



Thomas (Tom) Wilkins

WGI Founder and CEO Makes Things Happen

Billions of people may live on Planet Earth, but every one of them falls into one of three genre: (1) People who *make* things happen; (2) people who *watch* things happen; and (3) people who don't have a clue that anything is happening. Thomas (Tom) Wilkins – founder and CEO of The Wilkins Group, Inc. (WGI) – is unquestionably a man who makes things happen. From heading up a successful telecom firm to representing the technology sector in Austin, speaking at national and international conferences and mentoring

minority students, Wilkins passionately leaves his mark on all areas of life he touches.

"I was influenced by both my parents. But I adapted most to my dad's mindset," Wilkins said.

"He didn't ask folks for help. He wanted to find ways to make things happen."

Wilkins Sr. was a master at doing just that. He grew up in rural North Carolina during The Great Depression and one of the most racially divided times in history. And he became a quasi-machinist who associated survival with fixing things. Although Wilkins Sr. lacked a formal education, his intrinsic wisdom of life and curiosity for problem solving not only drove him from his country roots to an upper, middle-class lifestyle in Durham – they were the legacy he passed on to Tom Wilkins.

"I was fortunate to have him as a father," Wilkins said. "He and my mother shaped who I am today by instilling a need, a desire and an image of what defined success."

The mid-twentieth century was far from being the best times for most African-American families. But Wilkins' definition of success became a positive mixture of his father's early struggles coupled with his mother's belief in education and an abundance of hometown role models.

"Durham, North Carolina – in the 1950s – had more black millionaires than anywhere in the US. And I was always around successful doctors, lawyers and world-champion athletes," Wilkins said. "I expected to go out and conquer the world. But nothing I've been able to do even parallels with those people then."

Although nearby Duke University didn't begin enrolling black students until the mid-1960s, five other uni-

versities or colleges – attended by African-Americans – were located within 45 minutes of Wilkins' home. And three of them – including the University of North Carolina – were just 15 minutes away.

Wilkins decided – in the eighth or ninth grade – that he wanted to gear his inherent persona for solutions toward a technology career. And his mother helped reinforce his dreams with subtle maternal reminders about where he should begin his journey.

"We lived near North Carolina Central University. And several of its students lived in our neighborhood," Wilkins said. "Mom used to point to preppy students and say, 'that's what you're gonna be – a college boy.'"

Wilkins didn't disappoint his mother. He received his Associate's Degree in Electronic Technology and worked for two years at a local college while taking courses toward his BS degree. A wife, a child and 104 college credits later, Wilkins opted to continue his education in the US Navy where he served in Washington, DC as a member of the Presidential Ceremonial Honor Guard. And he received his BS in Electronic Engineering Technology from the American Technical Institute in Killeen, Texas.

"I actually started my career in 1970 as a GTE switchman before switches were fully electronic," Wilkins said.

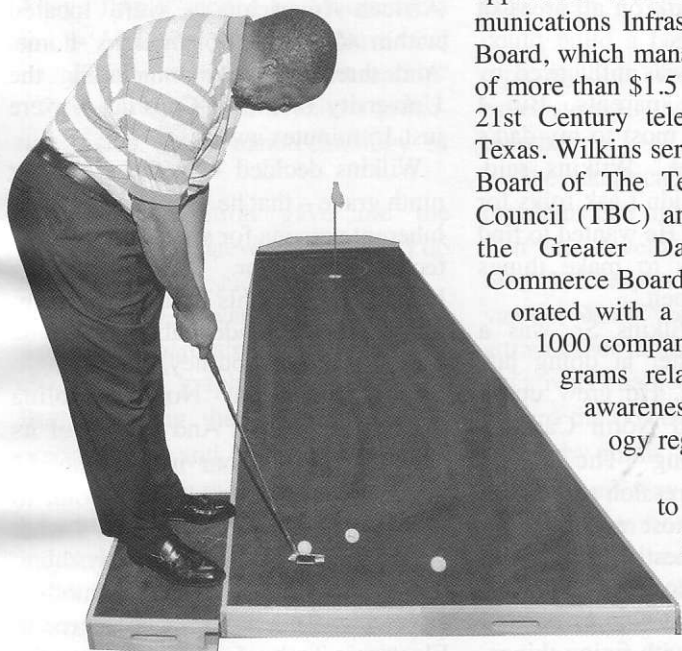
Wilkins left GTE for a position at Central Texas College. There he helped expand, maintain and upgrade microwave systems.

"I wanted to successfully be in the business of distance learning," Wilkins said. "This was my real introduction to telecom."

In 1980, Wilkins took a microwave engineering job at MCI in Washington, DC. But he subsequently returned to GTE as a satellite engineer.

"At GTE, I basically went from an hourly-wage switchman to a degreed engineer," Wilkins said.

Like Wilkins Sr., Tom Wilkins had become a "fixer of things". Although the things that he fixed were rapidly changing the world, Wilkins knew he



appointed Wilkins to the Telecommunications Infrastructure Fund (TIF) Board, which manages the distribution of more than \$1.5 billion allocated for 21st Century telecommunications in Texas. Wilkins serves on the Advisory Board of The Technology Business Council (TBC) and as a Director on the Greater Dallas Chamber of Commerce Board. And he has collaborated with a number of Fortune 1000 companies to establish programs relating to technology awareness as well as technology regulations.

"How important it is to participate in these groups. They need to know how we feel," Wilkins said. "Sometimes what they get is so

spun. I cherish the opportunity to share thoughts with these people."

With 30 years of information technology to his credit – along with his "never-met-a-stranger" attitude, Wilkins

is frequently in-demand as a guest speaker for telecom conferences. But he never misses a chance to tout the Telecom Corridor area.

"The TBC is known nationally. I'm always asked about it when I travel. And being a part of that group is an asset to me personally as well as professionally," Wilkins said. "TBC is more aggressive than any organization of its kind that I've been affiliated with or observed – in terms of fulfilling its mission."

While Wilkins shares a number of concerns with his counterparts in the Corridor, he has his own brand of staffing strategies that is keeping the WGI worker population climbing. With a current workforce of 75 employees within WGI's 8,000 square-foot facility – Wilkins has repackaged Wilkins Sr.'s potion for success, put his own name on it and distributed it throughout the company. Consequently, it has cured a significant amount of job-hopping at WGI.

could change an even bigger chunk of the world by unleashing his entrepreneurial spirit. In 1986, he founded Wilkins & Associates (W&A), a telecommunications services company. And six years later, WGI emerged from W&A as a systems integration company.

"My eyes opened early that fixing things and making them work was more fun than a job," Wilkins said. "Being an entrepreneur isn't about money. Nobody's gonna pay me for staying up all night. It's about meeting challenges and being the one to solve problems. We must have the spirit to stand up to the challenges to be effective."

Wilkins' effectiveness extends beyond the walls of WGI and the boundaries of the Telecom Corridor area and is as diversified as the man is complex. While his prowess in radio frequency (RF) implementation, microwave systems, local area networks (LAN), wide area networks (WAN), Intranet, Internet and cabling infrastructure is the foundation of WGI initiatives, it is also the vehicle that continuously puts Wilkins in the industry spotlight.

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"We find more diamonds in the rough when we finally realize that what we used to describe as prerequisites are really not all that necessary," Wilkins said. "What we really need are people who are dependable and have the capability of learning what's required but may not yet have the credentials. People who don't have a direct skill match often work out better than those who have the skills. People

with a little bit of experience can take that little bit of experience and a little bit of encouragement and become an expert."

According to Wilkins, success is "some level of hard work, some level of mental capacity and a whole lot of inspiration." While Wilkins' parents and a group of successful professionals in Durham, North Carolina inspired him to reach for the stars, Wilkins sends the same message to at-risk students and WGI interns.

"If you don't see it, you can't envision it for you. And if you can't envision it, success only happens by accident," Wilkins said. "Some kids don't know that there's successful people who look like them. And it never dawns on them that they can be successful until someone who looks like them tells them."

Wilkins is the same role model to countless minority students that the black doctors, lawyers and world-champion athletes were to him in

Durham during the 1950s. And he's frequently the first person to tell these young people that they can likewise make things happen in their lives.

"Mentoring is how I share my gifts and personal knowledge," Wilkins said. "But I don't speak as a corporate executive in an abstract manner or with raw rhetoric. I speak in their dialect and tone."

When it comes to speaking in dialects and tones, Tom Wilkins is a bi-social communicator. He articulately speaks the language of business and telecommunications. He eloquently shares the wisdom that he's acquired through life's adventures. Yet he is fluent in the dialogue of today's troubled youths.

"If a multi-purpose general contractor can build a skyscraper, he can build a dog house," Wilkins concluded. "The opposite is not true. But if you have resources, you can build anything. And no matter where I am, that's always my message."
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