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Remembering Bowdoin's Wil Smith '00 (1968-2015)

February 22, 2015 By [SH](#) [33 Comments](#)



Wil Smith '00 and his daughter, Olivia, in Morrell Gym, June 2014

The College learned early Sunday morning of the death of Wil Smith of the Class of 2000 — an alumnus and former associate dean at Bowdoin who inspired a generation of students, faculty, and staff with his determination, optimism, and service to the common good. Dean Tim Foster, who with other friends, teammates,

and colleagues visited Smith in the hospital over the weekend, wrote of Smith's life and what he has meant to the College and to so many others.

To Members of the College Community,

The Bowdoin community and so many others lost a truly wonderful person early Sunday morning when Wil Smith of the Class of 2000 finally succumbed to the cancer he had battled so long and so bravely. He was 46 years old.

Wil passed away at a hospital in Philadelphia surrounded by the love he had done so much to generate during his short but so very accomplished life. Over the past several days, many of those he befriended, inspired, and mentored during his years as a student, an athlete, and a leader at Bowdoin came to be with him in these final hours. We told him how much he meant to us and how much we loved him, and Wil responded in typical fashion with the smile we all know so well.

Wil's was truly a life well lived. Born in Florida, Wil was the last of ten children. His mother, Mildred, died of cancer on Wil's fifteenth birthday. After high school he attended Florida A&M University for a year. He enlisted in the U.S. Navy in May 1989, and was trained to be an aviation electronics technician. He served in the first Gulf War and, while stationed in Italy, he was transferred to the Brunswick Naval Air Station. In the summer of 1995, he met Bowdoin Men's Basketball Coach Tim Gilbride, who encouraged Wil to apply to Bowdoin, and the rest is a story well known by all associated with the College in those years.

But what few knew in those early days was that Wil was also a single parent. He struggled to balance his schoolwork while caring for his infant daughter, Olivia, until staff discovered his circumstances and a Bowdoin support network was established to help them both. As an older student – he was 28 when he matriculated – Wil was always a leader at Bowdoin, in the classroom, in our local community, and on the basketball court, with young Olivia playing in the stands during practice and corralled by coaches, students, and staff during games. Wil graduated with a degree in sociology, receiving his diploma in one hand while

holding Olivia in the other. This inspiring story of Wil and Olivia at Bowdoin was chronicled by *Yankee* magazine editor Mel Allen in [“A Letter to Olivia,” published in the winter 2000 edition of Bowdoin magazine](#). Appearances on the *Today Show* and on *Oprah* followed.

After graduation, while Wil continued to serve in the U.S. Navy Reserve, he joined the staff at Bowdoin as director of multicultural student programs. He went on to study law, earned his degree at the University of Maine School of Law, and in 2006, returned to Bowdoin where, as associate dean of multicultural student programs, he was instrumental in helping the College expand access and opportunities for students of color. Through his example, Wil also motivated and mentored students who were struggling. As far as Wil was concerned, there was nothing students couldn't accomplish, and he let them know that every day. Once again, the media noticed Wil's work and he was the focus of [a “Making a Difference” report](#) on NBC.

Wil was not one to sit back and take it easy. Beginning in the summer of 1999, before he graduated from Bowdoin, Wil began working with [Seeds of Peace International Camp](#), a conflict resolution program for teenagers from Israel, Palestine, Egypt, Jordan, India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, the United States, and immigrants from Asia, Africa, and Latin America. He became associate camp director in 2007, and was working at the camp right through last summer. And for nearly a decade, Wil coached basketball at Catherine McAuley High School in Portland, where he led the Lions to the state final in 2007 and amassed an overall record of 54-27. Today, at Bowdoin, we continue to acknowledge Wil's other record —his record of service— with the annual Wil Smith Community Service Award recognizing outstanding service to the community by a student athlete.

At the time of his death, Wil was [dean of community and multicultural affairs at the Berkshire School](#) in Sheffield, Mass., where he also served as girl's varsity basketball coach, director of new student orientation and student leadership training, and as chair of the school's diversity subcommittee, among several other duties.

On June 15, 2012, just after Wil was diagnosed with colon cancer, the story of Wil and Olivia was told once again to the nation in [a moving Story Corps piece aired on National Public Radio](#). It was a conversation that told much about Wil's courage and the love between this father and his now adult daughter. And it inspired executives at Sony Pictures to reach out to Wil about telling his story in film – a project now in the planning stages that [brought Wil and Olivia back to Bowdoin just last summer](#).

Memorial arrangements for Wil are pending, and the College will provide more information as it becomes available.

Many of us who knew and worked with Wil are deeply saddened today by this news of his untimely death, and our hearts go out to Olivia; to Wil's partner, Maha Jaber, and her son, Nim; and to the rest of Wil's family at this very difficult time. We will remember Wil with great fondness and affection, with respect for his many accomplishments, with awe for his optimism and determination, and with gratitude for all he did to make our community and the world beyond Bowdoin a better place.

Sincerely,

Tim Foster

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Comments

Dick Burns '58 says:

[February 22, 2015 at 11:13 am](#)

Among many other things, Wil's story tells it all about Bowdoin! It really is a singular institution in every way. I count myself, my brother and my granddaughters among those who have personally experienced the many facets of the College, of which there are way too many to write about here.

Dick Burns

Josh Weiner '00 says:

[February 22, 2015 at 11:32 am](#)

So sad. Wil was such a good guy and had such character and charisma. Literally got along with everyone and could connect with anyone. Still remember the cheer he got at graduation with his daughter up there with him. This one hurts. RIP.

Ben Gott '01 says:

[February 22, 2015 at 12:07 pm](#)

Thank you, Dean Foster, for your remembrance. Wil truly lived his life with enthusiasm, kindness, and compassion.

Miguel Brizuela '01 says:

[February 22, 2015 at 12:49 pm](#)

Witnessing Wil excel as a student and as a father at Bowdoin was inspiring. Wil lived a life that I admire. My sincere condolences to his family.

Lauren Flinn says:

[February 22, 2015 at 1:08 pm](#)

Dean Foster, thank you for your beautiful words. As we sat with Wil his last day we were reminded that Wil was so much more than a mentor, he was our father, our coach, our cheerleader, our light. When Bowdoin accepted the Posse program and us in the first Posse, skeptics said "those kids aren't ready for Bowdoin" and Wil said "no, Bowdoin isn't ready for these kids." He believed in us and loved us like his own kids . And he was the person that showed us how to be an authentic leader and stand up for what you believe in. Before I met Wil I was a shaped piece of clay and after I have been molded into a one of kind creation touch by the life of this man.

Beverly Wyse says:

[February 22, 2015 at 1:12 pm](#)

This is very sad news. Wil was such a wonderful person and always reached out to help others despite his hard circumstances. I remember going to his student apartment to pick up some notes and his little girl, Olivia, peeked around the corner. I had no idea he was raising a little girl on his own until that day. He obviously sensed that I was a single mother, facing socio- economic and academic challenges and gave his time an assistance to me on many occasions. In my mind, he was an exceptional human being, the like of which this world greatly needs. He will certainly be remembered and missed by this Bowdoin grad.

Nicole Bonasera says:

[February 22, 2015 at 1:53 pm](#)

I am saddened to hear this news as Wil remains one of the most honorable people i have ever met and will be missed terribly.

Beirne & Joan Lovely says:

[February 22, 2015 at 2:29 pm](#)

Wil was, to us, a member of our family. Our sons, Dave '99 and Greg '01, saw Wil as a brother. In Wil's time on this earth he touched so many lives in a positive way. The manner in which he lived his life should be an example to us all. May God hold him in the palm of His hand and may we always be grateful for having known and loved Wil. And finally, we thank Olivia, Maha and Nim for their incredible love, support and encouragement of Wil throughout this difficult time in their lives. Wil was so fortunate to have them by his side.

Gary says:

[February 22, 2015 at 2:32 pm](#)

Will was a great man, he was my football coach when I was at Brunswick High school.

Wenonah Wirick says:

[February 22, 2015 at 2:41 pm](#)

This is truly sad news and I am sorry for the loss to Wil's family. I remember Wil from Maine Law and hearing his story and seeing his daughter with him on occasion. I, too, was a single parent in law school and Wil was such a powerfully positive and inspiring person. A true pleasure to know, even if only briefly.

Octavian Neamtu '12 says:

[February 22, 2015 at 3:09 pm](#)

I had the honor of meeting Wil when he was a Dean at Bowdoin and I remember being absolutely inspired by his leadership and his charisma. My thoughts go out to his family.

Cindi taylor says:

[February 22, 2015 at 4:23 pm](#)

the world has lost an amazing man. I have been reading commentaries all over social media today. I am so saddened at the early loss of this man. I appreciate all he did to work with my son at Seeds of Peace, and will forever remember our visit to The Berkshire School. My thoughts and prayers go out to Olivis, Nim, and Mahar as well as to all the young people he touched. God touched all of us with Will's short life.

Randi Landry says:

[February 22, 2015 at 4:53 pm](#)

I had the pleasure of knowing Will briefly, he was such a wonderful young man and will be greatly missed by those who knew and loved him.

Vandy Shields says:

[February 22, 2015 at 6:52 pm](#)

My deepest sympathies to Families And Friends. May he rest in peace.

Airami Bogle Bentz '95 says:

[February 22, 2015 at 8:03 pm](#)

I spent some time with him the first summer after I graduated from Bowdoin. We coached at the Bowdoin hoops clinic and later he led a diversity workshop at Tabor, where I worked. I am still amazed at how he made his life extraordinary by seizing the day. He was one of a kind. It does not surprise me that Sony is interested in telling his life story. As Robin Williams said in *Dead Poets Society*: "Carpe Diem, boys. Seize the day and make your lives extraordinary." Also, Walt Whitman's "O Me! O Life!" comes to mind.

"Oh me! Oh life! of the questions of these recurring,

Of the endless trains of the faithless, of cities fill'd with the foolish,

Of myself forever reproaching myself, (for who more foolish than I, and who more faithless?)

Of eyes that vainly crave the light, of the objects mean, of the struggle ever renew'd,

Of the poor results of all, of the plodding and sordid crowds I see around me,

Of the empty and useless years of the rest, with the rest me intertwined,

The question, O me! so sad, recurring—What good amid these, O me, O life?

Answer.

That you are here—that life exists and identity,

That the powerful play goes on, and you may contribute a verse." Wil's verse was so special that it will live on—that is a fact. Rest in peace, dear Wil.

Raegan LaRochelle '00 says:

[February 22, 2015 at 9:20 pm](#)

The Class of 2000 has lost a shining star – a truly exceptional spirit.
My deepest condolences to his family, especially to Olivia.

Benjamin Kreider '05 says:

[February 22, 2015 at 10:03 pm](#)

This is truly a shock and a tragedy; I am choking up as I read this. While I never had the good fortune to become a close friend of Wil's during my time at Bowdoin, he was a larger-than-life presence.

He was one of the most optimistic, friendly souls I have ever met, and he did a world of good at Bowdoin, particularly for low-income students and students of color.

RIP Wil. You will be missed but never forgotten. My deepest sympathies to his family and close friends.

Ladonna Burley says:

[February 22, 2015 at 10:04 pm](#)

Happy to have known Wil, he loved his family and really respected his mother and sisters and his brother Otis, gone too soon, you get to pick the color of your wings

Al DeMoya says:

[February 22, 2015 at 10:18 pm](#)

I was inspired by his story when it came out. I'm saddened at his passing.

Melanie Race '00 says:

[February 23, 2015 at 9:51 am](#)

Wil Smith exemplified what it meant to be a Bowdoin student, a person of character, an alumnus who continued to serve the common good. My condolences to Olivia, the rest of his family, and friends. Please be well.

rodney vargas says:

[February 23, 2015 at 10:37 am](#)

I did not know will the academic. I knew the sailor. We were in Patrol Squadron 8 together

What I can say is that will was a good guy and shipmate. He was pretty funny to hang out with and talk to. Farewell and following seas my friend

Rodney Vargas AT2 retired USN

Meredith Swett Walker '99 says:

[February 23, 2015 at 1:21 pm](#)

I did not know Wil, but I admired him and I admire him even more now that I have my own kids. He was truly a great man and gone too soon. I remember how Olivia lit up the dining hall whenever she came in with her dad. I am sure she has grown into a bright young woman and I am so sorry for her loss. Olivia- do great things and enjoy the heck out of your life- I am sure that would make your dad proud.

Byron Watson says:

[February 23, 2015 at 8:00 pm](#)

During the 1994-95 basketball season Coach Wil Smith turned 15 Freshman boys into fine upstanding gentlemen. I will never forget the life lessons Coach Smith instilled in us. A huge thank you to the Smith Family and the U.S. Navy for bringing him to us. R.I.P. Coach, I love you!

Angel Broadwater says:

[February 23, 2015 at 9:45 pm](#)

I knew Wil before his academic accomplishments but after his service in the US Navy. He was truly a large heart wrapped in a charismatic shell. I am so sad for his daughter but hope she can find some comfort in his accomplishments and the way he lived life to the fullest, always keeping her first. There are not enough like him in the world.

Fred Howard says:

[February 24, 2015 at 8:59 am](#)

I'm shocked by the news of Will's loss to cancer. I never knew he pursued all the academic achievements he conquered. I was also stationed at NAS Brunswick in VP-8 with Will during the 90's. I knew of his athletic abilities especially in basketball. I will never forget the day he invited his brother and his brother's girlfriend to the Electronics Shop at Hanger 5. His brother was a member of the professional basketball team the Miami Heat at the time. He was so tall he had to duck just to get through the door of the shop. R.I.P I am at a loss for words.

Stuart Gleason says:

[February 24, 2015 at 2:04 pm](#)

I was a part of the 94-95 team mentioned in Byron's comments. Wil was the kind of person you could only wish to lead your team. No one could match his energy, passion and love for the game. BEEF. Balance, eye on target, elbow in, follow through. I was never a great player but he always inspired me to push harder in all aspects of life. To this day he is one of the greatest role models I've had.

Wade Charnok says:

[February 24, 2015 at 6:44 pm](#)

I served with Will Smith in VP-8. We were friends and then later we played against each other in Navy Football league where we each beat each other when it mattered, twice. I think we both respected each other. We were both champions and Will would tell my friends that he hated seeing me with the football in my hands in the last two minutes of a game. I felt the same about him. He was and is a champion and will be missed.

Go with God Will...Go with God

Coach Wade in Topsham

jaunene jones says:

[February 24, 2015 at 10:10 pm](#)

My heart is broken. ..an amazing soul gone too soon. I was apart of VP-8 squadron in Maine as well. He was my brother. We would sit and talk for hours. He gave so much of himself. Although we lost touch I never forgot him. I can't believe it. Rest in peace dear heart...pain no more for God has said u have suffered enuff. My condolences go out to his daughter n other family members. May he forever live on in your hearts.

Michael Christensen says:

[February 24, 2015 at 11:32 pm](#)

I am so deeply moved by this bad news. I first met Wil while he was a Navy Reservist at VP-92 on NAS Brunswick. He is such a kind and caring person, and always with his big smile. I remember the hard times he was going through when he first started school at Bowdoin. He always did extra Active Duty time during his off time at school do it would help support both him and Olivia. When I came back to VP-92 in 2006, Wil's bright smile was still there. We both transferred over to VR-62 when VP-92 decommissioned in 2008. I will really miss his wisdom and that big smile. He is such a great human being, and he touched many hearts in this world, and made it a better place to be. You will be deeply missed Wil.

Kathy Carey says:

[February 25, 2015 at 11:27 am](#)

This is heart-breaking news. I knew Wil as the parent of first-grader Olivia, whom I taught. His generous smile and way with children is what I remember, as he volunteered regularly in Olivia's classroom. He touched my soul personally when he and Olivia left the Woodside School community to head to Portland. As busy as he was, he still found time to bring Olivia to say good-bye and give me a Seeds of Peace hat for my Dad, whom he knew was ailing. This was a simple but powerful act of kindness. I hope Olivia can find comfort in knowing that her Dad touched the lives of so many.

cory jones says:

[February 27, 2015 at 3:40 am](#)

In memories of a true brother, who I dearly cared for much respect I also met Wil THE THRILL in vp 8 I can see the time you spent with me when I first got to Maine I thank you and how your character and grace made a change in my life. you are truly a HERO thank

you my friend for all you did and your legacy will continue to carry on.Olivia your DAD was the best GOD BLESS You and your family. Thanks for sharing him with us

hank lavallet says:

[March 4, 2015 at 8:41 pm](#)

Will was a great friend and great person. I know we were all touched by his genuine personality. VP8 was lucky to have him. A great man that will be missed. Tiger tiger!!

[Juliana L'Heureux](#) says:

[March 11, 2015 at 4:35 pm](#)

My sincere condolences to Will's loving family and to his admiring colleagues at Bowdoin College. His life has positively inspired many others.

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