

# Where there's a Wil: the story of Wil Smith '00

## Bowdoin College Orient

This piece represents the opinion of the author:

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Wil Smith '00 came very close to missing the first day of classes the fall of his first year at Bowdoin. At the end of August in 1996, he happened to be driving past campus and wondered when the semester was starting. He'd been accepted to the College the previous spring, but no longer lived at the address Bowdoin had on file from his application and had not received any preparatory material. So he was surprised when the deans informed him that classes began the next day.

He scrambled to make up for the time he'd lost in missing Orientation and began the semester with the rest of the student body that week. At 26-years-old, Wil was nearly a decade older than many of his new peers. When he showed up for his classes he brought an unannounced plus-one that caught his professors off-guard: his 16-month-old daughter, Olivia, who he was raising as a single father.

Professor Roy Partridge taught Wil's First Year Seminar, "Racism." He hid his surprise when Olivia and Wil came to class.

“I’d never had this experience before in my life,” he said. “I’d been teaching 15-20 years.”

Bowdoin in many ways was a whole new world for Wil, although one he would remain embedded in long after graduation. He grew up in Jacksonville, Fla., the youngest of 10 children. His mother died of cancer when he was 15.

Before Bowdoin, Wil spent seven years as an aviation electronics technician, specializing in land-based anti-submarine aircraft in the Navy. He enlisted three years after he finished high school and served in the first Gulf War. He was deployed to all corners of the globe: Sicily, Bosnia, Saudi Arabia, Iceland, Greenland, Panama, Puerto Rico and Argentina.

Growing up he had loved to read and learn about different places and people, and travel was one of the aspects he most enjoyed about the Navy. While deployed overseas, he made extra effort to immerse himself in the places he was stationed, often venturing to areas the Navy had told him not to go in search of normal people living everyday life. He was frequently in places he did not speak the language of, but he communicated with charades or napkin-drawings. He says he “learned from the common people that most people in this world just want to go about their business, they’re not concerned with these issues that the government is waging wars about.”

When I spoke with him, he was reticent about his war stories and careful not to sensationalize his experiences in the Navy, evincing the humility and tendency to emphasize his role as always one piece of a collaboration, rather than take credit or attention for himself. He consented to tell me one story about the time he was sure he would get shot down flying a special operations mission over Turkey.

“I guess the Turkish government didn’t know we were there and they sent planes up and I was looking out the window and I was looking at these jet planes with these missiles ready to fire and somebody yelling in the headphones. I thought we were goners. And then within seconds they were gone, and I caught my breath again.”

When he was not deployed, Wil was based at the Naval Air Station in Brunswick, which ultimately connected him to the College. He had played baseball, basketball and football in high school and in his off-hours, he coached football and basketball at the Brunswick Junior High School. (Men’s soccer Coach Scott Wiercinski was one of the students he coached in basketball.s) Some parents were initially skeptical of him, but his dedication to the kids on the team quickly won them over. It was here that he met Tim Gilbride, the Bowdoin men’s basketball coach, who would eventually convince Wil to apply to Bowdoin and to play on the basketball team.

The transition from life in the Navy to life as a student at Bowdoin had a steep learning curve for Wil. He was one of three African-American students in the class of 2000.

He hadn't told anyone at Bowdoin much about his situation. He was living off-campus and took Olivia with him everywhere because he couldn't afford daycare. Having missed Orientation, he didn't know about how to sign up for a meal plan, or that he didn't have to buy all his books but could read them on reserve in the library. In the Navy he had learned how to tinker with the hardware of computers but had never used word processing. He hadn't been in a formal classroom since high school and did not feel his high school had prepared him for the rigors of Bowdoin:

“I had never been asked to write a critical paper, where I had to show, create a strong thesis and support it with evidence from the text.”

Wil struggled. He failed a Latin American history class with Professor Allen Wells because he wasn't able to buy all the books; Dean Tim Foster was the Dean of First Year Students at the time and Wil was the first student he met with on the job. Foster recalls that Wil lost nearly 20 pounds and he vocalized anger at “the manifestation of a very unfair and unjust education system in the U.S. playing itself out at Bowdoin co-starring [himself].”

His classes introduced him to material and modes of thinking he had never encountered in high school. In the divides between his classmates and himself, he saw the disparities between most Bowdoin students—whose high school education had prepared them to be leaders—and the people from his community who he felt had been prepared, “at best, to be managers at McDonalds.”

“We never talked about the grand theories of social structure,” he recalled. “Where I came from we talked about racism as a practical entity which we were experiencing, but never studied it in a sociological or economic framework. To hear that some of these kids came understanding the frameworks, was in many ways maddening to me, because this was the first time as a 27-year-old, who had been in a war and travelled around the world, had ever heard these concepts. And it made me feel like I was never meant to understand them.”

His difficulties did not go unnoticed. That first fall Professor Partridge went to the dean's office to ask what kind of support they could give Wil. Foster told me that the College was prepared to do nontraditional things to help a nontraditional student succeed.

Betty Trout-Kelly, the assistant to the president for multicultural affairs and affirmative action, reached out. She said she didn't know what Wil was dealing with, but that Bowdoin would not let him go through it alone. After telling his story, the administration quickly marshaled resources for Wil. They got him an apartment in Brunswick Apartments and a meal plan. An alum donated \$25,000 to cover child care expenses for Olivia.

The more time he spent with students at Bowdoin, the more he began to think differently about being a student here. Basketball season started and the team immediately embraced Wil.

“I got to know my friends on the team, those guys were really good to me, and some of my babysitters for Olivia. They were good people. And it was hard for me to reconcile my disdain for a group of people when they were treating me so kindly.”

His teammates, Coach Gilbride and his wife, Lisa, were among the first people he trusted with Olivia and remain some of his closest friends.

He remembered a turning point in an Econ 102 lecture where the professor was talking about the boom of the Reagan years and the benefits of supply-side economics. He saw the other students nodding in agreement but felt that growing up had shown him that the things at the top never quite trickle all the way down.

“In my community, it was none of the rosy stuff that this guy was describing. It was rampant unemployment, crack cocaine, the beginning of the war against drugs, the war against black men,” he remembered. He started building relationships with other students too, who were interested in hearing and learning more about his experiences.

He got involved with a group of students on campus who “challenged the school to change the composition of the school, the demographics of the school, and it wasn’t just the students of color at the time, it was a lot of the majority students as well. They wanted people from backgrounds who were not like theirs to enhance their education.”

When Wil graduated in 2000, he ascended the museum steps carrying Olivia. The two of them received his degree in Sociology and Economics and a standing ovation from the crowd. As a senior, he was the captain of the basketball team and received the athletics award for outstanding commitment to community service, an award which was later renamed in his honor. After graduation he stayed at Bowdoin, in the Dean of Student Affairs office, working to continue the diversity initiatives he had begun as a student.

After several years, Wil left Bowdoin and got his law degree at the University of Maine, although soon after his graduation, Foster and several other administrators took him out for dinner and implored him to return to Bowdoin as the associate dean of multicultural affairs, a position they had created for Wil. Wil returned to the College dedicated to changing Bowdoin from—in his words—an institution for smart, East Coast kids that didn’t get into the Ivies to a place for dedicated students from high schools across the country.