

Interview with Colombina Wilson

By, Carlos J. Wilson

This interview was originally conducted in Spanish and has been translated and edited for length and clarity

Carlos J. Wilson (CJ): Good morning Mom! Thank you for taking the time to do this interview with me.

Colombina Wilson (CW): Hi, yes I'm happy to sit and talk with you anytime.

CJ: Maybe we can start with talking about how you and dad met?

CW: I'm coming from a small town in Panama, and we didn't have a high school. So, I had to go to the city to go to school, at the Instituto Panama. My brother Jose had a scholarship to go to a private school and was living with the bishop's mother. His name was Monsigner Carlos Ambrosio Lewis Tullock of the Society of the Divine World. When the Bishop heard about me, he said I could live with his mom too, to help take care of his mother. Jose would go to school in the morning and I would go in the afternoon so we could take care of the Bishops mom. The Bishop was a good friend of your dad, and your dad would always visit the Bishop. At the time, your dad was living in the United States, and would visit Panama.

Your dad was 38 and told the Bishop he was ready to get married. He asked the Bishop to introduce him to a parishioner. This was around April 1979. He spent that whole summer in Panama as a professor. We spent a lot of time together and he also met my family. In September of that year, he went back to Los Angeles, and we would talk everyday. He wanted me to move to the United States but I didn't know English or where I was going, so I was scared to move to the United States. After he asked me many more times, I finally agreed to move to Los Angeles to be with him.

CJ: Wow okay, I didn't realize he was already living in Los Angeles at the time you met. Can we rewind a little, I would love to hear about his story.

CW: Sure! Let's see, well he was born on April 1, 1941 in Panama City, Panama. His mom was an orphan, her name was Henrietta Wilson and raised him as a single mother. His dad was Wilfred Sinclair, but he never had a relationship with your dad. Since your dad had dark skin, Wilfred would never admit that your dad was his son, and wouldn't give your dad his last name. You know, that is one thing your dad never understood. He was very hurt that his dad rejected him but he really didn't understand why his mom stayed with him after he treated your dad that way. Since your dad's siblings were light-skinned, Wilfred recognized them right away.

So, your dad was Carlos Guillermo Wilson, and his two siblings were Isabel Sinclair and Claudio Sinclair. He was the oldest of the three.

Henrietta had three boys with a second partner. Wilfred also had some other kids with a different partner. So your dad had multiple half siblings that he didn't talk to much.

CJ: Who did dad live with and what was his childhood like given those dynamics you mentioned?

CW: Well, Wilfred moved to New York with his new family and left your grandma with 3 kids. And when your dad's mom married the second guy, she moved to a different town with Isabel and Claudio. Your dad didn't want to move, or maybe he wasn't allowed to.

So your dad was about 8 years old and his mom left him with the couple that had raised her as an orphan. Their names were Papa James Douglin and Lena McZeno, who he called Nenen. He considered them his grandparents and was very grateful they took him, especially because they were so poor.

When your dad was only 10 years old, Papa James passed away so your dad had to figure out a way to make money to help the family. He realized he could sell newspapers in the Canal Zone before school. So he would wake up at 5am, and sell newspapers in the Canal Zone and the United States military base in Curundu. I remember he told us that he sold the newspapers for 5 cents, and he got to keep 1 cent for each newspaper he sold.

Papa James and Nenen always told him that education was the key to escaping poverty. So after he sold the newspapers, he would go home at 7am to get ready for school. Sometimes with breakfast, sometimes no breakfast. On the weekends he would shine shoes, sell lottery tickets, and help his grandma sell food on the corner.

CJ: It sounds like he had a really rough childhood, I can't imagine how difficult that must have been. Shifting gears a little bit, what was his relationship like with religion at the time?

CW: Yes, he really had to fight to survive. Around that time, he was helping with the Catholic Church and local high school. He started to express interest in studying to become a priest and built a relationship with Father Bernard Schimmel. When Nenen passed away, your dad didn't have too many options, so Father Schimmel organized for your dad to go to Catholic Seminary school.

Father Schimmel sent your dad to school at La Societas Verbi Divini in Mississippi in 1959, your dad was 18...

Your dad arrived in the United States, with \$20 in his pocket.

CJ: Haha, yes I definitely remember the \$20. What was his experience like when he moved to the United States?

CW: Well in one way he was happy because he had food and school. He had 3 meals a day and a cozy bed for the first time in his life. In other way, he had a hard time adjusting and was held back in school right away because he didn't know English. Also, there were a lot of demands being in seminary school. He also didn't know the rules.

CJ: What do you mean by the rules, can you share more about that?

CW: Well... he didn't know about the racial issues in the United States in the 1960s. The first time he went to get food, he didn't know he wasn't allowed to go inside the restaurant. He said people were yelling at him but he didn't understand what was going on and that he was supposed to use the window outside. He ended up in the hospital that night. He had a couple other problems but didn't like to talk about that too much. He did say, when he had to travel with his classmates on the bus, the nice white students would usually need to go get him food.

But overall, he had a really rough time, he was bullied because he didn't have a father. He spent a lot of nights just crying in his bed. He thought about what to do next, but he knew his options were to continue suffering, or go back home to poverty. Luckily he was able to leave Mississippi and transfer to the seminary Boston location. While he was in the seminary, in addition to English, he learned Latin, French, German, and Italian.

CJ: Again, sounds like he had a really difficult situation, but found a way to make it work. What happened after the seminary?

CW: Hmm, he finished the program but decided he didn't want to continue his studies in the seminary. He wrote a letter to the head of the missionaries in Rome and was surprised when he got a response from Father Joseph Francis. He offered your dad a job as a Spanish and French teacher at Verbum Dei Jesuit High School in Watts, Los Angeles.

He moved to Los Angeles, he had a little studio by the school that was paid for. But, he had a horrible experience teaching in Watts. He almost got involved with several confrontations with the students who were often violent and not interested in school. He had to break-up fights, no homework was done, people coming late to class. Also, no support from the administration. He kept working hard and was able to help some of the kids interested in the materials.

While he was teaching, he also worked as a janitor and helped the secretary of the school with paperwork. Somehow, while he did those 3 jobs, he also started taking classes at Loyola Marymount University and got his bachelor's degree.

CJ: I really don't understand how that is possible...What happened next?

CW: That is your dad! After he graduated from LMU, he got a scholarship to UCLA and got a Master's in Spanish in 1970. Even though he had scholarships, he still needed to make money so he worked in the field, picking tomatoes. But then, he got another scholarship and got a PhD in Spanish and Portuguese from UCLA in 1975.

Eventually during that time he started working as a professor at LMU, from 1971 to about 1991. It was in 1979 when he had the job at LMU that he came back and met me in Panama. He asked his two siblings to move to the United States too because of the opportunity but no one listed to him except me. They all thought he was crazy.

CJ: I know dad wanted to be a doctor, did he ever talk about that, or what made him want to start writing?

CW: At the beginning he wanted to be a doctor. He knew he didn't have the money and time to pursue that path. So he wanted to choose something he would be good at and was inspired by a literature professor at UCLA. The teacher told him, "everyone has a story to tell."

And your dad decided to tell the stories about slavery, love, racial consciousness, and sociopolitical unrest. Because of his books and writing, there were lots of journals and magazines that asked for him to write or talk about it.

CJ: It's super interesting that people still study his books.

CW: Yes! In 2002, the President of Panama awarded him the Orden Vasco Nunez de Balboa. It's an award for distinguished diplomatic contributions to international relations between Panama and other countries. He was also working on a few other things, including a book that he kept calling his masterpiece.

Unfortunately, as you know he had the brain tumor and had to retire because of his health and he was never the same. And you know what happened.

CJ: Okay mom, I think maybe that is enough for now. Thank you for sharing this incredible story. I am so grateful for everything you and dad did for us and I hope we can make you proud. I love you mom.

CW: I love you baby.