

**Ms. Rene' Wilson**

**Served in the Army as a Post-Vietnam era veteran  
from 1979 to 1982**



## Rene' Wilson Interview

Counter #

002       Graham: My name is Crystal Graham and I am a student at the University of Washington in Tacoma. I am researching local history and interviewing people in the community about their life history, and their opinions about local issues as a means of preserving the history of this area. Today's date is March 4, 1993. Would you tell me your full name please?

Wilson: My name is Rene' Z. Wilson.

Graham: What does the "Z" stand for?

Wilson: I'm usually reluctant to tell people, but it's Zenola. Both my first names are French. My mother got both those names out of a book she was reading when I was born.

Graham: So it's not a family name?

Wilson: No, I'm the only one who got an uncommon middle name. Rene' means "Reborn", but I'm still trying to find out what Zenola means.

031       Graham: When and where were you born?

Wilson: I was born June 3, 1957 in Detroit, Michigan.

Graham: Can you tell me a little bit about your family?

Wilson: I'm the oldest of three. I have two brothers, one Shawn the other Keison Eric. I was in college when he was born. There's quite a bit of time between my brothers and me. Ten years between Shawn and me. And almost twenty years between me and Keison. We all had different fathers, but the same mother. My mother was very young when she had me. I was raised by her sister. They were more my family. My mother was only 14 when she had me. She made one of the wiser decisions by letting me go to my aunt's family to be raised.

Graham: So do you consider your aunt and uncle to be your parents?

Wilson: Certainly do. The image I have of my aunt is closer to a mother than my own mother's. I didn't go to live with my mother until I was eleven.

070       Graham: Can you tell me about the employment of what you consider to be your parents?

Wilson: My uncle Eugene, always had several jobs. He was in security and worked in the meat department of a store and several other jobs. He was determined to earn money and support his family.

Graham: How many were in his family?

Wilson: There were three girls besides myself. Fay is the oldest, Terriel was slightly younger than I am, and Leia who came much later on. They were like my sisters. My Uncle Eugene and my Aunt Gertrude, she only had a tenth grade education, were working class people. Aunt Gertrude worked in the home, and took care of other people in their homes. Later

on she got a job on the General Electric assembly line. She made a pretty good living until GE closed down Baltimore. Then she went back to taking care of people in their homes again. They were lower middle class.

121 Graham: Can you tell me about family relations? Were there any grandparents, cousins?

Wilson: My family was very close, especially on my uncle's side. In his family there was the Williams side and the Wilson side. I can remember, in the summer, they used to pack us up and send us down to Grandma Williams. She had a farm in South Carolina. We would pick fresh fruit and work in the fields.

Graham: Did your biological father have any impact on you?

Wilson: I have never, ever, met my biological father. My mother had some information on him, but they hadn't kept in touch. They were so young, he wanted to marry her, but she didn't want to get married just because of a child.

166 Graham: Can you tell me about your religion?

Wilson: I was raised in the Church of Christ. ... I was [raised] with a strong understanding of what was right and wrong. That if we did something and got caught, there would be some consequences to bear. ... I'll tell you why this was so important to me. When I went to live with my mother in New York, when I was eleven. I was thrown in with people from all types of backgrounds. I had to consciously draw on my past experience to make the decisions that were right for me. ... I consider my aunt and uncle laid the foundation of my life for me, because they gave me moral character.

221 Graham: Do you have any particular beliefs?

Wilson: I always had a strong belief in God. It set a parameter on my activities.

Graham: You felt you would be held accountable?

Wilson: Yes, in the future. But on a daily basis ... you had to set limitations. I watched my friends and associates do things, that I could never do. That was their choice, but I could never compromise, cross that line.

282 Graham: Could you tell me about your schooling?

Wilson: [This section has been extensively edited, education is extremely important to Rene' and she went into a lot of detail.] Education was very important in my family. I started out in Baltimore and was in the fifth grade when I moved to New York. ... I really didn't know my mother, she was like a fantastic figure on the edge of my life. ... One thing I associate with my mother, that she was young. She died when she was 36. Her name was Lucille, they called her Cille. She lived a fantastic life in New York.

Graham: What did she do?

Wilson: Waitressing when she was young. When she settled down with Phil, she became a hair stylist. My life was disjointed from the time I moved to New York to be with her. She was only 25 and I looked on her almost as a sister. ... We lived in Manhattan, across from Central Park. It was so different from Baltimore. ... But I always had a love of learning, but I

had behavioral problems because I missed my "family". There were no young people, just my mother and me. I couldn't relate to this as "family". So I did all of my socializing at school, which kept me in detention hall a lot of the time. ... A big influence on my were teachers, mostly white, some Hispanic, some black teachers. In New York the emphasis was on getting through, just graduating. ... We had to move to the Bronx and then later to Philadelphia. ... My mother married Phil and had her very own house, with her very own family. Then she sent for my brother Shawn, who was five and had been living with a foster family all his life. She didn't understand about ties. She brought me to live with her when I was eleven, and this took me away from my family. Now she did the same to Shawn. So I poured myself into his life, it gave me somebody closer to my age. ... I had developed a pattern for good academics, but poor behavior. But I had always wanted to go to college. ... I went to ninth grade at Germantown High School, which had a pretty good racial mix. ... In my senior year I went to live on Long Island with my uncle. I went to a white school and for the first time, saw the world of difference between a predominately black school and a white school. In terms of resources available, but also the emphasis placed on not just passing to graduate. But on learning ... these kids competed. I didn't fit in socially. White kids are definitely different from black kids and I didn't fit in.

917 Graham: So, since you didn't have a social life, you turned to academics?

Wilson: I had the best academic year of my life. ... The requirements were so much higher. ... That's what influenced my decision to go to an all white college. Dowling College on Long Island. A private college, part of our campus included a lot of the Vanderbilt estate.

059 Graham: What year did you start college?

Wilson: ... In September 1975 -- I graduated in 1979 ... I started out to be a law student and changed in mid stream.

Graham: So you got involved with the military through Army ROTC? Before then, who was financing your schooling?

Wilson: I was receiving grants for my tuition. My mother and step-father were financing my living needs. Back then it didn't cost a lot of money to go to school. Especially a small, private college. It was about \$30 a credit, if that much. I worked part-time to get enough money to go to the next football game or basketball game. ... I got involved with Army ROTC in my Sophomore year. I was having difficulties making ends meet and my mother and step-father were not willing to incur any more expense on my behalf. They felt I was grown and should be more self-reliant. One night while I was home on summer vacation, my step-father and I were watching TV and an Air Force ROTC commercial came on. They mentioned stipends and scholarships, my step-father suggested that I look into it when I got back to school. But the Air Force ROTC was offered at St. John's University. I couldn't go there, it was in New York City.

Side 2

I went to Hobbs University and the military science instructor convinced me to get involved in their program [Army ROTC was offered here]. I didn't get the scholarship, but I did get the stipend, which helped with my expenses. I fell in love with ROTC and decided at that point that I wanted to make the Army my career.

025 Graham: Did you feel there was anything different about you that caused you to enter the military?



Wilson: Yes, in that I was a minority and a double minority in a sense. I was black and I was female. ... I felt an onus to be just as good as or even better than my contemporaries who were white and had better educational opportunities. A lot of them were from West Point and belonged to military families. I wanted to not be just a quota ... even though Affirmative Actions was largely responsible for my having certain opportunities being made available to me. I didn't want to use it for a crutch. And I certainly didn't want to use it as my vehicle for upward advancement.

057 Graham: What actually made you decide to enter the military?

Wilson: Because I thought I was a pretty good officer, and my track record in ROTC. I couldn't imagine making any other career choice at that point. I had changed my major early in college, so I wasn't going to law school. I majored in history and had a minor in music. I saw the military as the mode for me to attain my accomplishments and my achievements in life. It would be my primary vehicle.

072 Graham: How did your family feel about your decision?

Wilson: They were elated. I was the first person in the family to ever receive a commission. I was the only person in my family's entire history to become an Army officer. They were really excited about it. That I had the possibility of being someone great and leaving a lasting mark for our family name in history.

085 Graham: What obstacles did you encounter during your military career?

Wilson: There were very few career obstacles, because I had nothing but open doors. Basically, I tried my very best to be a good officer. I was successful in that endeavor and it was recognized and acknowledged.

091 Graham: What about prejudice or harassment?

Wilson: Where prejudice was concerned. ... This was a competitive environment and because I was black and female, I knew that I was at a disadvantage, mainly because of the traditional patronage system basically between white males. It was an organized system, I'm not saying it was good or bad. I'm not passing any moral judgments on it. But it is a definite barrier, especially at certain points of advancement, to a black female. The only way I could have broken through that barrier, and I knew this, was to be a better officer on paper [in performance appraisals] than that person who just knows the right person or has the right background, or has the right gender and color. I really can't say whether I would have been successful, because I didn't stay long enough in the military. I did very well in the military and I was encouraged to stay by senior officers. But at that point, I had some spiritual things occurring in my life. I came to the decision to dedicate my life to the Lord. I didn't see realistically how I could stay in the military and achieve that goal of serving Him, full time.

130 Graham: What about any preferential treatment?

Wilson: There was none. The biggest issue for a black female at that time was fraternization. There's always a need for a certain amount of attrition to take place. You either have an out right RIF [reduction in force] or people are going to be exited for other reasons. I always thought, they had the fraternization policy there as a potential screening tool. First of all, in the officer's corp it's stressed, for those of us who took it seriously. You are an officer and you don't fraternize with your subordinates or enlisted people. Because you're in a different class and

you're supposed to be a leader. Leaders cannot become intermingled with the people they are trying to lead. There has to be a distinction there. Because there was no potential to cross over into the enlisted ranks, I think a lot of black females suffered. Because there were not very black male officers, in our ranks. We had to chose between dating white males, having the slim pickings of very few black males [officers], or making the move over into the enlisted ranks, where there were lots of black males.

Graham: I never thought about that, that's a valid problem.

Wilson: A friend of mine had that experience and she lost her commission because of it. She dated an enlisted man, which was strictly taboo. You did not cross over. But again, a black female had to make a decision. So my decision was to spend most of my time with white officers. I never "dated" white officers, but my friends were white officers. Don't get me wrong, these were my friends.

190 Graham: What do you remember most about serving in the military?

Wilson: That most people saw me as being the type of officer I never saw myself as being. I look at myself as being a fair minded person, who just has pretty high standards. I expect them of myself and I expect others to live up to [them]. So I was always labeled as being hard-core and unrelenting in certain areas. ... I was seen to be a by-the-book sort of person.

Graham: Did you have a hard time with that?

Wilson: I had a difficult time with that. Officers are required to socialize, it is part of the job. I wasn't a very social person, because of my background I became very introverted. ... I had never socialized in the context of a group ... basically I'm the "good friend" type. I attended social functions because I had to, it was a requirement of my job. In a sense, that would have presented an obstacle to me in years to come. Because the higher you go in rank, the more sociable you must be.

247 Graham: What about the training you received in the military?

Wilson: ROTC was excellent training for me. They emphasized all the right things. Leadership, accepting responsibility as a leader, and having the aptitude and ability to be a good leader.

Graham: What about your training in your career field? What did you end up doing?

Wilson: In the military, you have to "get your ticket punched" in order for you to really advance. You had to have command time. As a black female, I was given a lot of administrative jobs. Jobs that required I have the ability to do it, but not necessarily would lead me in a direction, a path that I had chosen. You see, I wanted that star [to become a General officer]. I had to be just like the men, I had to have command time and show that I was a good leader. ... People were chosen with a fine tooth comb to move onto those leadership positions and I was determined to be one of those. But usually I ended up in administrative positions. That to me was a subtle way of how the officers are sort of, set in groups. And I wound up [there], probably because I was a black female. It never struck me until now, that most of my jobs were administrative. But I was really determined to get that star. Finally I would have broken through something, I would have gotten my ticket punched somehow. I never wanted to

be categorized or stereotyped. I want to be my own person and get the respect that I am due as an individual, not as a group.

309 Graham: Can you tell me about your assignments?

Wilson: First of all, I was an executive officer in a training company, I was stationed at Fort ???, a training post for Signal Corp. communications. I was the executive officer/training officer in 36 Kelo and Charlie. Those are cable layers, tactical radio people. Which is the lowest density MOS [military occupation series] in the whole entire Army. So that didn't speak well of my first assignment. ... I had a very good commander, Captain Fisher, a Ranger. He was easy going but he had standards, and a good First Sergeant, Sgt Holt. They began to groom me. Especially 1st Sgt Holt, he was black and he had identified with me as black. He began the grooming process. He would tell me things, because he had years in the military. He would say Lieutenant you do this or that and he kept me on the straight and narrow. And because of that, I did well in my job. Capt Fisher saw that and he was the first person to give me a max OER [Officer Efficiency Report, this is usually an annual appraisal]. That sort of set a precedent for me, I said if I can do it here, I can do it anywhere.

Graham: So where did you go next?

Wilson: Because I did well in that job and my senior rater [on the OER] was Colonel Blasco, the battalion commander. He had had a lot of problems with his supply admin center. And because Capt Fisher spoke well of me as a young officer, they approached me about taking on SPAC [supply admin center]. I thought I might as well take it, nothings too hard for me. I didn't know I was getting into a can of worms. Col Blasco gave me a free hand to make necessary changes, that was the key. So I did very well there too. He gave me another max OER and I moved up to Directorate level. Another administrative job, but I got promoted to First Lieutenant. They put my into the Directorate of Training and Doctrine, I was the administrative officer there. Maybe there was some progression there. I went from Company to Battalion to Post. ... Because I had a reputation for getting the job done, I was given a free hand. Col Bishop expected a lot of me because I had done well on lower levels. I did the best I could. ... That's when I had to make my decision to leave and it was one of the most difficult in my whole life. I enjoyed being a military officer and did well in the military. But there was a spiritual part of me that had to be addressed. So I made the decision, against everybody's advice, including my family's, to leave and join the Peace Corp.

432 Graham: What about friendships? Did you have any particular friendships in the military?

Wilson: Again, I wasn't a very sociable person. I got very much involved in my job.

Graham: You haven't said anything about other military women.

Wilson: Let's back up to ROTC, my best friends were Pam Fletcher and Shawn Monohan. They were engaged and eventually got married. Pam is Jewish, white, and we were close friends. Mostly because she was not a hard-liner, but a by-the-book person like I was. She became a military intelligence officer. And Shawn, who was a year behind her, went into the quarter master corp. ... We were a small group in military science, the senior group was a maximum of 12 people. We were close and helped each other after class. That was probably the most socializing I had done in years and it was because of Shawn and Pam. They kept tabs on me. When I was stationed in Georgia at Fort Gordon, Pam was stationed in North Carolina at

Fort Bragg, we corresponded. ... She had a big influence on me as I saw myself. I didn't see myself as a black female, I was a military officer in the same vein as my friend. I was a professional Army officer. It never crossed my mind until that thing happened with JoAnne Rodrick and her being ousted out of the military, because of that fraternization thing. That's when my being a black female struck me. I had tried to develop a professional friendship with JoAnne, but she was in another dimension, another world all ready. Because of her relationship with an enlisted man. And I couldn't break through that, maybe she saw me as a threat because I refused to cross that line. I couldn't, I had a career to think about.

516      Graham: Has serving in the military affected your relationships with friends and family?

Wilson: One of my cousins said something to me that I will never forget. It was Faye, she was my baby sister when we were younger. She said, "Rene' you've changed so much, I don't even know who you are, you've changed so much."

Graham: Was this right after you got out?

Wilson: That was right after I finished my Peace Corp tour [Rene' was in the Army from 1979 to 1982 then served two years in South America with the Peace Corp]. I had never even thought of that [changing], I was just building a career. I was off with these other people, who had different backgrounds from my family. They were generally speaking, white and professionals. Then I would go home to my family who were basically just working class people. ... This served to sever another tie with my family. Who was it? Thomas Wolf said, "You can't go home again." And that is when I finally realized, when you have left and begin your life, it's dangerous to go home again. Because it builds animosity, because you have done things that they can't even relate to on any level. It builds some resentment. So I make it a point only to go home at key times, Christmas, you know holiday times. Family reunions, where I stay for just some quality time with family members, but then I disassociate myself from them and go on with my life.

586      Graham: What led to your being here at the American Lake VA Medical Center?

Wilson: Once I returned from my tour in the Peace Corp, I had to make some decisions. The mission field didn't open up to me, which is what I left the military for. By going into the Peace Corps I was laying the foundation for missions, serving the Lord. It left me in a quandary of what to do with the rest of my life. That's when I began to be sort of transient. I would go from job to job, state to state, trying to find me again. I look at it as a lost time for me, years that I have really lost. I was going in an endless circle of trying to find not only who I was, but who I was supposed to be from then on. I went to several schools and just traveled throughout the country. Just holding down jobs temporarily, just to make end meet so I could accomplish what I wanted to. Then I would move on. I've spent the last eight years doing that, just being transient. I would go back to Baltimore from time to time and stay a few months there. My family was very disappointed with me. Because they knew who I was. ... I went to school in Baltimore to become computer literate. I didn't want to stay in Baltimore and I had heard the job market in Texas was plentiful. It's not. I was working for Kelly Temps. And was staying in a big set up for homeless people. I met an individual who kept talking about Seattle. That if you wanted opportunity, go West. ... That Seattle had the bluest skies you ever want to see. So I jumped on a bus and was Seattle bound. When I got to Seattle, the first thing I saw was brick and mortar. And I was raised in brick and mortar ... I wasn't off the bus in Seattle five minutes. I was back on the bus headed toward Olympia. I knew it was the capital of this state and I kind of figured they would have government jobs there. And it was pretty there, I saw

green grass and trees that I hadn't seen in Seattle. I wound up there at the Salvation Army, which led me to the VA Medical Center. This is last year I came here.

Graham: Did you know there was a Domiciliary here?

Wilson: Now there's is something I was disappointed with. Out of all the time I have been traveling, I could have short circuited seven of those eight years. Maybe I'm wrong, maybe it was growing time. If I had known about the facilities that existed for veterans, I would never have spent time in shelters and missions. I would have gone to a VA hospital domiciliary and probably had my life back on track.

Graham: Because of the programs they put you through here?

Wilson: Yes, the programs are good. It's just that they aren't widely publicized. I had no idea that a domiciliary existed.

717 Graham: I didn't either until I start this project. Do you feel that you are being adequately treated by the VA?

Wilson: When I came through the program for the first time last year. My case manager and social worker keyed in on my aspirations for the future. I'm interested in nursing, so they paid for me to begin the C&A course at Pierce College. They helped me with other expenses which allowed me to enter into a brand new field. ... The supervisor of the program here read my chart and told my about a job in Olympia that matched my background perfectly. Its working with homeless veterans as the supervisor of the homeless veteran program [see newspaper article about the stand down held last year]. He told me not to sell myself short. Like my instructors in school, he wanted me to live up to my potential. He influenced me to take that position. It gave me a good income, my own apartment, so I made a very quick transition from here [the domiciliary].

Graham: What percentage do you see of female homeless veterans?

Wilson: Here at the domiciliary our numbers are few [six is the most they have ever had at one time, while there are usually 50 men in the facility]. Not that there aren't homeless women veterans out there. They just don't have the information, like I didn't have the information about it for years. When I was in Olympia, I had to ask about the domiciliary. The men knew about it and they were coming in and talking about. Perhaps its assumed that it isn't the environment for a woman. They have other resources at their disposal. They have GAU, they have AFDC [aid to dependent children]. Women have more resources at their disposal, men are at a disadvantage in the homeless category, they figure. Because women are always going to be taken care of, the government is always going to provide for women and children. Including veterans, since there are all these other programs, my history as a veteran didn't count.

870 Graham: Are you aware of any areas particular to female vets that should be addressed by the VA?

Wilson: I think in terms of our identity as women. We can't be clumped into a group. We have particular needs as women, even though we are veterans. I think a lot of time they [the VA] miss that. Here they really try, the female case workers and social workers are really trying to organize us into groups where our particular needs as women can be addressed.

Graham: Are these mental needs, physical needs?



Wilson: Mental, physical, social all of our needs as women. Last year I had a lot of complaints about that. It seemed that the programs were geared to and favored men. They didn't have gender specific things that I though were needed. But this particular program is addressing those issues and moving in that direction.

Graham: You've seen a change in the last 12 months?

Wilson: Yes. Dave Hopkins [the Chief of Domiciliary Services] is a very progressive person. He's willing to take your views into consideration before he makes final decisions. ... I've seen this program, mature and take off in the area where women's issues are concerned even in that short time.

946 Graham: Is there anything you would like to add?

Wilson: I'm grateful that you are doing this and in particular that you are looking to female veterans. To get our input and recognize the achievements and accomplishments of female veterans. Females have contributed a lot, not just to the military, but to the entire frame work of this society. And unless those achievements are recognized, I don't think you can really go forward knowledgeably in terms of leadership in the future. Unless we [women] are seen as leaders, we are seen as potential candidates in the political arena. Making changes and advancing, not only the cause of women, but advancing other causes as well. Being able to represent all groups of people, we as women are the majority in number. We have to be able to rise in the ranks and be seen as something other than a quota. We need to be seen as people with the potential to lead this society in a positive direction. I believe, from here [the domiciliary], a homeless female veteran could accomplish that. They have opened untold opportunities for me here and I do appreciate that. But it's been a process. Like coming from the Stone Age to modern times in the way they view women veterans.

(END OF INTERVIEW)