



EXTRAORDINARY EMPLOYEES

LIVE ◀ LEARN ▶ WORK

TOM WILSON LEAVES LASTING IMPACT ON THOUSANDS OF STUDENTS DURING 35-YEAR CAREER

by Katie Huger

Virginia Tech employee Tom Wilson might be the only person who can help someone complete a Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), give a full recap of the Hokies' last season, provide the elevation of Blacksburg, and offer suggestions on what to experience while visiting the New River Valley. For him, it's all part of a day's work as the tour bus driver for the Office of Undergraduate Admissions.

Three times a day, Wilson shuttles dozens of prospective and new students and their families from the Visitor Center to campus, where they connect with student tour guides. For many of these visitors, this is the first time they have ever stepped foot on Virginia Tech's campus, and Wilson is one of the first Hokies they will get to know.

While shuttling the visitors, Wilson works with the Hokie Ambassadors, who are also on board, to answer questions and provide tour information. He says this is his favorite part of the job.

"It's the perfect opportunity for us to share all the wonderful things that make the Hokie Nation a great place to call home," he said.

Each tour ends with the ultimate Hokie experience: touching a piece of engraved Hokie Stone as Metallica's "Enter Sandman" blasts through the bus's speakers – the very same tradition the football team has as they run out onto Worsham Field before every home game.

As the visitors exit the bus, smiling and chatting about all Virginia Tech has to offer, Wilson is reassured that serving others is what he was destined to do.



As tour bus driver, Wilson is responsible for maintaining the bus, driving visitors to campus for tours, and working with the Hokie Ambassadors to answer questions and provide tour information. Each tour ends with the ultimate Hokie experience: touching a piece of engraved Hokie Stone as Metallica's "Enter Sandman" blasts through the bus's speakers.

THE PATH TO VIRGINIA TECH

Wilson's passion for education began at just 5 years old when he was asked to be the director of the kindergarten band.

"I was only responsible for waving a stick and acting like I knew what I was doing," he said. "But it instilled in me a passion for teaching and serving that helped launch my career and still lives in me today."

After earning his bachelor's degree in music education from Concord University in Athens, West Virginia, Wilson spent the first two years of his career as a band director, music teacher, and assistant basketball coach in Highland County, Virginia.

In 1981, he decided to further his education and enrolled at Virginia Tech. While earning his master's degree in education administration, Wilson thought he wanted to become a principal; however, after working with Virginia Tech's Upward Bound and Talent Search program, he decided a career in counseling better suited his passion.

THE FIRST 31 YEARS

While working on his master's from 1981 to 1982, Wilson served as a tutor, and then after graduating, a counselor for Upward Bound and Talent Search. After several years, he was promoted to associate director of the program. In 1998, he became the program's interim director and was promoted to director in 1999, a position he held until his retirement in June 2012.

The programs, which are federally funded, encourage and prepare middle and high school students to pursue a college education. As part of the programs, Wilson has had an instrumental role in shaping thousands of students' lives.

During his tenure, he provided answers and guidance to middle and high school students – and oftentimes their parents – as they navigated educational opportunities. He worked with each student to develop an individualized action plan and guided them through their career and college choices.

For some students, Wilson was the one who told them they could achieve their dreams when others told them it wasn't possible. Rony Masri, president and founder of Total Motion Physical Therapy, was one such student.

Masri recalls the time when a guidance counselor told him not to apply to two of his dream schools, the University of Virginia and Virginia Tech.

"He told me that he believed in me," said Masri, "that if I put my mind to it, I could do it."

Masri took Wilson's advice and was accepted to both universities on early decision. He graduated from the University of Virginia with honors and went on to earn a master's in physical therapy from Old Dominion University and a clinical doctorate in physical therapy from the Medical College of Virginia. Today, he operates a successful practice that has three locations in the New River Valley.

"There is no way I would be where I am today without Tom Wilson," said Masri.

Wilson also served as a counselor to Masri's three siblings, all of whom also have successful careers.

"We knew he cared about each one of us," said Masri. "He believed in us and pushed us to succeed. Our success is a testament to the values he instilled in us. Tom was more than a mentor to us, he was a friend."

NOT QUITE RETIRED

Shortly after retiring as director of the university's Upward Bound program, Wilson returned to work as a bus driver for Blacksburg Transit hoping to remain active and maintain interaction with students.

Although he enjoyed driving for Blacksburg Transit, Wilson said he was discouraged that he did not have many opportunities to connect with the students. When the tour bus driver position became available in June 2015, he knew it would be the perfect fit and so did his immediate supervisor, Traci McCoy, campus visit coordinator.

"Tom is a true Hokie. He is hard-working, dedicated, and selfless," said McCoy. "Besides being an experienced bus driver with a safe driving record, he has the perfect personality for this position. He also had extensive experience with college tours through his previous work with the Upward Bound and Talent Search programs."

BEYOND WORK

Wilson's *Ut Prosim* (That I May Serve) spirit stretches beyond the university. For the past 30 years he has served as the choir director for Lutheran Memorial Church in Blacksburg. He also coordinates communion and helps record services for those who cannot attend.

Wilson said he enjoys leading the choir because it allows him to combine his passion for music with his faith. He also plays the drums in the band Beatnik Nightmare. The band plays original, progressive, and alternative music at events and establishments throughout the New River Valley.

Outside of his musical activities, Wilson volunteers at the Lyric Theatre as a concessions worker, helps at the Interfaith Food Pantry, and serves as a Hokie Club representative.

He is also an avid Hokie sports fan and is a football and basketball season ticket holder.

While Wilson stays active in the community, he said he does not have any plans to fully retire.

"This university provided me the opportunity to do what I loved for over 30 years and has given me another [opportunity]," he said. "I plan to stick around for as long as I am able. This is my home."



For the last three years, Wilson has been the drummer for the band Beatnik Nightmare. The group plays at a variety of establishments throughout the community. Photo courtesy of Tom Wilson via Facebook.

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