

Lessons learned in life and work

by Alison Lee Satake



The former William Hooper school now houses independent living apartment for seniors, and Wilma Williams Daniels has managed the property for 12 years.

photo by Stephanie Moore

A portrait of her husband sits on the windowsill by Wilma Daniels' desk in the historic brick building that houses seniors. For the past 12 years, Daniels has been the property manager for William Hooper apartments, 22 units in the 1914 William Hooper School building, which she and her late husband, Windell Daniels, renovated to provide a place for seniors to live independently. "I've always had a love for seniors and helping people. That is what my whole family is about, helping people throughout the community," she says. She also manages 28 units of family housing next door.

Although her two mentors from whom she has developed her business acumen were men – first her father and then her husband – she has turned their lessons into her own.

Lesson 1: Give back

Daniels sits on a number of Wilmington boards including the UNCW Board of Trustees, the Cape Fear Community College Foundation, the Greater Wilmington Chamber of Commerce's Black Chamber Council, and the New Hanover Community Health Center. Born in Chicago, raised in Montgomery, Ala. and Rocky Point, N.C., she moved to Wilmington when she was 12 years old.

Her father, James Finley, started the first commercial driving school in North Carolina. She worked in his Wilmington office, where people from all over the state would come to learn how to drive. "I learned my business ethics from him," Daniels says.

When she was 17 years old, she entered Hoggard High School as a senior, the first year the school was integrated. It was 1968. She says that it was rough. "I remember the days I ran and tried to hide because of riots [at the school]," Daniels says.

Like many of her African American peers, she missed her old school, Williston, which was Wilmington's African American high school that was shut down. "Our school, which was known as 'the greatest school under the sun,' was just closed down. There was so much history there for us," she says. While she had once planned to run in the high school pageant to become Miss Williston, at Hoggard African Americans could not even become cheerleaders.

After graduation, she enrolled at Miller-Motte College to receive her executive secretarial certificate. On a Sunday afternoon, she was driving home from church and a yellow

Charger on Princess Street caught her eye. The man driving the car pulled up beside her and asked for her name. He introduced himself as Windell Daniels, the man she would be married to for 38 years.

Lesson 2: Work hard and have a business plan

After graduating from Miller-Motte, she went to work at the Wilmington office of polyester manufacturer Invista for 26 years. Windell was an executive at an oil company for many years before opening his businesses, including the senior and family housing Daniels now manages.

“He was a dreamer, and we were sitting at home one day and we were talking about what we wanted to do together,” she says. They decided to start their own tour bus company called United National Tours, which would help older people with limited mobility. They developed a solid business plan. After 27 years, the company, which has been renamed Daniels Tours, provides tours to groups around the world.

Lesson 3: Have faith and keep striving

When Windell, a prominent leader in Wilmington’s business community, died suddenly in April 2008, her world changed. But Daniels says her faith has kept her strong. Her prominence and eloquence made her an obvious choice to fill many of the leadership roles once held by her husband.

“My husband’s death has made me stronger,” she says. His absence has helped her realize her potential as a leader. “It really helped me make crucial decisions and to realize that I am Wilma.”

For the future, Daniels would like to add to her long list of accomplishments writing a book about her father or the lessons she learned as a wife of an executive. ✦



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