

Jeff Willie: Life-Long Commitment to Literacy

STORY BY KARYN BRODSKY (ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED IN GOOD LIFE FAMILY

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Raising oneself up from extreme poverty is a major challenge for anyone to conquer, but it was Jeff Willie's revelation at age 19 that would forever change his life.



The current Allen, TX resident was born in 1957 as the 10th of 12 children in the East Texas town of Deberry, near Carthage, literally, as he says, “in the woods.”

“My home had no running water, indoor plumbing, electricity, television, telephone or automobile. We got our water from natural sources, like a local brook or a deep water well, and we had a wood stove, fireplace and heater,” Willie says. “For transportation, we used mules to pull wagons, and we raised our own food, including vegetables, chickens and hogs.”

Willie’s father, a sharecropper, was a World War II veteran and Jeff’s mother only completed the third grade. The older siblings all attended segregated schools, and the same held true for Willie until the seventh grade. He graduated high school in May 1976, one of the fortunate few of the “Willie Dozen” to do so. He adds that of his siblings who did not graduate, all but one struggled to be economically stable in their lives.

In 1977, at age 19, Willie enlisted in the U.S. Air Force. As he compiled the documents to enlist, he saw something that gave him pause. On his birth certificate, his father’s signature was simply the letter “X;” beneath it a note from the County Clerk confirming it was his father’s mark. This was how Willie discovered that his father could neither read nor write. “It hit me like a ton of bricks,” he says. “It all became clear; when my dad would ask me to read something to him as a way of ‘practicing my reading,’ it was his way of concealing his own illiteracy.” Willie says his father was “the most intelligent man I knew,” stating that one cannot measure intelligence based only on Intelligence Quotient (IQ); a good Emotional Quotient (EQ) is necessary as well.

From that day on, Willie resolved that he would base his life on a platform of literacy and academic discipline. He calls that focus his “X” factor, aptly named for the “X” with which his father signed his birth certificate. He served in the U.S. Air Force from April 1977 until October 2002 and earned three Associate Degrees from Community College of the Air Force, a Bachelor’s in Corporate Training and Development, Master’s in Organizational and Human Resources Development and a Graduate Certificate in Conflict Mediation from Abilene Christian University. Currently, Willie is pursuing his doctorate in Educational Leadership, concentrating on socio-economic resiliency factors, risk factors, protective factors and shared factors to produce high academic achievement among students of color. He is CEO of Jeff Willie Leadership, Executive Director/Executive Consultant with the John Maxwell Team, Associate Professor for the University of Phoenix, and has over 30 years of experience as a Conflict

Mediator/Family Mediator. Willie has an extensive background in Leadership Training and Development, is a former facilitator of Covey's *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* and has been a platform presenter/facilitator since 1982. He is a Certified Arkansas Law Enforcement Instructor in Rapid Response Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT), an Honorary Colonel of Arkansas State Police and an Honorary Member of Arkansas Highway Police.

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— JEFF WILLIE



Since that day in 1977, Willie has provided guidance to thousands of people who struggle with literacy. His motto is “I serve by adding value to people. People are my business.” He maintains that one can always help someone else. “If you live those values, then you pass on those values to someone else,” he explains. He quotes the American author and leadership expert, John Maxwell, “‘Be a river, not a reservoir.’ Share your knowledge; don’t just keep it for yourself.”

The legacy of literacy and striving to do one’s best has not been lost on Willie’s own family. He and his wife Pat are the proud parents of Katrina, who is a pediatrician and Ursula, who is an attorney.

Everything he teaches, says Willie, is part of literacy, including character building, citizenship, growth mindset and life-long learning. “You have to have a willingness to overcome obstacles. I look at them as opportunities for growth,” Willie says. “I try to lift people up, inspire, encourage, build relationship bridges and seek commonalities.” He teaches this mantra: “What I see is what I do; what I do is what I practice; what I practice is what I become.”

Willie has been recognized for his accomplishments. In 2018, Willy received a Very Inspiring Parent (VIP) Award from *Good Life Family Magazine* (*GLF*) in recognition of his resilience, his dedication to promoting literacy, growth mindset and his ability to overcome obstacles to become a beacon of hope in our community. “I met Jeff and immediately I knew there was something remarkable about him,” says Sheryl Lilly Pidgeon, Publisher of *GLF*. “And, wow, were my instincts correct. His resilience and his dedication to promoting literacy as well as helping anyone fortunate enough to cross his path is truly inspiring.”



Jeff Willie at the Yokato Air Base Japan, Leadership Development Center.

Willie continues to pay it forward. In November 2019, Jeff, with his wife, Pat, and three others traveled to Tokyo, Japan where they spoke to enlisted leaders at Yokota Air Base, hosted two Global Youth Initiatives (Yokota Air Base Middle School and High School), and conducted a leader symposium at Yokota Air Base Leadership Development Center.

In May 2020, in the midst of the pandemic, Willie partnered with Veterati, a digital platform for veterans and military spouses, who are transitioning from the United States Military, to access mentorship-on-demand from successful professionals across the nation (www.veterati.com), and was awarded a Veterati Blue Ribbon Award for his work.

Recognizing that change comes from awareness, support, faith, motivation and the right opportunities, Willie currently hosts “Win with Willie” on Facebook and YouTube Live Broadcast every Saturday evening at 7:30 pm CST and also hosts a [book club](#) where he delves into topics of resiliency, desire, personal leadership, personal growth, and more.

Willie says, “I’m not any different from any other person with a level of resiliency who picks themselves up and moves forward.” And, it is his passion to help people pick themselves up that propels him. “Without developing yourself and pouring into your own personal growth, how can you lead and help others?” he says. “A love for learning and resilience is essential for great accomplishment.

If you would like to connect with Jeff and his work as a speaker, you can follow him on [Facebook](#) and [YouTube](#).