

## Very Inspiring Parent AWARD

## How Poverty Produced a Platform

AN EPIPHANY THAT INSPIRED LEADERSHIP, LIFELONG LEARNING AND A COMMITMENT TO LITERACY

BY KARYN BRODSKY

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, 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



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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 a certified John Maxwell trainer, an Associate Professor and has over 26 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.

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.

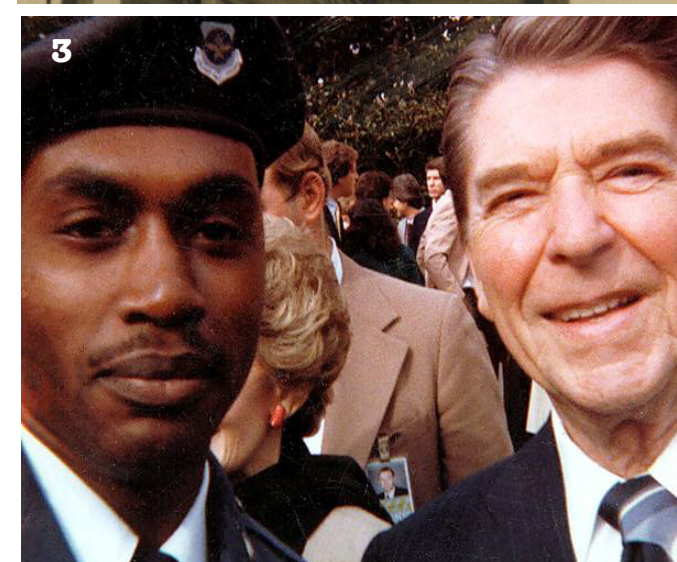
Everything he teaches, says Willie, is part of literacy, including character building, citizenship, growth mindset and life-long learning. "You have to have a willingness to overcome obstacles. I look at them as opportunities for growth," Willie says. "I try to

lift people up." He gives back to the community as a High School Air Force Junior ROTC teacher and teaches the students his mantra: "What I see is what I do; what I do is what I practice; what I practice is what I become."

Willie says, "I'm not any different from any other person with a level of resiliency who picks themselves up and moves forward." We see it differently. For his resilience, his dedication to promoting

literacy, character building, citizenship, growth mindset and life-long learning, and his community service, we present Jeff Willie with our Very Inspiring Parent award.

*Editor's Note: Jeff Willie is available for speaking engagements on a wide array of educational and inspirational topics. For information, reach him at 214.733.2561 or jeffwillie02@gmail.com.*



(1) Jeff Willie's father, Private First Class Hobie Willie, shown here at Camp Bowie in 1945. The sharecropper and World War II veteran hid his illiteracy from Jeff, the 10th of 12 children, until he enlisted in the U.S. Air Force at age 19 and noticed his birth certificate was signed only with the letter "X."  
(2) This home is a perfect replica of the home Jeff and his 11 siblings grew up in. (3) Jeff at a White House ceremony in 1983 with President Ronald Reagan following Operation Urgent Fury in which Jeff represented the Airlift Command Combat Security Police who were part of the rescue effort.  
(4) Jeff's family: (L to R) Ursula, an attorney, Katrina, a doctor, Aubrey, (son-in-law), and wife Pat.

Jeff Willie is an avid supporter of ExcellentTEEN Choice, Inc. (E.T.C.), which was founded in 2010 to inspire teens to make excellent choices today for tomorrow's success. The Arlington, TX organization was developed "to specifically address resources for youth to change their lives and to make excellent choices." (etcteens.com)

Recognizing that change comes from awareness, support, faith, motivation and the right opportunities, E.T.C. offers character building, leadership, educational and

young entrepreneurs' workshops and conferences to help promote excellence and to teach teens how to prepare for the future.

Programs cover a variety of topics, including character and leadership building, boosting self-confidence and increasing self-esteem, educational opportunities, relationships, social media safeguards, college life and time management, managing money, starting a business in the community and more. [www.etcteens.org](http://www.etcteens.org)