

FLETCHER "FLASH" WILEY

1965

Initially it came as heartbreaking news when Fletcher Wiley '65 didn't receive an appointment to the United States Air Force Academy on his first attempt.

"I was so dejected in not getting the appointment outright," he remembers.

He threw the rejection letter in the garbage, even though the correspondence included an offer to attend the USAFA Prep School Program for a year instead.

His grandmother, who raised Wiley in Indianapolis, Indiana, during the emerging Civil Rights era, fished the letter out of the trash and read its contents. She promptly called a Tuskegee Airman she knew and asked him to stop by the house to answer questions about the Prep School opportunity.

"He told me the Air Force Academy wants you, but they have to send you through this system because they have other ways of getting you into the Academy," Wiley recalls. "My grandmother convinced me. ... I did it for her."

As his high school friends headed off to college, Wiley says he wasn't thrilled to attend a preparatory program.

"I was a little embarrassed," he admits.

But fortunately it all worked out in the end, Wiley says, as he joined the vaunted Class of 1965 the following summer in Colorado Springs.

"I came to love the Air Force Academy and what it did for me," he says.

A Grandma's Influence

Florence Norton, Wiley's maternal grandmother, worked as a registered nurse at the city's all-black Crispus Attucks High School.

"She was pretty much a stickler for the studies," he recalls. "That's what life was like — a focus on school, growing up to be responsible, doing your chores."

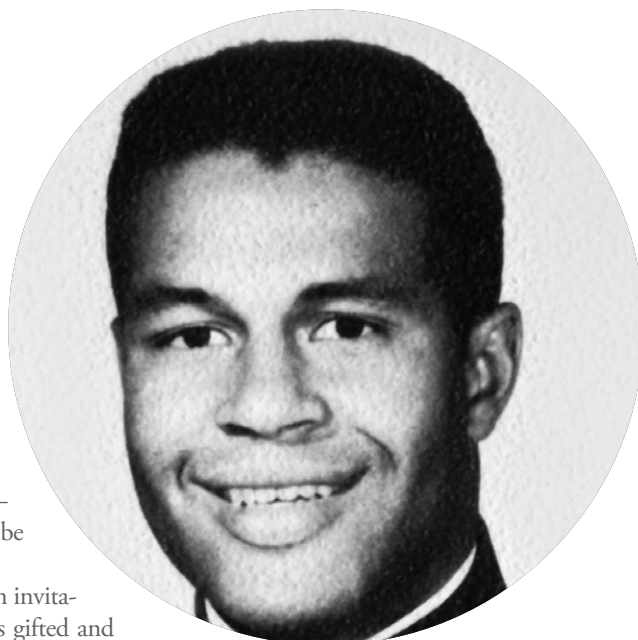
His academic efforts led to an invitation to join the school district's gifted and talented program, one of just two African American students to be chosen.

"I didn't want to leave my all-black school," he admits. "I was very comfortable with where I was. But this opened new vistas for me."

Wiley later excelled at sports, particularly basketball. He also was involved in the Cub Scouts and Boy Scouts.

As part of the close Crispus Attucks community, Wiley learned quickly that he was expected to make his family and friends proud as he matured.

"They all had an ethos of developing children into productive adults," he remembers. "All the African American children had a burden to represent the race and to be a positive representative as we strove as a people to fight the Jim Crow laws that were in existence at that time. We had to be exemplars of the best that



America offered. We were in training to do that."

Preppy Moments

In 1960-61, the Naval Academy Prep School hosted the USAFA program for the 119 students who attended with Wiley. He played football for the school, along with his roommate Lance Sijan '65. The nickname he was given that year — "Flash" — has stuck with him ever since. Turns out the moniker reflected his gregarious personality, not so much his blinding speed on the football field.

"I think my high school football coach liked me," Wiley laughs. "I think he maybe had [USAFA football coach] Ben Martin thinking that they were going to get the next Jim Brown coming to the Air Force Academy."

“Like an accountant would ask ... what is the delta? What is the delta of the difference I made? I don’t know if it’s a big delta, but we’ve done what we could and had some fun along the way.”

But that wasn’t me. I did the best I could.”

After a successful preppy experience, Wiley landed a spot at the relatively new Academy in 1961, with the hope of becoming an astronaut.

“I never thought about being a combat pilot, though I had a lot of influences ... particularly the Tuskegee Airmen,” he says.

Promoting Soul

As the fifth African American to graduate from the Academy, Wiley takes some credit along with his African American classmates for helping bring about the “soul-ification” of the institution in the arts, dance, argot and race relations.

He often produced rhythm-and-blues shows for his fellow cadets, noting that his life’s dream was always to join the “Temptations” singing group.

“We had bands, we had singers,” he remembers. “There were a lot of very talented guys at the Academy ... and not just black guys. Particularly, white guys from the South were into rhythm and blues and grew up with it.”

He and his friends also introduced other aspects of the African American culture to this melting pot of people assembled from all throughout the nation.

“Back in the early 1960s, when we came in, America was transforming toward our culture in terms of the music and the dance and so forth,” he says. “So, we suddenly became cool. The language we used ... our classmates adopted. It helped the cadets from all the ethnic groups figure out how to deal with us and feel comfortable around us.”

Wiley remained roommates with Sijan during the initial years at USAFA, and both continued playing football and hitting the books.

But in his third-class year, Wiley injured his knee and decided to quit football. To

continue supporting his friends on the Falcon squad, he instead became a cheerleader.

“The title of cheerleader doesn’t carry a lot of cachet with it, but I was an entertainment-prone guy,” he smiles. “I knew I could take that role and turn it into something very supportive to the football team. I brought soul to the concept.”

He would later become the first African American head cheerleader.

Air Force Duty

Upon graduation from the Academy, Wiley headed to L’Institut Des Etudes Politiques in Paris on a Fulbright Scholarship. During that year, he studied old colonial empires and how they differed in their approach to ruling their territories or colonies.

“It was an illuminating experience,” he suggests. “I met people from all over the world — Russians, Chinese, Vietnamese, Africans, Frenchmen — to get a general understanding of what people my age from those countries were thinking about.”

When he returned to the states, Wiley joined the Air Force Office of Special Investigations (OSI).

“It was at a time that James Bond was very popular,” he explains. “So, some of us became interested in getting involved in intelligence. We didn’t understand fully that the OSI was more like a detective, crime-solving and intelligence-gathering police force organization along the lines of the FBI rather than being like 007.”

After that initial assignment, Wiley was sent to the Pentagon to help conduct a special study focused on how the military had racially integrated well ahead of American society. Wiley was excited to be a part of the effort, hoping that the work would help accelerate the full integration of minorities across the entire society.

“A lot of people don’t realize that the military was the first to integrate its school systems on base,” he notes. “They were the first to integrate their housing system on base and demanded it off base. They wouldn’t do business with businesses that discriminated against military personnel on the basis of race.”

Wiley says he discovered his true calling during that assignment, and the work aligned well with the burden he felt from his upbringing to make a difference for people of color.

“I wanted to be involved in those types of activities and help the military be a transformational instrument,” he recalls.

But just as his research efforts were bearing fruit, Wiley says, the Air Force assigned him to an OSI unit in Korea and took him away from the Pentagon. He was less than thrilled with the move.

“I knew then that I couldn’t really control my career while I was still in the service,” he remembers. “So, that made up my mind. The day I landed in Korea, I submitted my resignation.”

As he completed his final Air Force assignment with excellence, Wiley says he began thinking about his next career move.

“At some point I needed to get on the path that my grandmother had laid out for me,” he says. “How was I going to get involved





and do that? Was I going to be a preacher, a teacher, a politician?"

Wiley decided to become an attorney, with an eye toward working alongside the Civil Rights movement. He applied to several law schools and eventually enrolled at Harvard.

Legal Eagle

Wiley completed both his master's in public policy from Harvard's Kennedy School of Government and his law degree from Harvard Law School. He studied public policy in case he wanted to seek public office later in life.

As an attorney, he decided to specialize in economic development initiatives, real estate, entertainment law and small-business development — helping African Americans and minority communities achieve financial prosperity.

"I started working on clearing all kinds of barriers for all kinds of people," he explains.

Although it wasn't part of a grand plan, Wiley and his wife, Benaree, settled in Boston and became leaders within the African American community and the overall business community.

LEFT: Following an injury, Fletcher "Flash" Wiley '65 quit football and joined the USAFA cheerleading squad.

ABOVE: President Barack Obama poses for a photo with Fletcher "Flash" Wiley.

BOTTOM: Fletcher "Flash" Wiley with wife, Benaree.

"In the mid-1970s, Boston was undergoing tremendous racial turmoil," he says. "It gave us an opportunity to step up and become involved. We looked upon Boston as the pioneers used to look upon going out to Oklahoma and California."

Wiley launched his legal career with the Boston office of the Fine & Ambrogne law firm, where he learned the basics of his profession. A short time later, he and fellow colleagues launched Budd, Reilly and Wiley, one of the nation's largest and most renowned minority-owned law firms.

Following a brief stint with Goldstein & Manello, P.C., as a senior partner, Wiley joined PRWT Services Inc., a minority-owned government and business services company, where he served as its executive vice president for business development and its general counsel. Wiley and his PRWT colleagues built the company into the largest minority-owned business in Pennsylvania.

Wiley's list of civic engagements through the years is considerable. He's served as board director of several business organizations, including three public companies.

The Wileys helped found the Crispus Attucks Children's Center Inc., an inner-city day care center providing Boston's disadvantaged children a head start on life.

Wiley also is a founding member of the Harvard Law School and the Harvard Kennedy School Black Alumni organizations; a former director of the New England Legal Foundation; overseer of the New England Region Anti-Defamation League; plus a supporter of other nonprofits and organizations.

In addition, Wiley was appointed to serve on the Board of Visitors for both USAFA and Air University, providing oversight and guidance for those institutions.

Wiley was heavily involved in the Greater Boston Chamber of Commerce, eventually serving as its chairman. During his tenure, he helped build strong relationships between the local business community and military institutions and extend opportunities for women in business.

For his many contributions to the community, Wiley was inducted into the Chamber of Commerce's "Academy of Distinguished Bostonians" in 2010.

"I didn't sit on my butt and watch life go by and not try to make changes," Wiley says.

"So, I feel good about being involved. I do not feel good about the fact that we still have the problems in the United States that were identified for me when I was a young kid in high school, studying civics in high school. I'm still looking for ways to make changes."

A Life Well Lived

When word came that he had been selected a 2019 Distinguished Graduate Award recipient, Wiley says he was humbled to join the impressive group of past honorees.

"It's a thrill beyond becoming a Temptation," he laughs.

Reflecting on his many accomplishments, Wiley says he's been fortunate to make a difference in Boston and throughout the nation.

"Like an accountant would ask ... what is the delta? What is the delta of the difference I made?" he says. "I don't know if it's a big delta, but we've done what we could and had some fun along the way."

Wiley is thrilled that his children, Pratt and B.J., have picked up the torch and are continuing the work he and his wife began. They remain passionate about equal rights and equal opportunities for everyone.

"We're all sort of in the fray," he says of his family's continuing fight for equality. "I don't think there's any other way, because I'm a warrior. I was trained to be a warrior at the Air Force Academy. All of us as citizens of the world have a responsibility to work to make the world a better place."

Wiley admits his effectiveness in the fight was greatly enhanced by marrying his wife.

"I always believed that life is a team sport," he smiles. "She was the very best draft choice." 