

Greenville Chamber
Growing a Greater Greenville

more **growth.**
fewer hurdles.

#togethergvl

The life and trials of William Walter Wilkins

Staff · May 27, 2011



Billy Wilkins is a partner with Nexsen Pruet, one of the largest firms in the Carolinas. Greg Beckner / Staff

As a child, Billy Wilkins fell in love with courtroom drama while watching his father try cases at the Greenville County Courthouse.

He made up his mind then to be an attorney and went on to become an iconic figure in state legal circles as 13th Circuit solicitor, chief judge of the 4th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals and in private practice today.

He is well connected in Republican circles and was Ronald Reagan's first appointment to the federal court system in the early 1980s.

Most in the legal profession who make it to the level that Wilkins did in the federal judiciary would remain on the bench until retirement, or death. But there is something in Wilkins that demands an audience.

That's a thing many in South Carolina forgot during Wilkins more than 30 years on the bench in Richmond, Va.

When Wilkins smiles in a courtroom it's like seeing Atticus Finch flash a Mack the Knife grin. There is something of the shark in that gentle smile.

He is hugely entertaining to watch before a jury and tries every case as if it were to be his last.

Illustrative of that was Wilkins' defense earlier this month of three commissioners from the Spartanburg County Holly Springs Fire District accused of a criminal violation of the state's Freedom of Information Act.

Wilkins turned what was expected to be a short proceeding into an all day affair.

A criminal violation of the FOI Act carries a penalty of \$100 or 30 days in jail. Hardly a murder trial, but Wilkins fought it as if it were.

His blistering cross examination of Jay King, a reporter with Hometown News, and fierce arguments before the judge turned what had been considered a slam-dunk for the prosecution into a victory for the defendants.

"I think everyone has a right to the best legal counsel they can get and in the Holly Springs case it was obvious to me that a great miscarriage of justice was being carried out," Wilkins said.

Wilkins said he has no idea how much the three Holly Springs defendants were charged for his services.

"Not a lot, I'd expect. Those folks don't have a lot over there. Frankly, I'm not sure how much the firm bills for my services. I get a salary (from Nexsen Pruet)."

Nexsen Pruet is one of the largest law firms in the Carolinas and has more than 170 attorneys with offices in Columbia, Charleston, Greenville, Hilton Head, Myrtle Beach, Charlotte and Greensboro. Wilkins came on with the firm in 2008 as a partner.

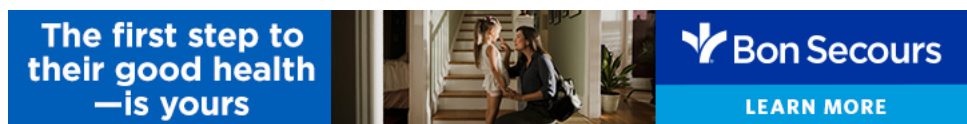
Those who know Wilkins say he uniquely combines being a shrewd attorney with an incredible desire to win and the gravitas of being a former federal judge.

All agree he is a formidable opponent.

"Most of what I know about trying a case I learned working as Billy Wilkins' assistant prosecutor back in the 1970s," said former 13th Circuit Solicitor Bob Ariail.

Ariail and Wilkins were on opposite sides in 2009 when former Greenville businessman John Ludwig Jr. pleaded guilty to driving his Maserati through a home near Furman University killing Bill Bardsley who was watching a basketball game.

Ludwig got no jail time in Bardsley's death but there were hefty payments to the family and, presumably, to Nexsen Pruet for legal fees.



That case more than any other cemented Wilkins' reputation as a fierce competitor just a year after he left the federal bench.

Wilkins defense of Ludwig was arguably the most controversial criminal case in years. Ludwig, a former Furman University football standout and hugely successful businessman, was not a sympathetic defendant.

His brushes with police over a nasty divorce before the Maserati incident didn't help his side. Neither did his driving record.

“With John it was usually ‘my way or the highway.’ That’s part of what made him such a success in business,” Wilkins said during an interview in his fourth floor office in the Nexsen Pruet building in downtown Greenville. “But he did what I asked him to do in that case. I think John realized the seriousness of the situation.”

In the wake of that firestorm, Ariail stepped down as solicitor and was replaced by Walt Wilkins, Billy Wilkins’ son.

That, too, is illustrative of the Wilkins family saga. Ariail and Wilkins both grew up on Augusta Road back when the edge of town was marked with cow pastures. They both attended Davidson College as undergraduates.

“My mother used to give us a dime to ride the trolley downtown to see a movie,” Wilkins said. “What we’d do is keep the dime to spend on candy at the theater and run all the way from Augusta Road to see the movie.”

It was a simpler time for a man who stepped onto a very big stage.

On the day Wilkins was interviewed by the Journal, the federal 4th Circuit upheld his victory and a \$4 million judgment in the “Flip this House” case (Trademark v. A&E).

As Wilkins explained it, Richard Davis who created the show sued the cable network A&E over profits from the popular TV series. Davis had a verbal contract with the network that entitled him to half the profits after expenses.

“He was so busy going from house to house that he never felt the need to have things down in writing,” Wilkins said. “We won this case because the court felt the verbal agreement was binding.”

Better to get it in writing than to go to court, Wilkins said.

Wilkins casts his net over a broad field in state legal circles, he said.

“They give me a good bit of leeway here.”

Wilkins is known as “Billy” but his actual name is William Walter Wilkins, the same name as his father and the same name that the judge’s son carries.

“My father was known as ‘Bum’ Wilkins,” the judge said. “It was a leftover from his days on the farm. His brothers liked to scare him by setting off fireworks.

“When the fireworks ran out they’d sneak up behind him and shout ‘Boom!’ just to see his reaction. But in the vernacular of the day “boom” sounded more like “Bum” and the nickname stuck from college on.

“I owe an eternal debt of gratitude to my mother for talking my father’s friends out of calling me ‘Little Bum.’”



 Share

 Tweet

 Share

 Share

Related Topics

[#Billy Wilkins](#) [#Bob Ariail](#) [#courts](#) [#Holly Springs](#) [#John Ludwig](#) [#law](#) [#Nexsen Pruet](#)

VIBRANT



banking solutions for a vibrant, growing Greenville.
Personal Banking | Business Banking | Merchant Services
banking in the places we call *home.*



Sign up for our e-newsletters or subscribe to get our print publications.

GET STARTED!

[GREENVILLE](#)

[TOWN](#)

[UBJ](#) UPSTATE
BUSINESS
JOURNAL

[atHome](#)

GREENVILLE JOURNAL

[CONTACT US](#) [ADVERTISE](#) [ABOUT US](#) [LEGAL](#) [OUR STAFF](#) [SUBSCRIBE TO PRINT](#) [SUBMIT PRESS RELEASE](#) [SUBMIT AN EVENT](#)
[SUBMIT LETTERS TO EDITOR/OP-ED'S](#) [SUBMIT LEGAL NOTICE](#) [CONTRIBUTOR FAQs](#) [SPONSORSHIP REQUEST](#)

We Inform. We Connect. We Inspire. © Greenville Journal. All Rights Reserved. | [Terms of Service](#)