

## **Robert L. Wilkins - Judge, U.S. Court of Appeals for the D.C. Circuit**

### **Public Defender -- Visionary – Strategist**

Like others before him, Robert Wilkins saw a need for a national museum dedicated to African-American history and culture. Like others before him, Robert Wilkins knew that the magnificent, awful, profound stories passed down through generations of African Americans “deserved a home.” Like others before him, Robert Wilkins knew that that “home” should not only be in the Nation’s Capitol, but also on the Mall, “in America’s front yard.”

But unlike those before him, Wilkins saw a way forward when efforts to support a museum seemed hopelessly stalled. He researched and maneuvered until he – and other stalwart believers working beside him -- helped the nation get there. “Failure was not an option....I had to make this museum happen.”

It wasn’t without personal and family sacrifice. It took all of Judge Wilkins’ time – he quit his job in the Public Defenders Office and worked without compensation for well over a year -- committing all his time and energy; his research and organizational skills; and his dogged determination to rekindle interest in, and support for, creating the museum.

What possessed Robert Wilkins to work without compensation at the very time when he and his wife were expecting their second child? How did he become obsessed with creating a museum on African American life and culture?

Perhaps his years as a black child of a single mother sensitized him and sharpened his vision. Perhaps it was his service as a public defender, working with youth who lacked self-esteem and hope. Perhaps it was the stories handed down by church elders -- stories of “one-room ramshackle schoolhouses” and of “countless indignities, both major and minor, and the physical wounds they inflicted.” Perhaps it was the sit-ins, the arrests. Perhaps it was the experiences of blacks in the military and other lessons learned from history.

In Wilkins’ mind, the museum would be a place to forge unity, a place “where we have the much-needed and long over-due national conversation on race that will help us understand each other and come together.” A place where African American youth in particular “could see and hear the countless stories of how African Americans with seemingly little hope and even fewer resources were able to fight for freedom, seek justice, and change laws and attitudes. How against all odds, African Americans won their freedom from slavery and their right to vote.”

In his book, Long Road to Hard Truth, from which the quotes herein are taken, Robert Wilkins recounts the decades-long efforts of others to secure congressional and other support for a national museum on African American history and culture. Started in 1916, this quest was stymied at every turn – by a “Birth of a Nation” racist mentality, the outbreak of World War I, the stock market crash of 1929, the disinterest of Smithsonian officials, congressional inaction, lack of any other federal patron. By 1980, it was clear that six decades of effort and a number of underfunded and ineffective commission studies had led nowhere. The idea of a museum was

“inching forward to an inevitable death” due to “legislative and bureaucratic apathy.” Hopes were dashed. “Congress was inhospitable, the Smithsonian was noncommittal, and the Mall seemed like a long shot.”

Enter Robert Wilkins, who wouldn't give up. Seeing himself as a catalyst, he stirred up activity. He met with people who had been involved in earlier campaigns, researched the detailed history of their efforts and learned from their failures, organized others, and joined forces with Senators Sam Brownback and Max Cleland, Congressmen John Lewis and J.C. Watts and others, an effort that led ultimately to the creation of the National Museum of African American History and Culture Plan for Action Presidential Commission. For the very first time, a Commission was created not simply to draft a report, but to develop an actionable plan.

Robert Wilkins was appointed to the Commission along with Cicely Tyson, Hank Aaron, and other entertainment and sports stars; three members of the Smithsonian's 1990-91 Institutional Study Committee; individuals with backgrounds in history and museum administration; as well as business, management and media leaders. Senators Brownback and Cleland and Congressmen Lewis and Watts were non-voting, ex-officio members.

As always, Wilkins played an outsize role. He wrote and circulated to all Commission members a detailed report on the efforts made over an 80-year period to create a museum dedicated to African American History; he helped to write the Commission's mission statement; and he served as Chair of the Commission's Site and Building Committee. He fought for placement of the museum on the National Mall.

The result, of course, is the proud National Museum of African American History and Culture now standing between 14th and 15th Streets, just south of Constitution Avenue Northwest. A museum designed to educate the country about African American history as part of all our history is on the Mall, in a location where “Americans, and even international tourists, who were not necessarily coming to Washington to learn about African American history, might feel inspired to come inside and discover something new. “

The full 100-year struggle that began in 1916 with the introduction of the first bill to honor blacks – specifically Black soldiers and sailors – and ended with the creation of the Museum of African American History and Culture is movingly described in a new book, [Long Road to Hard Truth](#), written and published by Robert Wilkins and available through [www.hardtruthbook.com](http://www.hardtruthbook.com) or at any major bookseller.

By Linda Ferren