



THE GIFT OF WILBUR

BY JEFFREY WESTHOFF

PHOTOGRAPHY: SUSAN MCCONNELL

WILBUR EDWARDS REACHES ACROSS NINE DECADES OF EXPERIENCE TO HELP PARENTS TEACH THEIR CHILDREN VALUES FOR LIFE.

WILBUR S. EDWARDS – BILL TO HIS FRIENDS – may be in his 90s, but his thoughts are with the young. Having retired twice from a career in educational media, Wilbur remains devoted to developing young minds. With the help of a children's author and illustrator, Wilbur has put together a Web site filled with ethical lessons. The Web site, called My Young Child (www.myyoungchild.org), is funded by the Early Parenting Foundation Wilbur established, and is a not-for-profit group where others may also contribute.

Young minds aren't the only things Wilbur nurtures. During his first attempt at retirement more than 30 years ago, Wilbur began planting walnut trees. With encouragement from his wife, Jane, and the guidance of foresters from the state Department of Natural Resources, Wilbur turned his 12-acre property into a walnut tree preserve.

In terms of a tree's lifetime, the saplings Wilbur planted in the late 1970s are still young. He smiles as he stands among 40 of them in a sunny copse that is a winding, hilly path away from his house. Unless you tip your head to see the modest domes of leaves and branches 20 feet up, the trees look more like tall, skinny, brown poles. That's as it should be, Wilbur says. "To get them to grow straight up — that's the object."

The My Young Child Web site is also about growing straight and tall, though in a different way. Wilbur's original vision for the site was to provide parents with an online resource to teach morally-upright, straight-arrow values to their toddlers.

Wilbur's background in educational media began in 1957 when he joined Encyclopedia Britannica as vice president in charge of sales for the publisher's educational films division. He later became president of Compton's Encyclopedia, a junior encyclopedia that Britannica acquired in 1961. He retired as the chairman of Compton's after 17 years with Britannica. "I thought that was it. I thought I'd go to Florida or Arizona or someplace and retire," Wilbur says. "After six months I became restless. How many days can you play golf?"

In 1978, Wilbur started a new business, Magna Systems Inc., a Crystal Lake-based company that developed training videos and DVDs for child development professionals. He sold the company in 2006 as his 90th birthday approached, but Wilbur still had an urge to produce educational materials.

"I had a concern about all the dishonesty, corruption, and fraud taking place in our society," Wilbur says, "and I wondered how we can give parents something they can give their children, something where they learn to pursue a satisfactory way of life."

My Young Child was born during a phone conversation with Nancy Battista Morgan, an educational writer and consultant who produced programs for Magna. She mentioned that she and her friend, Holly Bell, a preschool teacher and professional illustrator, were looking for a forum for a series of children's



Above: Wilbur works with Nancy Battista Morgan and Holly Bell. The three created My Young Child, a Web site created to teach children ethical lessons.

stories. Wilbur believed their project meshed with his desire to promote values education online. "He had a vision," Nancy says.

The Web site features brief stories written by Nancy and illustrated by Holly. With titles such as *Gilbert the Goat Learns Respect*, *Silly Lilly Remembers Her Manners*, and *Rosa the Rabbit Learns to Be Fair*, the stories are designed for parents to read to their children as they scroll through Holly's drawings. "Kids can relate to the pictures more so than they can to the words," Holly says.

Every story comes with a set of discussion questions and activities, as well as age-appropriate parenting tips. "We do our homework, too, in terms of making it developmentally appropriate," Nancy says.

Wilbur says the Web site follows a tradition of short stories with morals aimed at children. "Aesop did it centuries ago with his fables," he says. "Then in the 18th century McGuffey came along with his reader ... which were mostly stories with a moral. So we're attempting to do online what others have done over the years."

The site went live in late 2007 with eight stories that Nancy and Holly created that summer. They finished another seven stories over the past summer. Nancy says Wilbur gives the women topics he wants them to explore such as bullying or truthfulness. "He wants it to be about values," Nancy says, "whereas we tend to veer toward the social skills."

Wilbur also took charge of promoting My Young Child. Just as he kept pace with the evolution of educational media during his career — from filmstrips to films to videotapes to DVDs — he has stayed current with the Internet. He grins with pride as he shows a Flash presentation on parenthood. He plans to put the video on YouTube to promote My Young Child. He has also worked out a deal with Google to market the Web site.

Wilbur plans a marketing push soon, but even without promotion the Web site has been averaging more than 20,000 hits a month in 2008. It has been drawing traffic from Hong Kong, Australia, Japan, Great Britain, Israel, Egypt, and many other countries. "It's interesting that you can reach out to the entire world," Wilbur says. Meanwhile, Nancy and Holly are excited to find My Young Child being cited on health care as well as educational Web sites. "With the Web, it goes unexpected places," Nancy says. "It's mind-boggling," Holly adds.

The three partners believe they make a fine team. "Bill's been our guide.



Above: Wilbur and his family. Other: These illustrations created by Holly are designed for children as their parents read the stories, which are written by Nancy. Every story teaches children morals and offers a set of discussion questions and activities, as well as age-appropriate parenting tips.

He's just very encouraging," Holly says. "He is definitely inspiring," Nancy agrees. For Wilbur, the appreciation is mutual. "Their enthusiasm spurs me on," he says.

Wilbur's father, William James Edwards, lived to age 104. At 92, Wilbur remains vigorous. He moves spryly along the sloping trails of his property and up and down the many stairs of his home, a converted farmhouse that once belonged to Floyd Bateman, a Barrington Hills founder. In 1926, Bateman bought the home, originally a four-room farmhouse in 1892, and remodeled it in 1927. Wilbur bought the house in 1957.

Wilbur's wife, Jane, died five years ago, but the residence remains very much a family home with framed pictures of Wilbur's three children, six grandchildren, and 12 great-grandchildren on the walls and shelves of every room. "There are kid's pictures everywhere in this house," Holly says.

The room Wilbur uses as his office, which runs the length of the rear of the house, is decorated with black and white photos of people he worked with throughout his career: former Illinois Gov. Adlai Stevenson, Newton Minnow, Mortimer Adler, Arthur Godfrey, Gloria Swanson, Hubert Humphrey, and more. Wilbur met Godfrey and Swanson during his days at CBS, where he

worked for 18 years prior to his career at Encyclopedia Britannica.

Wilbur's broadcast career began in his home state of North Carolina, where his grandfather settled and worked in a gold mine after emigrating from Wales. While a student at Davidson College, Wilbur became a program announcer at the 50,000-watt CBS radio station in nearby Charlotte. During his senior year, he applied to the Yale Divinity School and the University of North Carolina Law School. When he graduated in 1937, he was unsure whether to pursue the ministry, law, or his radio career. He chose Yale. "If the good Lord wanted me to be a minister," he recalls, "I better not duck that."

He stayed at Yale for a year. "It was the best academic year I ever spent," Wilbur says, "but it became clear to me that God didn't want me to become a minister." He returned to the radio station in Charlotte and joined the sales department.

Most of his following jobs with CBS were in sales and management. Wilbur was transferred often, moving about the country with his young family (he and Jane married in 1940). From Charlotte he moved to New York, and in 1945 he was transferred to Chicago as CBS's western sales manager in the era Chicago was still considered "western." Wilbur lived in Barrington during this stint, but



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in 1948 he was transferred to Boston.

In 1950, Wilbur was sent to Los Angeles to be general manager of the city's CBS radio station. While there, he participated in the great sea change of American media when CBS bought a local television station in Los Angeles, KNXT and made Wilbur its general manager. Wilbur remembers he knew nothing about television. "Nobody did."

He quickly learned the importance of local programming, "to find out what kind of programs interested the people of L.A." Though Los Angeles was still the glamour capital of the world, early television audiences loved "hillbilly" programs, Wilbur says, as well as news and sports.

Wilbur's two sons were Cub Scouts at the time, and when the boys wanted a speaker for a den meeting, Wilbur asked the station's program director if any on-air personalities were available. The program director recommended a young announcer who liked to do puppet shows. His name was Johnny Carson. The Cub Scouts responded to Carson's act with polite applause, Wilbur remembers, but they were much more enthusiastic about Range Rider, a TV cowboy. Carson, of course, went on to host the *Tonight Show*.

After two years in Los Angeles, Wilbur was transferred back to New York as sales manager for CBS's newly formed syndication unit. By selling syndication rights to such programs as *The Gloria Swanson Show*, *The Amos 'n Andy Show*, *Annie Oakley*, and *The Range Rider*, Wilbur was present at the birth of the rerun. Although active in the pioneering days of the medium, Wilbur doesn't watch much television anymore except for sports and *The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer*.

When Wilbur accepted his position with Chicago-based Encyclopedia Britannica, he and his family were keen to return to the Barrington area, which Wilbur remembered for the landscape and sense of community. "I liked the hills. I liked the rolling country, which I'd been used to in the East. I liked the people," he says. "They were very down to earth, very approachable. ... You have to prove yourself in the East, but here people accept you. That's been my experience."

The 1950s were the heyday for the types of educational films that Britannica produced. While Wilbur was not involved in making the films, he took pride in bringing them to schools across the country and the world. "I had a sense of satisfaction that I was doing something that was helpful to people," he says. "That was a social consequence for me. ... Once I got into it, it continued to be important to me."

Fifty years later, as Wilbur fosters the My Young Child Web site, that sense of satisfaction continues. 

PHOTO: THOMAS BALSAMO



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