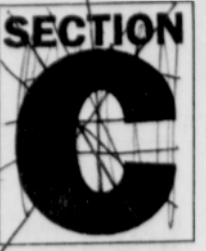


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Noel Willis: Graduating With Honors

Like thousands of college seniors throughout the country, Noel Willis recently basked in the limelight of convocation ceremonies. But unlike most seniors, the journalism major at the University of Missouri graduated with honors—magna cum laude, to be precise.

"It was a very, very, good feeling," Willis, 22, remarked of walking across the auditorium stage to receive his bachelor's degree. "Just having family members clapping made my day."

Willis, who is the grandson of John and Thelma Sylvester of Portland was also named a member of Kappa Tau Alpha, an honor society for a select group of students from among the top ten percent of the graduating class. The honor is a prestigious one indeed, especially when earned at the oldest and most renowned journalism program in the country.

A number of family and friends from across the country shared in the moment, including the graduating senior's "Grandma Syl," Thelma Sylvester. "Your mind tells you that there's no way Grandma Syl should make such a long trip," Willis said. "But in my heart and soul I'm as pleased as punch she made it here."

Noel Willis spoke with love and admiration of his grandparents, who he said represented a crucial bridge between the past and present. He also noted that his deceased grandmother on his father's side of the family, Bernice Mayfield, was there in spirit. "They're all great people, no doubt about it."

A number of family members and

friends gathered for a post-graduation celebration dinner. The moment was touching for all who were present, but the dinner's honoree said that he was especially overwhelmed.

"I never experienced that type of emotion in all my life that I felt toward every person in that room," he said. The honors graduate offered special praise for his mother, Verlean Sylvester Willis. "She constantly read to me as a child, and I'll always remember our trips to the library," Noel Willis recalled. "She's the one who laid the foundation."

She certainly did. A single working mother for the better part of Noel's childhood, Verlean Sylvester Willis stressed the importance of reading. A stack of library books could often be found in the back seat of her car.

"My advice for young mothers with no money is that the library is the best place to take your family," Ms. Willis suggests. "There are so many worlds to explore. And it doesn't cost anything."

"Besides, if a child can feel free with a book," she said, "it will be much easier for them to learn in school."

Noel Willis will be the first person to point out that his father, Leon Willis, and stepmother, Harriet Palmer-Willis, were there for him, too. Willis recalled that his father helped to erase whatever doubts the journalism student had concerning his abilities. Often, Leon Willis's letters from home served as a lifeline for his youngest son.

"Dad's a man who does not express his emotions as much as he probably should," Noel Willis said of his father. "Just having him at the graduation ceremony meant a lot to me."

The years of family encouragement obviously paid dividends. But Verlean Sylvester Willis is quick to give ultimate credit where it is due. "We were a support group for Noel. But he did it."

Not long after experiencing the euphoria of graduating, however, Noel Willis said that this is a crossroads period in his young life. "I'm going to have to sit down and take a hard look at who I am," he said. The journalism graduate said that the predicament of many young Blacks has been of concern to him also.

"It just proves how screwed-up this society is. I think of those brothers in jail," he said. "They are people who are as bright as I am—no brighter. There is an Einstein out there."

The honors graduate argued that through our labor and bloodshed in battle, among other contributions, Blacks are "more American" than practically any other group of people in this country. Yet, despite that, he noted that we continue to live in "a system that doesn't recognize what an individuals promise is."

"I thank God that I was able to get through the cracks," he said. Denise LaCour, who made the trip along with her daughter Crystal, has dubbed her nephew "The Magna Man" in recognition of his accomplishments. The specific honors do not mean as much for Verlean Sylvester Willis, however, as she watches "the last child leaving the nest," she said philosophically. "It's the icing on the cake," she said. "But, you know, I've always scraped icing off cake when I eat it, anyway. But that's not me."

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