of the Trotskyist Socialist Workers Party, had established the paper in Detroit in 1951 and they had a small following at Wayne State University and in the Detroit auto plants and communities. Together with other Black activists, Reg attended public meetings in the *Correspondence* offices and

gradually became a member of the group. He became good friends with two of the group's leaders, James and Grace Lee Boggs.

"I participated in all aspects of the publication, from writing, editing, and drawing cartoons to traveling the country on behalf of our newsletter. *Correspondence* discussed the labor movement and politics, but it also featured Black artists, and some issues were devoted to the Black visual arts in Detroit as well as to publishing Black poetry," Reg recalled. In a series of articles called "What Are We Fighting for Anyway?" Reg discussed the civil rights movements as "a revolutionary struggle for freedom."

As a staff member for *Correspondence* covering the movement, Reg traveled to Harlem, New York City, to Prince Edward County, Virginia, and to Atlanta to get to know the movement there led by Martin Luther King. In Monroe, North Carolina, Reg connected with Robert F. Williams, the organizer of a Black armed self-defense organization and later author of *Negroes with Guns*. In 1961, Reg undertook the dangerous task of delivering guns to Williams and the Monroe organization. He also led the Detroit Committee to Aid the Monroe Defendants.[1] Reg also traveled to meet movement activists in the Caribbean and Africa. During various travels in the 1960s and 1970s, he had an opportunity to meet and talk with C.L.R. James. "These meetings gave me some appreciation of the giant intellect and the broad historical knowledge of the man," Reg wrote.

In addition to his work with the civil rights movement and the *Correspondence* organization, Reg was also involved in various reform organizations. After the Detroit urban rebellion of 1967, when Michigan Governor George Romney, Detroit Mayor Jerome Cavanagh, and business executive Joseph L. Hudson created New Detroit to examine the causes of the unrest, Reg became a member of the board. He was also involved with the Urban League and one of the presenters of its annual report in 1989 talking about his concerns about inequalities in

educational grants.

Reg's civil rights activism overlapped with his professional career. He completed his Ph.D. in Psychology at Wayne State University in 1971 with his dissertation "A Comparison of Learning Styles in African Tribal Groups with African American Learning Situations and the Channels of Culture." He also became a licensed psychologist in both Michigan and Washington, D.C. He went on to become a professor teaching courses in psychology, Black studies, and public policy. He became a director of test development and research, director of Black Studies, and of the Upward Bound program. He also served as a visiting professor of the L.B. Johnson School of Public Policy at the University of Texas. He became the president Wayne County Community College in Detroit for 10 years.

Beginning in 1982, he was involved in writing the *Annual Status Report on Minorities in Higher Education*, and he edited books such as *Minorities in Higher Education* and *Race and Equity in Higher Education*, and was a co-author of *Human Development and the Urban Community*. Reg's book *Think About Our Rights: Civil Liberties and the United States*, a history of the Black civil rights struggle with documents, was published in 1988. In May of 1991, Reg spoke on Blacks in the military expressing his concerns that participating in the military was not leading to opportunities and advances for Blacks in higher education as it once had when it benefitted him. In recognition of his academic work, he became a Senior Scholar at the American Council on Education, and a member of the editorial boards of *The Urban Review* and *About Campus*, as well as that of *New Politics*. He was the recipient of many awards, including a Distinguished Service Medal from the City of Detroit and the American Council on Education created the Reginal Wilson Diversity Leadership Award.

Yet, while pursuing his career, Reg remained politically active, attending demonstrations in Washington and in Florida

and writing on the issue of civil rights and equality that most concerned him. He continued to be a powerful advocate for affirmative action in academic journals and in the pages of *New Politics*, having joined the editorial board in 1995. In "Affirmative Action 2003" he stated the need for continued affirmative action forcefully:

*The majority of people of color, however, are barred from access to quality schooling before they are born by the twin evils of this society—race and class, which are byproducts of the capitalist system, but operate independently from it. In spite of undeniable progress, the majority of people of color are burdened by lifelong oppression, poverty and racism.*

For those reasons he believed affirmative action continued to be essential to the struggle against racism and discrimination.

In a review discussing *Brown v. Board of Education* he wrote:

*We must as socialists demand the best outcome for the greatest number of people; we cannot ask for less. We must not be seduced by the usual perception of seeing elite education as being only for those who have gone to good public or elite high schools. With the decline in integrated schools, the judicial failure of *Brown* and the wealth gap increasing for blacks and Hispanics, there is the danger of throwing up our hands and abandoning those who are the focus of our efforts. We may have lost the force of *Brown*, at least for the foreseeable future. We must not lose the people whom *Brown* was intended to save.*

To take one final example, in his 2006 essay "On Affirmative Action," Reg argued that affirmative action had been severely weakened, but he continued.

*That does not mean that blacks should give up the fight. That*

*means they must fight with even more ferocity for affirmative action. There are 37 million people in poverty in the United States. That is 12.7 percent of the population. That is the highest percentage of poor in the developed world. Twenty-five percent of blacks are in poverty and 22 percent of Hispanics. The poorest place in the United States is the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation. The only place poorer in the Western hemisphere is Haiti. These people are all Americans. They are all part of a gathering storm. They are the silent brothers and sisters whom no one talks about but who will not go away. They are the ultimate focus of affirmative action. They pose the question that was proposed in 1776: "What are we prepared to do to achieve democracy?"*

As these few paragraphs suggest, Reg was a critical analyst of American racism, a strong advocate for affirmative action, and one who not only demonstrated that in his essays but who could until shortly before his death be found on the streets marching and demonstration for the values in which he believed. And even after he turned 90, he took the train from Washington to New York to participate in the *New Politics* editorial board meetings.

He is survived by his wife, Dianne K. Perry, PhD. and two children, Adam Wilson and Kafi Wilson. We at *New Politics* have been honored to have Reg on our board and will miss him.

*This article will be of particular interest: My Experience with C.L.R. James and Correspondence.*

\*Thanks to Reg's widow, Dianne K. Perry, PhD. for sharing with me much information and many stories of Reg's life as well as her own memories of their experiences in the civil rights movement in the 1970s.

[1] Stephen M. Ward, *In Love and Struggle: The Revolutionary Lives of James and Grace Lee Boggs (Justice, Power, and Politics)* (University of North Carolina Press; Illustrated

edition, 2020), pp. 285-6.