

***The following essay by Leamon's son Leamon E. Wilson won him the AFSCME Family Scholarship; it is published on the AFSCME Co. 25 website. Leamon E. Wilson will start VOD college this year***

## **WHAT AFSCME HAS MEANT TO OUR FAMILY**

***By Leamon E. Wilson***

On July 19, 1995 I was born into the AFSCME Family. My father had recently been elected as President of AFSCME Local 312, the Local representing mechanics employed by the Detroit Department of Transportation. Dad had worked his way up through the ranks, serving as a steward, chief steward and grievance committeeman before accepting the nomination to run for President of the Local. Three years earlier he had met my mother, a union representative, when she successfully argued that the employment of one of the local's members should be restored, primarily because of the employer's misconduct. According to family legend, when the grievant received his job back and full compensation for the time he was out of work, Dad fell in love and the grievant – "Uncle Hank" – was best man at the wedding and later named as my godfather!

This brief, albeit comical, history is important because all of my life I have been surrounded by the love and support of people who believe that caring for and service to others is a privilege given to each of us. I participated in my first Labor Day parade when I was just over one year old. My father pushed my stroller – shaped like a car – during the parade. Although I had taken a few steps two days after my first birthday, I really began walking after the parade, mimicking the marchers I had watched that morning. My mother swears that I marched around the living room for hours. I don't remember this, but I do know that it was not my last march.

As the son of a union activist I have had the opportunity to participate in protests over collective bargaining agreements, violation of contract terms and job losses. As young as I can remember I have accompanied my father to grievance meetings, community meetings and union meetings. As a very young child I was usually handed to one of the female members who would care for me and protect me as my father argued (i.e. yelled) to get his point across. As I grew older, the task for ensuring my safety was turned over

to “one of the guys,” which generally meant that I could have my fill of anything in the vending machines while my father argued (i.e. yelled) to get his point across.

During all of these years I have also had the privilege of meeting political, civic and religious leaders throughout the community, a unique opportunity not generally available to the average student. I’ve seen first hand the compassion and commitment demonstrated by members as they fought for the right to make a decent wage or to prevent non-union vendors from taking away their jobs altogether. I’ve seen the stress and devastation families experience when layoffs or job eliminations force them to lose what most of us would think are basic life necessities – a home, food, transportation and the ability to support their children.

Throughout it all my parents have consistently reinforced the value of these experiences – the importance of standing in the gap for the disenfranchised; for being the voice for those who cannot speak for themselves; and for ensuring that the rights of all peoples are never diminished or eliminated. The obligation to serve and give back is as engrained in me as my name. The AFSCME Family Scholarship will help me reach my goals and continue a long standing tradition of being a gatekeeper for those in need. While I may or may not end up in a unionized profession, these experiences have taught me how to be a better person, to be compassionate, and, as my father would say, to always be caught doing the right thing because it is the right thing to do.

Thank you for the opportunity to walk proudly in the path he forged.