

Newsman Steve Wilson: Bulldog or Bulldozer?

TV muckraker is loathed by some, but has won fans with fearlessness

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The most combative journalist in Detroit walked away from his latest confrontation with the mayor Tuesday disheveled and seething. He'd just been cursed, shoved, grabbed, kicked and punched. His dress shirt was untucked, his hair was a mess. Sweat dripped down his forehead.

It was inevitable, really, that the melee would break out - the only question was when and how forcefully the whole thing would explode.

TV investigative reporter Steve Wilson and Detroit Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick had had other dustups -- most notably an incident in Washington, D.C., when Wilson flew there to catch the mayor with a microphone, a camera and an attitude he knew would make compelling, and, some say, repulsive television.

The money shot featured one of the mayor's bodyguards shoving him into a wall after Wilson had badgered Kilpatrick for an answer about the city's lease of a red Lincoln Navigator for his wife, Carlita. It was the kind of jaw-dropping footage that has helped make Wilson a ratings star in Detroit's competitive TV news market. And has given ammunition to his critics.

He arrived at WXYZ-TV (Channel 7) late in the summer of 2001 after a nearly four-year absence from TV news. He'd been fired at his previous gig in Tampa over disagreements with station management about a public health story. He sued the station, and the case dragged on for years. The spectacle turned Wilson into a hero to several left-leaning groups around the country but also branded him a malcontent in the mainstream TV news business.

Or so he thought.

Since the ABC affiliate in Detroit took a chance on him, Wilson has become must-see television for WXYZ's viewers. They've watched the reporter -- not your typical TV

pretty boy -- secretly follow Macomb County officials and businessmen to Costa Rica and insinuate that they were hiring prostitutes, and barge into the home of the Eastern Michigan University president and open expensive cabinet doors and demand answers about why millions of dollars had been spent on the home.

Local viewers know Wilson best, though, for his reports last winter about the infamous Navigator.

So when Wilson showed up at Kilpatrick's re-election campaign kickoff Tuesday afternoon in front of newly built homes and hundreds of mayoral supporters on Detroit's west side, it was foreboding.

The beaten path

As soon as the mayor unfurled himself from his black Escalade and began shaking hands on his way to the campaign stage, Wilson, followed by his cameraman, Ramon Rosario, approached to ask questions.

"We'll do it later with everybody else," Kilpatrick told him. "You're not special."

For the next hour or so, as the mayor and his family and allies spoke from the stage, Wilson paced about, convinced the mayor was blowing him off.

When the speeches ended, the mayor's spokesman, Howard Hughey, announced to the swarm of reporters that Kilpatrick wasn't taking questions. As he stepped down into the crowd, a few reporters asked anyway.

Wilson scurried around to the front of the moving pack, as a half-dozen security and staff members encircled the mayor, trying to cut a path back to the Escalade. The bodyguards began pushing Wilson. Kilpatrick's personal assistant DeDan Milton grabbed Wilson. Someone kicked him in the shin. Wilson turned and kicked back. Seconds later, someone punched Wilson in the gut.

Kilpatrick supporters began shouting for Wilson to back off, to quit harassing the mayor. But the pushing and shoving continued. A child was knocked down in the scrum.

Undeterred, Wilson kept lobbing questions.

"No answers today, Mr. Mayor?"

Finally, the mayor reached his SUV. As he climbed in, he turned to Wilson:

"Quit buying prostitutes. You quit buying prostitutes."

He was referring to an allegation by Warren city officials last year that Wilson had paid for prostitutes in Costa Rica to set up a group of public officials and businessmen there on a fishing trip. The charges have never been proved, but the rumors persist.

The mayor said it again.

"Quit buying prostitutes. Fat ass."

He closed the door and the motorcade, at least five cars strong, sped off.

Dozens of supporters, reporters and a few bodyguards milled around the scene, amazed by what they'd seen. Wilson wasn't finished. He spotted Kilpatrick's sister, Ayanna Kilpatrick, and walked toward her, only to be rebuffed by security. A few minutes later, he noticed the mayor's chief of staff, Christine Beatty, and cozied up.

She turned away.

Two bodyguards rushed over and forearmed him back.

"This is a public street," Wilson shouted.

It was all caught on tape.

Hughey, standing nearby, said Wilson doesn't play by the rules.

"In my dealings, I've never met any reporter who goes to such lengths to create a theatric situation," he said, shaking his head.

Wilson finally walked away and got into his Ford Escape. Inside, still sweating, he vented.

"I'm the guy out in front who won't stop," he began. "Did you see that weenie from Channel 4? He asked one question and stopped."

He grew louder.

"There's nothing that will be more effective than showing that mob scene on television with those thugs," he said. "They kick you when they can. They sucker punch you when they can. Do I do all that for great film? No! I think people deserve answers and I think we ought to demand them."

There it was, Wilson's journalistic philosophy distilled into raw, unedited sound bites. Had he gone too far? He would ponder that question later.

For at that moment, he had tape of a scene that captured nearly everything about his career: the unrelenting doggedness, the willingness to embarrass himself, the insertion of himself in his stories, and the line between journalism and entertainment that he pushes every time he picks up a microphone.

Many think Wilson is the embodiment of the ambush interviewer, sneaking up on his targets where they don't expect him. Wilson prefers to call them "unscheduled accountability sessions."

Not the vain type

Wilson is, by TV standards, an anomaly. Nothing about him, as he likes to say, is even remotely hip. Or pretty. He is rotund and jocular and jowly. His voice is commanding, and he wields it like an actor, conveying disbelief, sarcasm, irony with help from his remarkably expressive eyebrows.

He is fond of transitional phrases designed to squeeze his prey:

"Let me make it simple for you," or "Oh, come on!" Or starting reports with, "You may think you know ..."

He's honed his technique and idiosyncrasies over a 33-year career defined by national success and local controversy, big scoops and numerous awards.

When he's out on the town in metro Detroit, whether working or not, viewers often approach Wilson, hand extended, and thank him. They approach him in stores and restaurants, in the lobby of his Southfield high-rise, and sometimes when he's in the field working on interviews.

Wilson said he's not had such outward adulation in any other market.

"When I worked in San Francisco, people watched my stories, but they didn't come up to me on the street like they do here," he said.

He has a theory on why: "Nobody fights for the average guy anymore."

Even Wilson's detractors concede that his stories about foibles in public life make for compelling television. How he reports them is another matter.

Has he crossed the line?

"I may have curled my toes over it," he said last week, the night he agreed to be interviewed for this report. "But I make no apologies."

Back in 1996, when he worked for "Inside Edition," he decided to stake out two medical HMO executives living a lavish lifestyle whom Wilson accused of not paying for medical care for their clients' employees. Federal court records show he set up surveillance in a van about 100 yards from the couple's house - the executives were married. He and his camera and sound crew followed the couple to tape them, and wanted footage of them leaving the house.

The couple noticed they were being followed and contacted their firm's security. The guards eventually approached the van and discovered who Wilson was. The couple, and their children, fled to their waterfront mansion in Jupiter, Fla., to evade Wilson.

Wilson knew of that home and fled there, rented a boat, and anchored in the Intracoastal Waterway that fronted the couple's home. Using a boom mike and camera, Wilson and his crew sat there for hours. The couple sought and won a restraining order from a federal judge.

Wilson said he never crossed onto private property, and eventually the injunction was tossed.

"I wasn't intimidated by that restraining order. I knew I was not doing anything wrong," he said. "Everything I did I did on public property. They don't want people to see them walking out of their \$10-million home onto their \$2-million yacht. It's a better story with that shot. I wanted that shot."

Less notorious was the time Wilson staked out former President George Bush in 1992. Wilson had discovered Bush claimed for tax purposes that his home was in Texas, saving him thousands of dollars. But he spent most of his time - when not in Washington - at the family compound in Kennebunkport, Maine.

So he called the White House for an interview. He got nowhere.

In typical Wilson fashion, he decided to stake out the president. He knew the president was campaigning in New Hampshire and had scheduled a meet-and-greet at a mall. Wilson and his cameraman bought plaid shirts and parkas to blend into the woody crowd, grabbed an amateur video camera, and found a place in the greeting line.

As Bush inched along shaking hands, Wilson pretended to be a supporter. When the president reached Wilson and extended his hand, the reporter pounced.

Bush eventually answered, telling Wilson his heart would always be in Texas.

"There are some people who say that's a cheap shot," he said. "I don't care. I got an answer."

That's what drives him, the prospect of a response.

"A lot of reporters now try to be everybody's friend," said Belle Adler, a longtime friend of Wilson who teaches journalism at Northeastern University in Boston. Adler was a producer for Wilson when he worked at KGO-TV in San Francisco. "Some people identify with that, some other people don't. But Steve is a straightforward guy. He's not pompous. He's not a glamour guy. His heart is really there."

Primary school of hard knocks

Wilson's mother told her young boy, "If you can't say something nice about someone, let's hear it."

Wilson credits her with his brassy approach to life. He said he was the kid picked last when boys chose up sides for sports teams.

"I was never built for it anyway," he wrote to the Free Press in an e-mail this week. What he lacked in sports ability, Wilson made up for with his success selling newspapers. His sales prowess earned him trips to Disneyland.

He also read the papers, and a young news junkie began to emerge.

Wilson worked at a radio station in college at Indiana University, which he chose for its broadcast journalism program. His first TV job was in St. Joseph, Mo. For the next 10 years, he moved to bigger stations, in Buffalo, New York City and San Francisco, developing a reputation as a fierce investigative reporter.

In the early '90s, he went to "Inside Edition," a tabloid-style, nationally syndicated show where he became known for pushing the limits in an industry niche that had few rules. He left after six years when the show didn't renew his contract.

"I was burned out," he said.

According to colleagues, so were they. Wilson was demanding, intense and blunt. Besides, times were changing.

"The real kind of gotcha journalism had had its heyday by the late '90s," said Mike Cavender, an Atlanta-based TV news consultant and a former chairman of the Radio-Television News Directors Association.

In 1997, Wilson, who still had a small production company and had started a phone-

card company, was hired by WTVT in Tampa to produce investigative reports. He was paid \$40,000 a year for 10 hours of work a week. His wife, Akre, also a TV news reporter, was hired full-time. They were billed as an investigative team.

Less than a year later, they were fired. And Wilson slipped into the darkest stint of his career.

Ringside, in court

Wilson and Akre sued the station, owned by Fox Television, for, among other things, violating the Florida Whistleblower Act. At issue was a story about a hormone used to make cows produce more milk. Wilson said he found evidence the hormone could harm cows and people.

The station said it wanted more information from the company making the hormone. Wilson and Akre accused the station of asking them to broadcast lies.

They had worked on the piece for months. News directors, general managers, producers, lawyers and Wilson and Akre rewrote the script 83 times.

After Wilson and Akre were fired, Wilson represented himself in his suit. He wanted to save money, and he wanted to make an impression on the jury. He deposed 73 witnesses, including Walter Cronkite and Ralph Nader.

Fox accused him, according to court records, "of being drunk with subpoena power," intimidating former colleagues in depositions and stalking opposing attorneys. In one instance, he went to the gated home of a Fox attorney in St. Petersburg, Fla., because Wilson doubted her reason for rescheduling a deposition.

At the guardhouse, Wilson said he told security staff he had flowers for Pat Anderson.

He got in, went to her front door, and when her boyfriend answered, demanded to know where she was.

"I was visiting my father in the hospital in a county south of there," Anderson recalled in a recent interview. "And he shows up at my house, posing as a flower deliveryman, trying to push his way past my boyfriend into my house. He had a carnation, I think."

Wilson has a different recollection.

"I had a nice summer bouquet of flowers. I didn't pose as a flower delivery guy. I told the guards I had flowers for her."

It looked bad, he admitted this week. But he felt he had to take the gamble. He was

fighting a large corporation with deep pockets.

Wilson set up a Web site the day he filed suit in 1998. He spun the story his way, offered tips on how to help and solicited money. Some questioned whether he used the money to help buy a \$1.3-million house in Ponte Vedra Beach, Fla., near Jacksonville. Wilson still lives there with Akre and an 11-year-old daughter. He flies back from Detroit on weekends.

Wilson said he raised no more than \$30,000 and spent it all on legal fees. He also said the home was purchased with proceeds from their Tampa-area house and by liquidating much of their life savings. Wilson said he dumped everything in the Ponte Vedra home to shield his assets in case he lost his suit and had to pay Fox's attorney fees.

The trial jury ruled for Akre on the whistle-blower count and for Fox against Wilson. An appellate court overturned Akre's verdict. This week, the couple settled the case, paying about \$150,000 to Fox.

Back into battle

Wilson was lying low on his family farm in the mountains of North Carolina in 2001 when Bill Carey, then news director at WXYZ, called. Wilson, out of the business nearly four years, figured he was finished.

Carey, who has a reputation for finding and reclaiming lost talent, desperately wanted someone to inject investigative juice into his newscasts.

"You can argue about his flair or style, but he is a great storyteller," Carey said last week from his home in Tampa, where he is now the general manager at the local ABC affiliate.

Carey turned Wilson loose. He went after sleazy pharmacists, faulty tires, extravagant university presidential homes, school executives, city managers, mayors and toxic vaccines.

By the time he turned his attention to the "Michigan Boys," a group of Macomb County men, including a judge and a police chief, Wilson was loved, loathed and feared. The Macomb group chartered a jet to Costa Rica for an annual fishing trip. Wilson insinuated the men hired prostitutes.

Warren officials denied it, grew tired of what they deemed his biased, titillating style, and eventually turned the investigation on Wilson, ambushing him with their own cameras.

"The guy is a bully," said Mike Greiner, Warren's deputy mayor. "We've been investigating him for a couple of months."

Greiner said he was finally going to stand up and punch this guy back.

"We've had all kinds of reporters come after us," Greiner said. "If you do a two-hour interview with him, answer every question he asks you, and stand to say you have to leave, that's the part he runs. It's unethical."

WXYZ general manager Grace Gilchrist said Warren officials just aren't tolerant of scrutiny.

"Few people have the courage to challenge," she said. "I think the concern in the community is that there isn't enough real news."

That quest gives Wilson little peace. His mind churns incessantly, searching the angles. He had a heart attack a few years back and still, he asks, he chases.

After the initial fracas during Tuesday's Kilpatrick announcement, when Wilson began looking for other officials to question, a kid approached him to tell him how much he likes watching him on television. He was 17.

Wilson thanked him and moved on. The kid, Darnell Fleming, lingered.

"He should get tired of all the bodyguards pushing him."

Staff writer JULIE HINDS contributed to this report

MEDIA AGREEMENT

When this story was originally published on May 20, 2005, the Free Press and WXYZ-TV (Channel 7) have a cross-promotional agreement that includes a daily advertisement for Channel 7 on the Free Press TV page and a reading of the next day's Free Press headlines on Channel 7's 11 p.m. news. Both organizations also use Jerry Hodak's weather forecasts and have worked together on political polling.

WXYZ did not suggest this story and had no control over its reporting, writing or editing.

This media agreement is no longer in effect.

TV CONFRONTATION: HYPE OR NECESSITY?

Confrontations are sometimes a part of the job for reporters. And in TV news especially, they make for juicy footage. It's compelling stuff, watching perceived bad guys or powerful public figures being put on the spot with tough questions.

But those involved in broadcast journalism say there are good reasons for confronting a source in a dramatic fashion, and there are reasons that are more about hype.

"There's a difference between running into a confrontation and staging a confrontation," said Deborah Potter, executive director of NewsLab, a Washington D.C.-based TV news training center.

When other avenues of contacting a subject have been exhausted - phone calls, interview requests - it's often inevitable that "all you can do is lie in wait to get an answer from someone," she said. But if that's the first tactic a reporter tries, "viewers know it's to provoke an emotional response."

Vince Wade, a former investigative reporter for Channels 2 and 7, said the nature of TV news may increase the perception that it's all about the confrontations.

"There's a certain built-in sensation to television because of the equipment," said Wade, now an independent video producer. "You've got a camera, you've got lights. Someone once said TV news is like writing with a 1-ton pencil. We can't be unobtrusive."

But Wade said it's fairly rare for a reporter's dustups to overshadow the actual facts of a story.

He recalled a few incidents over the years, saying "They were memorable because they didn't happen a lot."

-- By Julie Hinds