

## Rebecca Wilson photographs exotic wildlife and is a committed community volunteer

By Thomas Jordan

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Rebecca Webb Wilson, a Memphis philanthropist and community volunteer, recently prepped for a summer trek in the Alps by lugging a 25-pound backpack up and down stairs. She also trudged along a sandy seashore with her laden pack, attracting quizzical glances from some others on the beach.

Hiking the vaunted Haute Route, or high route, which traverses the Alps from France to Switzerland, was another in a long string of adventures for Wilson.

In 2008, she climbed Mt. Kilimanjaro in Africa and she has been on medical and dental missions to Honduras. A nature photographer ([hawkkeynature.com](http://hawkkeynature.com)), Wilson has shot pictures in many places in the world: Gorillas in Rwanda, chimpanzees in Tanzania. She has ridden elephants in Botswana and shadowed polar bears in Canada.

In Memphis, Wilson, who also is a lawyer, pilot and writer, has embarked on adventures of a different sort. Among other endeavors, Wilson is the founder of Bridge Builders, a youth leadership program, and she helped overhaul the Memphis Zoo.

Wilson, who has four children and seven grandchildren, is one of Memphis' Adult Volunteers of the Year and one of the Women's Foundation of Memphis five 2010 Legends Award recipients.

### Wilson attends Vanderbilt

Wilson was born in Jackson, Tenn., and attended Vanderbilt University in Nashville. She graduated with a major in languages: Spanish, French, Portuguese and Russian.

After graduation in 1965, Wilson went to work for Pan American World Airways as a flight attendant.

"Those really were the good old days. We had to wear heels, and that was before luggage had wheels. Carrying a suitcase wearing three-inch heels is not

fun, I can tell you."

Pan Am was the principal U.S. international air carrier from 1927 until it went out of business in 1991.

Pan Am flight attendants were required to speak a foreign language and have a college degree in the 1960s, Wilson said. She was based in New York City.

In 1967, high above the Atlantic Ocean, Wilson cooked steak dinners for two passengers bound from New York to London — Beatles John Lennon and Paul McCartney.



Rebecca Wilson

"John was very quiet, very reticent, but Paul was very friendly," she said. "I had my picture made with Paul McCartney."

A new television show "Pan Am" will debut late this month on ABC. The show will follow the lives of Pan Am flight attendants in 1963.

"I'm going to sit there and watch the show with my Pan Am hat on."

Wilson said she found her hat while rummaging in her attic recently.

While she was based in New York, Spence Wilson of Memphis, who is now a businessman here, contacted her. The two met when they were both students at Vanderbilt.

"He was going to start business school at Harvard and he was

going to drive through New York on his way to Boston. We hadn't seen each other in two or three years. He looked me up and we started dating in New York and Boston."

After Spence Wilson graduated with an MBA from Harvard University in 1968 the couple married. She had to quit her job with Pan Am because flight attendants in those days had to be unmarried.

Rebecca Wilson then got her pilot's license, sold real estate for Kemmons Wilson Realty and was involved with Les Passees, a volunteer organization concerned with the quality of life of children and their families.

Wilson had been taking courses at the University of Memphis and, after discussions with her husband, decided to go to the University of Memphis School of Law.

"Of course I had no idea of how hard that was when you're married and have children and other responsibilities, but we blundered through it."

The couple's third child, Lauren, was born two weeks after finals during Wilson's first year of law school. The other Wilson children are Spence Jr., Rebecca and Webb.

She graduated from law school in 1978 and began work as an assistant U.S. attorney for the Western District of Tennessee, a job she held for four years.

### Founded Bridge Builders

In the fall of 1987, County Mayor Bill Morris held a series of lunches for community leaders to discuss the "severe societal problems that Memphis had," Wilson, who was among the leaders, said.

"They took us on a bus trip. They took us to see all these premature babies . . . that were born to teenaged girls, took us to houses where there were rats as big as cats, they showed us where people got their food stamps, just a variety of things," Wilson said.

"Bill made a very impassioned plea that the private sector needed to get involved because, pretty soon if they didn't, the government

couldn't handle all the problems the city was facing."

Wilson said Morris told his luncheon guests that if they were interested in getting involved, talk to him about it.

At that time, the Wilson children went to Briarcrest Christian School, a private institution.

"I don't think there was a single black at Briarcrest," Wilson said. "I felt like my children were growing up in a world that had much rougher and harder societal problems than I faced growing up in Jackson, Tenn., and that in this part of the world, things were exacerbated by race. And my children were growing up pretty much as segregated as I did in Jackson, and I didn't want them to have that happen."

Her idea was to have a youth leadership program that would pair a private school with a public institution.

She proposed Bridge Builders, and Morris referred her to Rev. Don Mowery, who was the head of Youth Service in Memphis at the time.

"So I went to Don with the idea of Bridge Builders. And fortunately, he was open to it, and he wanted to expand the mission of Youth Service and try to reach a wider group of young people. So I met with him and his staff in March of 1988 for the first time. And we had a camp running in July. We did it with 20 kids from Briarcrest . . . and 20 from Northside. I felt like if it would work between Briarcrest and Northside, then it could work with any pairing of schools in the city."

Wilson said she wanted her children to have a different experience than she had.

"And three of my four got to be Bridge Builders. My oldest was a senior when I was doing this. The other three all went through Bridge Builders."

Today, Bridge Builders serves about 1,500 high school juniors and seniors each year from more than 50 public, private, parochial, county and home schools in the

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