

# Alumni Gazette

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## LASTING LEGACY

Marie Wilson, BA'72, MA'77,  
member of the Truth and  
Reconciliation Commission



Western

BY JASON WINDERS, MES'10, PHD'16

# FINDING HER PLACE

**MARIE WILSON HOPES THE LASTING LEGACY OF HER WORK IS A CANADA WILLING TO CONFRONT ITS PAST.**

**T**he enormity of it all never settled in until evening.

As one of three members of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, Marie Wilson spent years chronicling the lasting legacies of Indian Residential Schools. She heard hundreds of stories that reduced adults to tears by melting away the years – grown men and women became children in front of her eyes as they revisited a horrific, locked-away past.

“I had to constantly remind myself that these were adults in front of us – sometimes a very elderly person. But sometimes, you could hear their voices change in tense and tone. Then all of a sudden, you had this 5-year-old in front of you. They were little children,” Wilson said. “I have grandchildren who are exactly the ages these children were in the various versions of their experiences. I found it extremely difficult.”

After a day of “toughing it out” in front of crowds and colleagues, she spent evenings alone, in a hotel room, often in tears. It could all be too much, even for a veteran reporter like Wilson.

“Journalism prepares you for that. You put your game face on and then deal with your personal stuff on your own time,” she said. “I was grateful for that training in that discipline. I already knew how to do that. Not to say it was easy. But at least I knew how.”

Today, Marie Wilson, BA'72 (French), MA'77 (Journalism), still carries the memories of those days – and nights. But she hopes the lasting legacy of her work is a Canada better prepared to face its future because it was willing to confront its past.

**BORN IN PETROLIA**, Ont., raised in Sarnia, Wilson came from a large extended family with no post-secondary tradition. Her eldest brother was the first among dozens of first cousins to attend university; she was the second. Western was an acceptable choice to her family because it was arm's reach from home.

“It was uncharted territory. We were attached to our extended family. My parents had no reference for having a daughter in postsecondary education,” Wilson said. “Seems my hunger was in competition with my roots.”

At Western, she studied French Language and Literature. During an exchange opportunity in Montreal in third year, she was swept away by the wider world. Life beyond southwestern Ontario was to her liking. “That opened up the world to me,” she said.

Following graduation, she left to teach high school students in the Republic of Upper Volta, an impoverished francophone West African nation now known as Burkina Faso. It was a unique moment for the woman who grew up surrounded by so much family. Limited by technology and distance, she was cut off from the world familiar to her.

“I, literally, did not hear the voice of anyone from my family for two years,” Wilson said.

The rocky political landscape of the country, one dotted by coups and political unrest, made for interesting times. She depended upon radio for information about the world. But there was always something missing from the coverage.



(PHOTO BY TARA MARCHIORI)

"I saw how the news played out on the ground, and then how it was communicated to the people through the radio," Wilson explained. "The coverage was all about the political play, the political forces at work. There was nothing about the dire straits of the population and the things compelling those people, the things that, no doubt, led to the coup in the first place."

It was at that moment, she decided to return to Canada for journalism.

Back at Western, Wilson noticed news from the Canadian North was dominating the headlines, namely the Mackenzie Valley Pipeline Inquiry and James Bay Cree hydroelectric resistance.

"There were all these big questions unfolding in northern Canada, which reminded me of what I just lived through in Africa," she said. "The dynamics were all about economic development, Indigenous rights and the environment – and how all those things interplayed. That was so interesting to me. So I made it my mission to get to northern Canada."

When she graduated, she bought a train ticket for as far as she could go west and then flew to Yellowknife, N.W.T. With an armload of hand-written resumes, she worked her way east, dropping off resumes at "every whistle stop across the country." She landed at the *Regina Leader-Post*. She lasted six weeks before CBC reached out to her for a job in Yellowknife.

Soon, her French language skills made her an attractive target for a new post in



Quebec, a national reporter based in Quebec City. There, she covered the first referendum on Quebec sovereignty. A lengthy Radio-Canada labour strike in 1981 prompted a move for Wilson and her husband, former N.W.T. Premier Stephen Kakfwi, to his hometown in the Dene community of Fort Good Hope, N.W.T., near the Arctic Circle.

In 1982, CBC launched Northern Canada's flagship TV current affairs show, *Focus North*. As its first host, Wilson pioneered the broadcast industry above the 60<sup>th</sup> parallel. A decade later, she became the CBC's senior manager for northern Quebec and the three northern territories. As regional director, she launched daily television news for Canada's North, navigating four time zones and 10 languages, the majority of them Indigenous.

"The CBC was the news of The North. People relied on it," Wilson explained. "I fought really hard to encourage Indigenous broadcasters, give them a voice, try to make our service as good a quality as it could be for them. But I also tried to offer things from The North to the rest of Canada – there is still such a blind spot about The North in Canada."

Because of her expertise in cross-cultural communications, the South African Broadcasting Corporation invited Wilson to work with their journalists as they brought Nelson Mandela's dream for democracy to life. Throughout the 1990s, she taught reporters how to hold their new public government to account.

These experiences proved valuable when Wilson got the call to bear witness to the stories of residential school survivors.

**FORMED IN 2008**, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada was a direct result of the *Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement*. Starting in 2009, Wilson was named one of three commissioners, along with Murray Sinclair, Manitoba's first aboriginal associate chief justice, and Wilton Littlechild, a former MP and Alberta regional chief for the Assembly of First Nations.

She valued her role as the commission's only non-Indigenous member.

"Non-Indigenous Canada needed to realize what happened belonged to all of us. We could not just leave it as something for Indigenous people and say 'Too bad for them. Let them work their way out of it,'" Wilson said. "It was Canadian law that created those schools; it was Canadian policy that caused so much damage. We needed a non-Indigenous commissioner as part of the mix."

A career of writing, listening and recording, combined with a deep family connection to the conversation – her husband attended a residential school, as did her in-laws – made Wilson feel she had "something to offer on many levels."

With a five-year mandate, the commission was charged with informing Canadians about what happened in Indian Residential Schools by documenting the stories of survivors, families, communities and anyone personally affected by that experience. Given these schools operated for more than 150 years, and included more than 150,000 children, the scope was seemingly endless.

The commission hosted seven national events across Canada where they heard first-hand stories of those impacted by these schools, as well as witnessed the ongoing legacies of the institutions within communities.

"This may be the first time Canada has been forced to listen to voices it has

## "From the beginning, there was this question looming: *What if we do all this work and nothing changes?"*

long ignored. It was the first time Canadian society tweaked to the fact any of this happened – we were not taught this in school," Wilson said. "We have got to update our files, fill in the blanks of the things we were not taught when we went through. There have been huge gaps in our learning and in our understanding of each other."

Due to the gruelling physical and emotional stress of the work, each commissioner received personal support – mental, physical and spiritual – at the end of each event.

She also called home every day "just to hear the voices of loved ones." She did not use those moments to talk about her day, or, especially, about what she heard. "I needed to feel I wasn't alone," she explained. "I needed to know there were people caring for me, no matter how far away."

Many people she met – strangers, mainly – offered her their support, albeit momentarily and in passing. "There were many, many, many people over the years of the commission's work who told me, 'A lot of us are praying for you. I don't know if you know that.'" So I had the support of prayers from unknown

strangers, as well. That was part of being able to hold it together."

The voices she heard still echo today. Even now, she seeks support.

"From the beginning, there was this question looming: What if we do all this work and nothing changes? That was my deepest fear," Wilson said.

With its original mandate extended, the commission concluded its work in June 2015. Among its legacies are a collection of statements, documents and other materials forming the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation, as well as a powerful document identifying *94 Calls to Action*.

This call urges all levels of government – federal, provincial, territorial and aboriginal – to work together to change policies and programs in an effort to repair the harm caused by residential schools and move forward with reconciliation.

For Wilson, the call to action extends into every heart and mind.

"This is not just a project – it must become the new normal. We must be well-informed about each other's histories and, as a result of that, we start to see each other in new ways and start to understand," she said. "The one thing I tell everyone is, you must read the *94 Calls to Action* – which are not 94 pages, only a dozen pages – and ask yourself, 'Where do I fit in?' I am talking about everybody – either as a professional in a particular field, or as a parent, or as a member of a faith community or athletic organization, or as a member of the arts. If everyone does that, we will start to see the changes we need to over the years ahead." [WAG](#)

## Nominate an outstanding Western alumnus for a prestigious Alumni Award of Merit

Categories, criteria and nomination form can be found at [www.alumni.westernu.ca/connect/awards/merit.html](http://www.alumni.westernu.ca/connect/awards/merit.html)

The nomination deadline is Friday, March 31, 2017. Awards will be presented on Homecoming weekend, October 20-22, 2017.

For more information, please call Susan Henderson at 519.661.2111 ext. 85871



2016 Alumni Award of Merit Recipients

Hafeez Amarshi,  
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Community  
Service Award

Melanie Peacock,  
MBA'90  
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Shafin Diamond Tejani,  
BA'99  
Young Alumni  
Award

Gary West, BA'68  
Dr. Ivan Smith  
Award