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**MDC Board Member David Wilson: From Sharecropper's Son to the Groves of Academe**

"I was in the sixth grade before I went to school for five consecutive days each week," says David Wilson, Ph.D. In the Alabama blackbelt where Wilson grew up, African American children weren't required to go to school. His sharecropper father needed his sons' labor to keep the farm going-in the fall it was picking cotton, in early spring, tilling the soil and preparing it for planting cotton, okra and corn-so the boys had to skip school several days a week to help out.

"One week we'd go to school Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday and stay out Thursday and Friday to work in the fields. The next week we'd go Thursday and Friday and work the fields Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday," Wilson recalls. Frustrated by having to play catch-up each week, his five older brothers dropped out of school by the third grade. But Wilson vowed that was not going to be his fate. "I decided I would do everything in my power to develop my brain," says Wilson, the youngest of 10 siblings- and the first in his family to attend college.

Wilson says the make-shift wallpaper that also served as insulation in his childhood home played a big role in his education. His mother used the pages of *Look* magazines, given to the family by the white sharecroppers who owned the house, to plaster over the holes in the walls and keep out the winter chill. The house with no indoor plumbing, no electricity and no phone had walls that provided Wilson with his bedtime reading. "A huge portion of my elementary schooling took place in that shanty on a red dirt road in Marengo County," Wilson notes. "That's where I truly learned to see the world outside Alabama."

There were teachers along the way who nurtured Wilson's talent and cultivated his intellectual curiosity, and he is the first to acknowledge their influence. In fact, Wilson attended Tuskegee University because a high school teacher had taken him there as a 9<sup>th</sup> grader and he was smitten with the place. "I was in hog heaven, because I couldn't believe I was actually on a campus so rich in African American history," Wilson recalls. To support himself and pay his tuition, Wilson took out loans and worked three jobs. When he later went to Harvard for masters and Ph.D. degrees, he again used loans to finance his education. "When I left Harvard in 1987, I owed the university enough money to buy a three bedroom house in Alabama," Wilson says, chuckling.

Based on his own track record, Wilson is a strong believer in not letting a lack of resources stand in the way of an education. "At Auburn (where he is Associate Provost and Vice President for University Outreach), I've been successful in getting the school to create scholarships for students with limited resources," Wilson says. "I look for opportunities to bring young people to Auburn and demystify the college experience. Exposure is important, but particularly to people

who grow up in poverty and don't have the resources to travel. I pride myself on not losing that prism of understanding life from the bottom up."

Wilson also was one of three authors of a study, commissioned by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, on the state of college financial aid in America. The results of that study spurred the Gates Foundation in 1999 to earmark \$1 billion for scholarships for higher education, the largest single gift ever given to education. The Gates Millennium Scholars Program awards scholarships to 1,000 low-income minority students each year, and Wilson is justifiably proud of having been one of the key authors of the study that prompted the Gates' largesse.

In his role overseeing the outreach division of Auburn University, Wilson is emphatic about involving community stakeholders in the university's initiatives. "I always ask, 'how have you involved the voices of the people you purport to help?'" says Wilson, adding, "the strategies we've developed have greater potential for sustainability if they are inclusive."

After a decade at Auburn University, Wilson is trading the mild Alabama climate for the frostier winters of Madison, Wisconsin. In May, he will take up his new post as Chancellor of the University of Wisconsin Colleges and the University of Wisconsin Extension. "Wisconsin really understands the importance of taking the university to the people," Wilson says. "The university coined the concept 'the Wisconsin Idea,' which says that the boundary of a public university is not the acreage on which it sits; the boundary of a public university is the boundary of the state."

When asked why he is not angry or bitter about the obstacles he faced as a child, Wilson says it's because of a life-changing conversation he had in 1990 with South African anti-apartheid activist, Walter Sisulu. As a Kellogg Fellow in South Africa, Wilson had the opportunity to meet and talk with Sisulu, who had been imprisoned, along with Nelson Mandela, for 28 years for his stand against apartheid. Wilson and the group of young people who met with Sisulu were impressed that he seemed to harbor no bitterness toward the society that locked him away for nearly three decades, and they asked him if their impression was correct.

Wilson says he'll never forget Sisulu's reply: "I spent 28 years in prison, of which six or seven were in solitary confinement, and I harbor no anger toward the society that did that to me. If you leave here without knowing anything else, know this: if you commit to doing the right thing, there is no room in your heart for anger or bitterness. I knew then and I know now that what I did was the right thing."

"At the time, I looked at myself in the mirror and said, 'I have met two men-Mandela and Sisulu-who have every right to be angry, and they're not,'" recalls Wilson. "Nobody locked me away for 28 years. Clearly I need to move beyond this state of mind."

And Wilson says he did leave his anger behind. "I consider myself a positive person who is here to improve the quality of life of those trapped in difficult circumstances," Wilson notes, "and to form alliances across race, gender and socioeconomic background. Anger, if not managed, gets in the way of progress."

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### **Ford/MDC Community Philanthropy Meeting Focuses on Greensboro's Struggle for Justice and Equity**

In early February, the Ford Foundation and MDC convened representatives from 30 community philanthropy organizations from across the country in Greensboro, North Carolina, to learn from each other and from Greensboro's rich history of civil rights activism and its contemporary struggle for justice and equity. MDC is the leadership and learning partner for the Ford

Foundation's Community Philanthropy, Race and Equity in the American South initiative. Participants came from as far away as Canada, California and Cincinnati as well as from Mississippi, Texas, Alabama and Louisiana.

Forty years ago, Greensboro grappled with desegregation. Today, Greensboro-like many other American cities-is facing a changing economy and a new wave of immigration. Philanthropic and faith-based community organizations are leading Greensboro's efforts to create a community that works well for all its residents. The two-day meeting focused on some of those community organizations, which sparked discussions about the opportunities and challenges for advancing equity and racial justice in America and beyond.

A second purpose of the gathering was to unveil a new website-<http://www.sncp.us/>-that will serve as a virtual meeting space for community philanthropy activists. The Southern Network for Community Philanthropy (SNCP) is an electronic tool designed to help philanthropies, individual donors, and nonprofit organizations organize and learn about public and private resources for creating equitable communities. Though the network focuses on the American South, it encompasses members throughout the United States and welcomes all those interested in working for greater racial, economic and social equity through collaborative community giving. The site contains articles and stories about the experiences of communities as they build bridges across traditional barriers of race, class, culture and gender and about how local funders work with nonprofits, policymakers and community leaders to create sustainable communities.

### **Opening the Meeting: Beware "Dangerous Donations"**

Dr. John Hope Franklin, historian and African American scholar, gave the opening remarks, commenting on philanthropy's role in furthering racial and social equity. Dr. Franklin defined philanthropy as "love of mankind," noting that such philanthropy leads to the pursuit of justice and fairness. But he warned against assuming that philanthropy's purpose is always noble, labeling those donations that result in limiting rather than expanding opportunity as "dangerous donations." As one example, Dr. Franklin noted the investment in higher education for blacks after Reconstruction. Those donations were based on the assumption that black students could only learn practical trades and weren't capable of mastering a liberal arts curriculum. The resulting "opportunity" had built-in limitations.

### **Race, Equity, and Reconciliation in Greensboro**

The first full day focused on visits to three community organizations working to help Greensboro navigate its new demographic and economic realities and come to peace with its past.

The [Community Foundation of Greater Greensboro](#) has positioned itself as a leader, broker, and funder of new forms of civic engagement and problem-solving by enlisting a wide range of local citizens who consider themselves "givers." Following a report that declared Greensboro "high in giving but low in social trust," the Foundation shifted its focus to that of building social capital through "relationship-based community philanthropy," honoring and encouraging both traditional and non-traditional donors. The Foundation also believed that it had to put its internal house in order before it could address community needs, so it changed the demographic makeup of its board and staff and asked the bold question, "Who in the community is comfortable with us, and who isn't?" The Foundation has sought to understand the underappreciated giving traditions of Greensboro's many demographic groups in order to find ways to support and encourage their generosity. The result has been a new way of working and a host of innovative programs that reflect the interests of new constituencies. One of these new programs is El Fondo Patronato de Mezquital, a fund developed by a "home town association" of former residents of Mezquital,

Mexico. The fund provides seed money for community projects in Mezquital, several of which have leveraged additional investment from federal and state sources in Mexico.

The Welfare Reform Liaison Project (WRLP), part of a faith-based community action agency, works to help low-income Greensboro residents transition from welfare to work. Two factors distinguish the approach of WRLP, which grew from a seminary thesis by its founder, Reverend Odell Cleveland. The project works in close partnership with the private sector to secure donations of surplus office supplies, paper goods, and other goods that are then resold at low cost to nonprofit organizations. WRLP also uses its storage and distribution warehouse as a training workshop where aspiring workers learn about merchandizing, inventory management and product distribution. WRLP then uses its relationships with major retail employers (K Mart, Family Dollar Stores) and firms in Greensboro's distribution sector to place its graduates in good jobs. The WRLP's combination of commitment to its workers and its carefully cultivated relationships with private business is giving low-wealth workers and their families new opportunities and changing the way business and the human service sector relate.

The [Beloved Community Center](#) (BCC) has taken an unprecedented step to heal the scars created by a defining and tragic moment in Greensboro's past: the 1979 massacre of an interracial band of labor activists by members of the KKK and the American Nazi Party. Drawing on Desmond Tutu's dictum that "you will be a crippled community as long as you do not look at your history," the BCC has created the Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission, through which citizens and institutions can determine the truth behind the events of 1979. This is the first US application of a process that has been successfully deployed in other societies in which history and culture have masked atrocities against marginalized people. The visit to BCC provided an opportunity to understand the nonviolent vision of Nelson and Joyce Johnson, the initiators of the Truth and Reconciliation process, and to engage the Johnsons and other civic and community leaders in dialogue about truth and reconciliation as a strategy for advancing justice and building community. "Reconciliation is not a prelude to punishment; justice is not about revenge," Nelson Johnson reminded the group. "This is not about punishing the 'trigger pullers.' The courts failed us, the newspaper failed us, the police force lost its way, and the community failed us. To focus on the 'trigger pullers' and not the institutions would be to 'invert justice.'" The Truth and Reconciliation process is driven to create a healed community as a key step in a just and fair community. "Everyone favors reconciliation," Nelson Johnson said. "Some who favor reconciliation want the truth. Some who want the truth want justice. We want reconciliation, truth, and justice."

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## Transitions

### **MDC Chief Operating Officer Dr. Ivey L. Allen to Take the Helm at the Foundation for the Mid South**

MDC's chief operating officer, Dr. Ivey Allen, is heading to Jackson, Mississippi to become president of the [Foundation for the Mid South](#), a regional development foundation that works to improve education, help families and children and build the economy in Arkansas, Louisiana and Mississippi. In her new role, Dr. Allen will preside over a staff of 14 and work with an 18-member board of directors. She takes over the presidency from Dr. George Penick, the Foundation's first president, who is leaving to become the director of RAND Corporation's newly created RAND Gulf States Policy Institute.

"In her four years with MDC, Ivey has been a trusted colleague who has made many lasting contributions to the organization," said MDC president David Dodson. "She will be missed-but our

paths will certainly cross in the future as our respective organizations go about the work of advancing opportunity and equity in the South."

MDC and the Foundation for the Mid South have close ties, going back to the Foundation's beginnings in 1989 when former Mississippi Governor William Winter was on MDC's board and recognized the need in his region for an organization similar to MDC. At the time, MDC helped in the creation of the Foundation and guided the formation of its focus and mission.

Dr. Allen said her first task will be to cultivate relationships with the staff and board as well as funders. "The devastation of Katrina has reintroduced the South to people who had forgotten about it," Allen explained, "and foundations have renewed their focus on the region."

"We knew that Dr. Allen's experiences at MDC, in particular, would complement the Foundation for the Mid South's work to promote racial, social, and economic equity in Arkansas, Louisiana, and Mississippi," said Governor Winter, who was head of the search committee. "As a native of Greenville, Mississippi, she has a unique perspective of and has continued to stay involved with the issues and opportunities that exist in our region. Her service to Jackson State University as a visiting professor, to the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation as a trustee/director, and to MDC and its commitment to promoting equity and opportunity will be invaluable assets to the work of the Foundation for the Mid South."

"This is a wonderful opportunity," Dr. Allen said, adding, "there will be challenges but they will be good challenges to have as we continue to rebuild the South. We will continue to build partnerships, because we can't do it alone."

### **Two New Staff Associates Join MDC**

Christina Rausch and Kate Doom have recently joined MDC's staff. Christina works with the FEMA Emergency Preparedness Demonstration Program and the Program for the Rural Carolinas. Her experience includes working as a consultant to NC human service nonprofits and in community building and grants management at the United Way of Greater Greensboro. She has an M.S.W. from the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill.

Kate has come to MDC to work on the Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count initiative. She's a recent cum laude graduate of Guilford College and has experience as a financial director for a candidate for the Florida state legislature.

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### **News Briefs**

The new **Danville Regional Foundation has hired MDC** to help its board develop grantmaking strategies for its assets of \$250 million. MDC is leading the board through a process of examining the community's history and the roles that philanthropy has played in its history as well as looking at future trends, emerging equity gaps and new options for grantmaking.

**MDC, with the support of the Ford Foundation, has launched a new website, [www.sncp.us](http://www.sncp.us), dedicated to the work of community philanthropy.** The site will serve as a virtual meeting space for those working in community philanthropy and contains a discussion board and articles about the experiences of communities as they build bridges across traditional barriers of race, class, culture and gender. Also on the site are articles about how local funders work with nonprofits, policymakers and community leaders to create sustainable communities.

**MDC senior associate Colin Austin has been selected as a Marano Fellow** of the Sector Skills Academy. The competitive fellowship, supported by the Aspen Institute, provides Fellows working on sector employment projects with leadership development experience. Austin, who directs MDC's Connecting People to Jobs and Latino Pathways programs, is one of 24 Fellows from around the country selected for the one-year fellowship.

**Preliminary results of the MDC/Duke poverty study are now available** in [pdf format](#). The study was conducted in summer 2005 among 312 families in four rural North Carolina counties: Gates, Beaufort, Burke, and Vance. The poverty study team held community forums in each of the four counties to develop local community definitions of poverty. The research teams then interviewed 312 individual families from those communities to learn the details of their family situations and examine how the families have moved into or escaped poverty over the past 10 years. Duke's Dr. Anirudh Krishna and MDC's senior associate Leslie Boney wrote an OpEd based on study findings.

**The Winter 2006 edition of Lumina Foundation for Education's magazine, *Focus***, is entirely devoted to community colleges and the Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count initiative. MDC is the lead partner for this multi-year national initiative to help more community college students succeed. Visit the Achieving the Dream website at [www.achievingthedream.org](http://www.achievingthedream.org).

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Information about MDC is available at [www.mdcinc.org](http://www.mdcinc.org).

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