

Wilson, Leland (1934–2013)

ANDREW HOWE

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Leland Yelland Wilson was a chemist who spent 40 years teaching in Adventist higher education, at Union College (1956-1966), Philippine Union College (1966-1974), and Loma Linda University, Riverside/La Sierra University (1974-1996).

Early Life

Wilson was born in North Leeds, Maine, on October 14, 1934.¹ A fifth-generation Adventist, he moved with his family around New England before settling in New Hampshire for primary school and later Florida for high school, attending Orlando Church School and then Forest Lake Academy.² During this time he demonstrated proficiency in chemistry, opting in 1952 to attend Walla Walla College, which at that point had one of the most comprehensive chemistry departments in the denomination.

Education and Family

At Walla Walla, Wilson's interest in chemistry deepened. During the summers he worked at Harris Pine Mills, making furniture, to pay his tuition.³ He met and fell in love with fellow Walla Walla student Dorothy McDuffie. They were wed in May 1955 and nearly a year to the day later welcomed their first child, daughter Janice Lee. That same month Wilson graduated from Walla Walla.⁴

The family moved briefly to San Francisco, where Wilson worked as a chemist at a paint company. The field of education beckoned, however, in the form of teaching positions at the University of Idaho and Union College. He opted for the latter, and in 1956 the family moved to Lincoln, beginning 57 years of association with Adventist higher education, 40 years teaching full-time, and 17 years either in part-time or in retirement as an emeritus professor).⁵

In addition to his teaching duties and raising a swiftly growing family—Leland Jr., Laurie, and Kifford⁶ were all born during the Nebraska years—Wilson found the time to attend graduate school at the University of Nebraska in Lincoln. He earned a Master's in Inorganic/Organic Chemistry in 1959 and a Ph.D. in Physical Chemistry in 1964. His dissertation, typed up by Dorothy, was titled "Study of Solutions of the One Electron Two Center Problem for Heteronuclear Cases."⁷

Physical Activity

During his time in Nebraska, Wilson developed an enjoyment of physical activity. He loved hiking, planning trips to mountain ranges that would allow him to be physically active while appreciating geology, a particular interest. Over many years he walked multiple sections of the Pacific and Appalachian Crest Trails. Later in life he learned to sail, taking a small boat he owned to Lake Elsinore, 45 minutes from the La Sierra campus. Wilson was well known for his love of mainstream sports, listening to Boston Red Sox games on the radio and enjoying the football culture that prevailed at the University of Nebraska.⁸

When it came to sports, however, above all else Wilson enjoyed playing pickup basketball games with students, valuing not only the game itself but notably a type of camaraderie normally not present in the classroom. He continued playing pickup basketball games after moving to La Sierra, endearing himself there to several generations of students.⁹ Just because he enjoyed the game and loved students did not mean he took it easy on them. As the author of this, entry can attest, even in his 70s Wilson could still set a solid pick!

Mission Service

Throughout his career Wilson's service extended beyond the academic Adventist community. While at Union, he was heavily involved in the College View Church, serving as deacon and Sabbath School teacher, and leading out in ingathering.¹⁰ His service ethic continued after his move to La Sierra, where for many years he was a deacon in the university church.¹¹ It was in the years in between Union and La Sierra, however, that his church service was most pronounced, during a mission teaching chemistry and science at Philippine Union College (1966-1974). He chaired the Math and Science department during this time.¹²

Service not directly associated with his teaching duties took him to numerous islands in the Philippines, where among other attempts to spread the gospel word Wilson visited prisons. Growing up in a foreign land turned out to be an adventure for his children, who learned not only about the culture of the Philippines but also about its natural history, flora, and fauna. The family had always had multiple pets, but during this period kept more exotic fauna. In addition to dogs, cats, chickens, ducks, and pigeons, family pets also included a cockatoo, a heron, and a monkey. During these eight years, extended trips to Europe and the United States, plus time spent in other parts of Asia, rounded out the family's cultural experience.¹³

La Sierra

In 1974 Wilson accepted a call to join the faculty at La Sierra, then Loma Linda University, Riverside campus. He would be a constant presence at the institution, and in its chemistry department, for the next 40 years. At the same time he joined the faculty, his oldest entered Nursing school at Loma Linda while a fifth and final child, Erik, joined the family.¹⁴ As the chemistry department at La Sierra was larger than at the other Adventist schools

where he had taught, Wilson was able to focus more in his research areas of physical and computational chemistry. He had gained experience at the University of Nebraska in programming computers for running rudimentary computations, a skill that came in handy when the microcomputer revolution resulted in machines in the 1980s that could handle more complex data sets.¹⁵

Wilson served as a faculty leader on campus during the difficult split from Loma Linda and was instrumental in helping to forge a new identity as a university that placed a premium not only on faith-based instruction but also on disciplinary research.¹⁶ Armed with computers up to the task for his research projects, despite being late in his career, Wilson led by example, publishing widely during the 1990s and even after retirement, including articles in the following journals: *Journal of the Chemical Society*, *Journal of Physical Organic Chemistry*, *Chemosphere*, *Theoretical and Computation Chemistry*, *Organic Reactivity*, *Journal of Molecular Graphics and Modeling*, *Journal of Organic Chemistry*, *Journal of Medicinal Chemistry*, and others.¹⁷

Service to Various Communities

During his time at La Sierra, Wilson was known as a committed Christian who served multiple university, church, and disciplinary communities. He served in numerous capacities at the La Sierra University Church, also volunteering for the local chapter of the Pathfinders¹⁸ and as a docent at the campus' World Museum of Natural History.¹⁹ Wilson taught courses and maintained contacts at Riverside Community College, California Baptist University, and Pepperdine University, and held a visiting appointment at the University of California, Riverside. He was involved in the annual meetings of the American Chemical Society and conducted research for Livermore Labs and the Aberdeen Proving Grounds.²⁰

Within the larger Adventist community in Southern California, Wilson was perhaps best known for a series of marriage-enrichment seminars that he and his second wife, Halcyon (Hallie) Westphal Rhodes, gave during the 1980s and early 1990s. The couple—who knew each other from their time as undergraduates at Walla Walla²¹—had married in June 1980, for a honeymoon visiting their seven combined children, who were spread out between California and Kansas.²² These marriage seminars reflected currents of gender anxiety that existed in Adventism during a decade in which momentum for women's ordination was beginning to build. Wilson was very proud of the fact that his wife—associate pastor at the La Sierra University Church—contributed much to the gospel ministry, both as an Adventist and as a woman.²³

Legacy

Above all else, Wilson was student-centered, serving as a chemistry professor inside the classroom but as a teacher of life outside of it. He believed in the value of integrating faith and learning, whether it be in explaining the joys of the natural world to children visiting the World Museum of Natural History to teaching a craft to junior high students at a Pathfinders meeting to talking about life with college students during a break in a

basketball game. He was well known, in particular, for his commitment to students who were struggling, many of whom were invited for a home-cooked meal at the home he shared with Hallie.²⁴ In recognition of his contributions, a group of ex-students established the Leland Wilson Memorial Chemistry Endowed Scholarship. This fund's description notes a: "legacy of encouraging undergraduate involvement in scientific research and his passion for helping students who need a 'boost' to reach their academic and career goals."²⁵

Leland Yelland Wilson passed away in Riverside, California, on February 6, 2013, after sustaining an injury while doing what he enjoyed best: bonding with Adventist youth during a basketball game.²⁶

SOURCES

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NOTES

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