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**"I would do it all over again" -
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"I played my part & I am happy" - Irving Wilson remembers

The name Irving St Claire Wilson is synonymous with Special Education in Barbados and the wider Caribbean.

Today, at the age of 95, he is a living tribute to development of education and other opportunities for persons who are deaf and blind.

His gait may be a bit slower and he relies on a cane to move around, but his remarkable memory and sense of humour remain intact and he was only too thrilled at the opportunity to invite us into his home and take us down memory lane.

He is convinced that his work with the deaf and visually impaired did not happen by chance. As a matter of fact, he was being prepared for the path his life would take at a very early age.

"I think it was my upbringing; I think it is something that fell on me from the time I was probably six or so years old. I lived next door to an old lady who was blind and I could not help admiring her. She had four grandchildren who were very close friends of mine. So when by mother went to work, she would leave me with this lady. I found that I couldn't trick her at all. I admired her so much".



He was so intrigued by his neighbour that when he was a teenager, Irving visited the Barbados Association for the Blind and Deaf. The Association came into being in the 1940s but became an established organisation in 1954.



The founding members included the then Chief Justice of Barbados – Allan Collymore and Grantley Adams who was the first Premier of Barbados.

Sir Grantley Adams

Irving Wilson recalled a visit to the Association: *“..... I didn’t like what I saw - I said are these cattle? The bell would be ringing and there would be these persons who were blind struggling to come up for food. I had the impression (it might not be true) that it was leftovers from the General Hospital that was being served to them and that used to make my stomach sick.”*

He then decided to become a volunteer with the Association. *“And I decided then that I had to give those people some of my time.”*

Years later, while teaching at the Parkinson Memorial Secondary School, a particular incident determined his fate.

“There was an incident that I felt was not dealt with properly by the Principal and with that I decided to leave. “I looked at him and I said, ‘Sir, the next train in - I’m out on it!” About two weeks after I saw this ad in the newspaper for the training of a Teacher for the deaf – I said, “Praise God, let me try” - and I went off to England and I did the course and that is how I got attached to all of this.

After studying specialised education at Manchester University from 1966 to 1968, he returned and was so keen on making a School for the Deaf a reality, that he contacted The Lions Club of Barbados. The Club agreed and with help from the Government – at the time led by the country’s first Prime Minister, Errol



Errol Barrow

Barrow – the school was built on Pine Plantation Road, St. Michael, where it still stands today.

And so Irving Wilson really ventured onto this new pathway by working with persons who were deaf.

“So I was really very involved with persons who were deaf in the beginning, but we started to notice another problem in the number of adults who were blind on the road engaged in begging”.



James Street Methodist Church

Irving Wilson and others decided that these adults were in

need of a place to call home and it was a Methodist Preacher who came to their rescue when he loaned them the Hall attached to the James Street Methodist Church.

With one problem solved, another reared its head - that of keeping a tab of all the persons who were blind and deaf across the island. The young Irving resorted to taking some radical steps. He recalls that one step may have even been illegal!

“My aim was to get at the children who were blind and deaf children, so the first thing I did was to look for ways in which we could find them. I got in contact with the Ear, Nose and Throat (ENT) Department of the Hospital and I met a really wonderful man who gave me access to all the files of children – I went through the files and picked out all the children who were blind and deaf.”

He then approached Churches and Doctors.

“The Doctors were asked to call in about any children who were blind or deaf and guess what? “They did call!” With this major task accomplished, the enthusiastic Irving Wilson now decided to deal with the parents of these children.

“On thing is that they (the parents) were ashamed of the children and as a result would hide them and not let them out into the community. But with hard work, we managed to convince them to allow the children to interact with others - that in itself was a major hurdle crossed. But what about educating these children?”

When it came to educating persons who were blind and deaf in the early years, they were sent to Trinidad and Tobago; but Trinidad would only accept the children from Barbados if they had a vacancy.

As customary, Irving Wilson found a solution to this problem. While there was a School for the Blind, in 1975 it was added to the already established School for the Deaf after administrators asked the Government to bring the school under the Department of Education.

"For me, that was the light at the end of a long dark tunnel; we then had to go to the Ministry (of Education) to introduce the School for the Blind. We had to teach the folks at the Ministry about what teaching persons who were blind meant, because we recognized that it was not an experience that normal people go through. They provided us with salary for the teachers, but we had to look after all other requirements."

While focusing on the children and young people, his attention also turned to the older persons in the society. They were on welfare and provided with meals, but he felt that they should also have something to do.

"We sent a young man to Trinidad and Tobago to learn the art of basket-making and chair-caning; he came back and taught them. This went on for quite a few years until the Lions Club of Bridgetown got involved and assisted in building a Workshop for the Blind. But this Workshop was only for persons over the age of fifty."

"There was a kind of a stigma attached to the Workshop because it was thought that it was only for old people. As a result we started to look at involving a lower age group."

It was suggested that it would be cheaper to send the "old people" home, continue to provide them with welfare and start to look at the lower age group.

"We did this and it was successful, because they were just coming to the Workshop for recreation. We did it in a very kind way; those who could still do basket-making and so on, we would give them the material and

they would work at home, so there were no hard feelings."

Indeed the years have rolled by all too quickly and he has had no regrets. Irving Wilson's work was not in vain and in recognition of his contribution to his country, on November 15, 2000, the Government of Barbados renamed the School for the Blind and Deaf – the Irving Wilson School.

As our interview came to an end, he leaned forward and with a smile on his lips and a twinkle in his eyes whispered -

"You know something? The Association I would say has always been a part of me. I sometimes dream about it. I think my greatest highlight would be that of Kerryann Ifill (now President of the Senate of Barbados) going to the University. I am so very proud of her....."

He then sighed, leaned back in his chair, his gaze moving lazily to a window across the room and said:

"My job was not a paying one, because it has left me with the smallest pension that a teacher gets on the island but I have had real satisfaction and I feel really happy that what little I could have done I did it. I've played my part and I am happy and comfortable".

THIS SCHOOL WAS RENAMED
THE IRVING WILSON SCHOOL
IN RECOGNITION OF THE
OUTSTANDING CONTRIBUTION
MADE BY
MR. IRVING ST. CLAIR WILSON B. S. S.
WHO PIONEERED THE EDUCATION OF THE DEAF
AND BLIND IN OUR COUNTRY
THIS PLAQUE WAS UNVEILED BY
THE HONOURABLE MIA AMOR MOTTLEY M. P.,
MINISTER OF EDUCATION, YOUTH AFFAIRS AND CULTURE
NOVEMBER 15, 2000

WILBERT WILLIAMS - "I'D DO IT ALL OVER AGAIN!"

Wilbert Williams greeted us with an engaging smile and escorted us into the comfort of his home in Kingston, Jamaica. Now a man of leisure, having retired some years ago, this man who was once the President of the Jamaica Physiotherapy Association, the Managing Director of the Abilities Foundation and a Past-President of the Caribbean Council for the Blind (CCB), was eager to share his life's journey.

"I was born blind - at birth I got too much oxygen and that resulted in my blindness when I was placed in the incubator; in those days the monitoring wasn't as good as it was supposed to be".

Wilbert Williams was born in Kingston, Jamaica and from the very outset his life was filled with adventure. He was born prematurely and as a result was placed in an incubator.

The condition is known as Retinopathy of Prematurity (ROP), which manifests itself as a developmental eye disorder in pre-term or prematurely born babies, when retinal detachment and scarring occurs in one or both eyes. It has the potential to cause permanent visual impairment or blindness.

"They say that with that kind of situation you can also have mental disorders and mental deficits, so I don't know I'm still trying to find out where they are," he chuckled. Growing up with five siblings constantly around him, Wilbert was treated no differently.

"I'm from a large family; I grew up with five siblings and interacted with so many others. My mother actually had twelve children in all, so I had to integrate and do what I was supposed to do. I really enjoyed being with them, playing all the games; playing hide and seek; playing marbles.... I really found my place and enjoyed it!"

"They accepted me in their own way, without any training; they took me everywhere; they showed me things, that made a world of a difference." His mother did not

hesitate to enroll him into the Salvation Army School for the Blind that was also located in Kingston. For him the experience was an excellent one. What made it even more fascinating was the fact that he was one of two "guinea pigs" who went to public school.



Wilbert attended the Excelsior High School, where he became involved in the Integrated Programme, without the kind of support that is available today, he managed to survive what he calls a culture shock.

"On both sides it was a shock; the children there had to get accustomed to us and we had to get accustomed to themWe had to use readers for everything, because there were no books available in Braille for us to use. We even did GeographyIt was a good fun learning experience for us."

"We did the local examinations; we did the Cambridge School's Certificate and then I eventually got a scholarship to study overseas".

The year was 1962 and the young Wilbert was all set for yet another adventure – this time across the seas to England on a Government Scholarship. The journey to England was to say the least an eye-opening experience.

"At the School of Physiotherapy, they had a good Hostel that had a Library so we didn't have to walk up and down with those heavy Braille Books; all that we were required to do was study and retain."

As he jogged his memory of the days in England, he remembered an incident that left him feeling extra special.

"When Sir Hugh Foote (Governor General of Jamaica 1957-1962), retired and returned to England, he came to visit us at the School and the Principal decided that we must be special for somebody like that to be visiting us. So the Principal from then on took extra special interest in us."

At the end of his studies of three and a half years - it was now time to return home and he was assigned to the largest Public Hospital in the English-speaking Caribbean - the Kingston Public Hospital located in downtown Kingston



Kingston Public Hospital

"I remember walking into the Waiting Room and calling a patient. She hesitated and I heard her tell the other people, "Him blind you know, mi not going." That broke my spirits; I was so upset and I told my boss who only told me to call someone else. So I went out and called the second lady. This person turned to the first lady and said, "If you not going, I not going either."

Wilbert knew that he was in big trouble. What would his fate as a Physiotherapist be if all patients shied away from him?

"... this went on for a while until my boss went out to them as said they would have a long wait."

So I returned and called another lady - who responded by saying "all right let me give him a chance, but if anything happen to me - me and him." I tried to take her history ... but she got more of mine! In the long run she allowed me to treat her. She came out and declared, "Him all right you know, him can treat you." And that was my certificate that was more important to me than the Certificate I obtained from England."

With that first experience under his belt – he no longer felt like an outcast, but there were other hurdles to be crossed.

"There were hurdles when it came to getting promotions and I think people who are blind all over the world can attest to this some don't feel that you can manage. Even if you've been acting in the position, they tend to doubt your ability even when you have functioned in the job full-time and this I find very strange. I think what you make of the job is the important thing. You're like a salesman and you have to make sure that you stay ahead of the other people in the field. If they are qualified, stay one or two notches ahead of them ..."

Wilbert became a force to be reckoned with at KPH; he was eventually joined by another colleague who was visually impaired, Nyla Latty, who was also trained in England. They went on to work together at other Hospitals in Jamaica's Capital, including the National Chest Hospital and the Bustamante Children's Hospital.

"Because KPH was the center of everything, you could be transferred all over the place, so for a number of years I also worked at Mona Rehabilitation Centre. I was eventually promoted to act as the Chief Physiotherapist, when I returned to the KPH."

His years of experience at KPH placed him in good stead with Government Officials and in 1992 he was seconded to the Ministry of Labour.

Then the Abilities Foundation came knocking at his door. Established in November 1991, it is Registered Voluntary Organization offering vocational education to persons with disabilities.

"If you work in rehabilitation, it is nice to see the end result so that was a natural progression."

It was here that he made another mark as Managing Director. After twelve years with the Abilities Foundation, Wilbert Williams decided that it was time to slow down and he retired.

Without a doubt, Wilbert Williams, who was honoured by the Government of Jamaica with the Order of Distinction, is indeed one of the pioneers for the disabled in Jamaica and the Region. He believes that significant progress has been made as it relates to the disabled.

"While his journey has never been smooth sailing, he credits his wife of forty-two years, his children and church family for helping him along the way.

"To an extent, I'm disappointed in that more persons with disabilities are unable to get into gainful employment and this is based solely on their disability, because some of them have very good qualifications"

We have seen progress, but unfortunately, a lot more needs to be done; more financial resources need to be put into education and training. It's good that we have started to put in ramps and rails in public spaces, but we need to provide more access to employment and better access to health services, so we still have a long way to go; but I must say, we have come a long way since the National Year of the Disabled in 1981."

Wilbert Williams' accomplishments are many, from being bestowed with the highest honour by the Lions Club – that of being a Melvin Jones Fellow, to lecturing Theological students in Jamaica, he is now thinking of documenting his life by writing a book. According to him, the only thing he is yet to accomplish is driving. Overall, there are no regrets and he knows without a doubt that nothing in life happens by chance.

"My years have been fulfilling. They were fulfilling because we got results. As a Physiotherapist, people came in and they weren't walking and you got them up and going again; people who were injured came in and after your intervention and working with them, they can manage in wheelchairs and can function."

"What God takes from you, He will always give you back something far more special," he said with a smile of satisfaction.

In looking towards the future, he yearns for equal opportunities within the disabled population.



Support the Jamaica Society for the Blind's Mail Appeal!

Jamaica Society For the Blind
Ph: 876-927-6757 / 876-927-6759



Donate Today!



From the Desk of the CEO - Arwel Grant



During this quarter, we continued our programme to achieve a Caribbean area compliant with the Objectives of Vision 2020: The Right to Sight Initiative.

Antigua and Barbuda - a proposed Eye Health and Diagnostic Centre:

The Caribbean Council for the Blind (CCB) participated in a very successful Inter-Ministerial Meeting, at which the organization's proposal to the Government of Antigua and Barbuda, to establish the Eye Care and Diagnostic Centre, in the Accident and Emergency Building of the former Holberton Hospital, received the enthusiastic support of Senior Representatives from seven Ministries of Government, with direct technical interest in the proposal.

The meeting was convened and chaired by the Minister of Finance the Economy and the Public Service, Harold Lovell. The proposal received high commendations from the technical staff of the Ministry of Health and is now on the desk of Prime Minister Baldwin Spencer, pending consideration by the Cabinet of Antigua and Barbuda.

Antigua and Barbuda - Ministry of Health gives the official go ahead:



Gray's Farm Health Centre

We are delighted to report that the Ministry of Health, has now given formal approval for CCB to begin retrofitting sections of four Health Clinics to become Vision Centres by October of this year. The Vision Centres will be located in: All Saints, Grays Farm, Johnson's Point and Barbuda.

Also in Antigua and Barbuda, based on collaboration between CCB and the Government, four Refractionists

are currently in training in Guyana. They will return to Antigua in September to operate Level (I) Eye Health Services out of the four Vision Centres.

Jamaica: newly refurbished Eye Department in Mandeville nearing completion:



The suite of Operating Theatres being established in Mandeville is near completion. We are now awaiting the installation of mechanicals, including air-conditioning, extractor fans and specialized ophthalmic equipment.

Establishment of New Eye Departments in Guyana and Haiti:

We continue to await the arrival of newly ordered equipment to establish/improve new full-service Eye Departments in: Georgetown and Linden (Guyana) and St. Marc (Haiti).

New admissions to the B.Sc. in Optometry at the University of Guyana:

The University of Guyana has given the "green light" for the recruitment of the second cohort of students to read/practice for the Bachelor of Science in Optometry. In addition to students from Guyana, CCB will be offering scholarships to students from: Haiti, Jamaica and St. Lucia, starting August 2012.

Our quest for evidence-based development continues:

We continued our Research Programme with the designation of Glaucoma Specialist, Dr. Dawn Grosvenor (of Barbados) as Principal Investigator for a series of Glaucoma Surveys being planned for: Guyana, Jamaica, St. Lucia and (possibly) patients attending a Glaucoma Clinic in London. Data collection is now being contemplated for November/December, 2012.

Eye On Sight has been produced with the assistance of our partners including:

The European Union



Sightsavers



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Our Mission.....

Our Purpose.....

Our Goal.....

Our purpose is preventing blindness and visual impairment while restoring sight and creating opportunities for persons whose sight cannot be restored.

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