

# “How Do We Move Forward?”

## A Conversation With David Wilson

**D**avid Wilson recently paid a visit to Scholastic’s New York offices, along with his friend Daniel Woolsey. Their documentary, *Meeting David Wilson*, will debut on MSNBC on April 11. The film is the profoundly American story of a young man’s search for his identity. Along the way, he meets another David Wilson—the great-great-grandson of the man who enslaved his ancestors. “Even if we’re not related by blood,” the other David Wilson told him, “we’re related through history.” Here are excerpts from our conversation with filmmakers Daniel Woolsey and David A. Wilson.



David Wilson

### Q. How did you two meet?

**A. Daniel Woolsey:** We were both [production assistants for a fashion shoot]. I was under the impression that I would be working with models, and I showed up and all I got to work with was Dave. We ended up driving back and forth to Queens [New York] all day, delivering things, and never saw one model. If you’ve seen the movie you know that Dave doesn’t drive—to this day, he doesn’t drive. So I drove, and Dave was in my ear, talking about a bunch of different projects. We started working on a bunch of them, and the rest is history.

**A. David Wilson:** We actually had a business together that didn’t do so well. Both of us came from the video production side of things, but we started a company that wasn’t really in production, [and] it didn’t do too well. For the past several years, I’ve been doing family history research. If you’ve seen the film, it talks about what motivated me, which was my growing-up and my childhood. So when I got older, I started doing the research I always wanted to do as a child. I would tell Dan about

some of the research and the things I was coming across, [like] North Carolina. When I discovered David Wilson, Dan said, “You know, we should really do something with this.” I was really hesitant because I’m not the type of person to be on-camera. I was never really trained to be on-camera, and I’m more comfortable behind the scenes. But the more and more I thought about it, the more I saw its value and how it could really help a lot of people. Especially kids [who] came from the environment and background that I came from. So we decided to go on this journey together. When you see the film, you see that the first part is kind of a rehash of what really happened. Then we pick up down South, and that’s where the film meets its verité element—when we begin to go down South and journey to meet David Wilson.

### Q. When did you decide this could be a film?

**A. Wilson:** Well, obviously Dan is white, and I am black, and we’ve had a lot of discussions [about race] in America. We said, “You know,

it’d be nice to do a film on the different perspectives on what makes us different and what really ties us all together.” Little did I know that what I was doing in my own personal life would be what we would work on and produce. So that seed was already there. It took me a while, but I came around to saying, “There is some value in this.” That was the big “aha moment.” It just took me a while to come to that conclusion.

### Q. When you began making a documentary film out of this quest, did you know what you were getting into?

**A. Wilson:** No one ever does. I just heard a quote recently by a famous filmmaker who said, “In narrative films, fictional films, the director is God. In a documentary, God is the director.” It’s true. You have an idea for what you’re setting out for, but it’s really a roller-coaster ride. You don’t know what you’re going to encounter, emotionally, technically. There are curves that

are thrown at you, and you have to deal with them as they come along. There are some surprises, and there are some things that you can kind of expect. We left our jobs in April of '05 and just decided to go for this and make this film, because we thought it was that important. I left with pretty much no money, and it took a while before I would ever receive [any]. I think it took another year before I ever received another paycheck. So it was something that I just decided to go at. This was really a passion that we had. We said, "People are really going to benefit from this film." We decided that we were going to have a dialogue about race that was going to be different. We're not going to point fingers or harp on the past, but we're going to look to the past as a springboard for moving forward. What lessons did we learn? How are we all tied together from this? That's what this film does. I don't blame [the other] David Wilson; I don't blame anybody or any event. I look at it and say, "What have we learned from it? What can we use from that to move forward?"

**Q. And what's the answer?**

**A. Wilson:** I think there's two parts of it. For African-Americans, especially young ones, [who] are a big focus in our film, there's a simple message that I think is relayed by my uncle in the film. He said if all they see—he's referring to these young kids—are things that are around them, be it violence or drugs, well, they'll drift in that direction. But if they understood what our ancestors went through, and the strength that they had in going through and overcoming those things, then they'll understand that by extension they have that same strength,

and they can overcome the situations and circumstances of their day. So, that is the message for the younger generation. Then you have a more mainstream message, that has to do with the black and white America, and all Americans. It's that we are all related. David Wilson said something in the film that I think sums it up. He said, "Look, even if we're not related by blood, we're related through history." I think that's the broader message of this film.

**Q. You talked about the curveballs that were thrown at you. Were there times when you wanted to give up?**

**A. Wilson:** Yes. Money! Dan can speak to this better than I can. There were times when we did run out of money. We just had to try to make things work. We knew we were at a point where we couldn't turn back. I think that our film probably would have taken less time to make if our money situation was [better].

**Q. Where did you go to get money?**

**A. Woolsey:** Initially for money, we started paying for things ourselves. Then borrowing cars, borrowing cameras, asking people for tape stock. When that ran out, we started asking friends, family, people on the street, people who would pull up next to us in a cab, literally. After we made the trailer, it became a little bit easier because it was more than just two guys talking.

**Q. Beyond the money, were there other times when you thought you'd hit a dead end?**

**A. Wilson:** Yes. Even before the production, in some of my research I felt that way. I get a lot of questions,

especially from African-Americans, about the difficulty of doing the family-history research. A lot of African-Americans can't trace their family before 1870. Because 1865 is the Emancipation Proclamation, 1870 is the first census that includes African-Americans. So a lot of people will say to me, "How did you do it?" A lot of it was making a lot of phone calls, going online. I had an additional researcher who would do groundwork down in North Carolina. This was something where it was a lot of work—that had I not left my job and had the amount of time to focus on it, this film would probably never have been made, because it's a serious commitment. That's not to discourage anyone who wants to do it, because you can still find time to do it. But to dig as deep as I did, it takes a lot of time.

**A. Woolsey:** I wanted to say one thing about hitting walls. We hit a wall about every week, so it wasn't so much [that] it was easy going, and then you hit a wall, and what do you do when you hit that wall. Every week there's a wall, and once you get to the first one you think it's insurmountable, but you figure out a way to get over it. When the next one comes it's not as bad, and the next one is not as bad. At one point, an investor sort of pulled out, and we realized our backs were against the wall. To make the movie, all you really need is the passion for the project. You will quit your job, you will put your money into tape stock instead of food, you will do all of these things, and still hit a wall every Tuesday afternoon.

**A. Wilson:** Yeah, we tied ourselves to it. Here's another thing, too; when you're working with money and time, obviously time equals money.

Especially when you get into post-production—your editor is there, and you're paying your editor daily. We didn't really have a lot of time to do prep work like we had wanted to. We've never really done a feature documentary on our own. We worked for CBS, but it's different when you have a huge staff of 8,200 people working on things, but when you have three people working on a feature-length film it's tough, it's very tough. There were moments creatively where we hit walls, we'd think, "How do we get over this? How do we tell this?" Even with David Wilson, we had a long conversation—well, what parts of the conversation do we want to take? You know, we wanted to be certain that we portrayed things properly. Everything in the film, especially with race in America, has to be dealt with delicately. We wanted to be sensitive to it, how everybody perceives it, but we also wanted to be honest. So when you're trying to toe that line, you have to be very careful. You'll get into a lot of creative arguments. So there's a lot of walls that we hit, but fortunately we were able to get over them.

**Q. What about the relationship between you two and your views on race?**

**A. Wilson:** Obviously, when you're dealing with issues, African-Americans see things differently from white Americans, and vice versa. So Dan would say to me, "Well, I don't necessarily get that," or "I think people would look at that [in] a different way than you're intending it to be looked at." So we would always take that into consideration—how would this be viewed from both sides? We

wanted [it] to be viewed accurately. I think the fact that we had a diverse creative team made for a better film. We wanted to make it understandable to all people and bring everyone together. We didn't want to make a "black film." Especially when a lot of black filmmakers and directors, or a film that deals with race, is considered a black film. We wanted to make an *American* film. This is an American journey. I think that's what's most important.

**Q. What do you make of the David Wilson from the South, and his family's legacy?**

**A. Wilson:** I mentioned to David in our discussion, "Do you feel that you have any sort of responsibility?" He said he didn't feel responsible for what happened back in those times, but that he does feel responsible for being a part of the solution. I think that's fair. I never went down there to blame him for my ancestors' afflictions. I did want him to understand that the things in his life, his fortunes, just as much as he's appreciative of his ancestors for having that, it's also off the back of some of my ancestors. So there is a certain responsibility [we have] as Americans to fix the problem. That's why we asked the question "What's wrong with black people?" It's not a politically correct question, but it's a necessary one. There are clearly problems in the black community. If we're scared to address them, they will only get worse. This is an American problem. The poor graduation rate affects us all in the global economy. So, on that level alone, we have a responsibility to figure out what's wrong. Why are black people killing each other? They

are. Why are black people dealing drugs? What's going on? We have an obligation because we are related through history. It's about self worth.

**Q. What do you see for the future?**

**A. Wilson:** The film, for us, was—well, in this film there is a great deal of information that I don't think people really touch on when they talk about race in America. We thought of doing an extension of this film by doing a book on it. For example, one of the things that stands out to me is, we asked a lot of African-American males, "Where do you see African-American males 20, 25 years from now?" Almost 90 percent of the responses were "I don't know." They thought they would be extinct or in prison. Some people might see that as unrealistic, but the fear of not knowing their future is so real. It's frightening. I have to say, when you look at the statistics [in this country], one in every three black men will spend some time in prison during [his] life. You have more black men in prison than you have in college. It's very frightening. The level of stress that young black men in particular have knowing all this [is staggering]. I grew up seeing people murdered and killed. That's very real to them. It's really dark. I think there's a lot of experiences we had in doing this research and over the past three years on topics that aren't usually discussed when dealing with race.

**Q. It sounds like you were a unique child. What set you apart? What allowed you to survive the tough environment that was all around you?**

**A. Wilson:** I think the most obvious of all is that I had two parents. I think

that was probably the biggest element. My mother and father were strong forces in instilling common sense in us. I was the first to graduate from college in our family. They taught us common sense, and to be good people. They used religion to get that across to us. I think that's the big difference. But I also want to say that I knew some other people who had two parents and who were smarter in class—I was never the smartest or, you know, the most articulate—I knew some of the smartest people who would go on the streets and do things they shouldn't have. I think my parents just instilled this drive, and I think that's the biggest distinction. There's so many good kids who end up in bad circumstances. It's not because of any deficiencies, mental or personal.

**A. Woolsey:** There's also a lot in the movie where Dave's mom describes him when he was 6. They were walking down the street and he saw a bum and he said, "I don't want to be like that." So, yes, I give a lot of credit to your mom and dad and religion, but something about you, when you were younger, already had that drive.

**A. Wilson:** Yeah, I would say that, but I think a lot of kids have that. It's just how do you channel it. Even in my own family, I have a brother who went to prison. So, you know, even within the two-parent home there's something about the environment that can penetrate the parenting.

**Q. Was there resistance in your family to your making this film?**

**A. Wilson:** My family was pretty supportive. They are pretty open-minded. They were interested in the information I found out about [our extended] family. What's interesting is, my father

is a very quiet man. That's one of the reasons why I use my uncle more in the film—my father's more reserved. After the film was done and I showed it to my father, he thought I should have been a little bit more aggressive in the way I dealt with David Wilson. I said, "Dad, that's not the way you raised me." I understand that there are those emotions, but what would have been gained from yelling at him? We live in a world [of] 24-hour news networks. There's someone from the right, someone from the left, and the commentator in the middle and they say "go" and they start attacking each other. At the end of the exchange, you are either confused or more polarized than you were before. What we wanted to do with this film is have something where there's actual movement. What is the greater goal? To this day, Dave and I e-mail each other and call each other on holidays. I keep him up to date on what's going on. That was the most important thing for us to show [in the film]: You can disagree without being disagreeable. What's the middle ground? How do we move forward?

**Q. Growing up, did you have any teachers who made a lasting impression on you?**

**A. Wilson:** The interesting thing is, my elementary-school teacher, Ms. Carita, and my eighth-grade teacher, Ms. Jones, are the two [who] stood out to me as exciting teachers. It was interesting, I went back to see Ms. Carita, and she was still teaching, and she remembered me because I had such a big family. I was just telling her, I remember everything about her class, the first day I went to school, her teaching me. It's interesting,

because I was learning so much. So much of the basic education—this particular woman fed me this information. She was a really good teacher and still is. This was 25 years ago, and I still remember everything.

**Q. What message do you have for today's young people?**

**A. Wilson:** One thing that's very important to change is the perception of black history, for both blacks and whites. Our ancestors, who went through slavery, segregation, and all sorts of discrimination, weren't victims. They were victors. They overcame all of those things. These were people who were brought over here, stripped of everything—language, culture, family. They were put on the same level as animals. They worked and fought to make things not only better for themselves, but for everyone who came here. That's a victorious story because so many of our ancestors could have given up and chosen the easy way. People like Harriet Tubman went against the grain at their own risk. They were victors. There are so many stories like that. When I started doing my own family research, I realized those stories existed not only in books. My own great-grandfather exhibited characteristics that were heroic and admirable, even though I'd never read about him in a book. He purchased land, started a church, and taught his children the importance of literacy.

—Interview by *Suzanne McCabe*,  
Editor, Junior Scholastic

For more information about the film,  
go to: [www.meetingdavidwilson.com](http://www.meetingdavidwilson.com).