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Gertrude Wilks

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# She's still fighting for the children

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Gertrude Wilks is tired now.

After 21 years of working as a community activist in East Palo Alto, she is still fighting for the children, but she has stepped back from the barricades.

The Gertrude Wilks Academy, a private school that educated hundreds of community children grades Kindergarten through 12, closed two years ago. A combination of funding problems, crime, and a community malaise took its toll on the school.

And Danny Wilks, her son, died in August of a heart attack. He was 37 years old and the second of her three children to die. Only a daughter, Pat Huston, survives.

In 1982, her eldest son Otis died in prison, where he was serving time for robbery. Danny graduated from Harvard and ran a Washington, D.C., consulting firm on fund raising and proposal writing.

"I slowed down after that," Wilks says. "I had to deal with myself. A lot of things just didn't matter for a while."

Wilks, 59, was the subject of a "roast" Saturday at the Villa Chartier in San Mateo when the Mothers For Equal Education celebrated their 21st Founder's Day.

Although most of the group has "passed on," according to Wilks, there are still about 10 people active in the organization that has pushed for quality education. Today, the organization continues to sponsor a day care center for about 15 children. Discussions are taking place about developing a rescue mission for women and children and a "Children's Palace" for the day care center.

"We got together because of the children and we kept going ever since," Wilks says.

Raised in Louisiana, Wilks is one of seven children. Although she never finished school, she was able to teach her own parents to read and write.

She moved to Richmond with her husband Otis, in 1946, and came to East Palo Alto in 1947, where she became involved as a community activist.

She served on the Municipal Council for 12 years and was to serve as mayor from 1976-1979. She is officially retired from political life, but continues to work within the community.

Before creating the Nairobi Day School in 1969, (later to become the Wilks Academy), Wilks helped E.P.A. children "sneak out" of the district to better schools. She helped arrange for Palo Alto families to care for the children during the week so they could obtain a better education in that city's public schools.



Times Photo by Ray Zirkel

## ACTIVIST FOR EDUCATION

"I know that if our children are given the opportunity, they can do what anybody else can," says Gertrude Wilks, a founder of Mothers for Equal Education in East Palo Alto.

Most of those students went on to college, Wilks contends. One student has his own medical clinic, another is at Harvard studying for a Ph.D. in international law and another is a computer specialist at SRI Palo Alto.

"I know that if our children are given the opportunity, they can do what anybody else can," she says.

But these days, opportunity is hard to come by in East Palo Alto.

Wilks blames the closing of her school on drugs — particularly cocaine.

Drug use in the community is affecting even small children, she says.

"It's so devastating and so disgusting," Wilks says.

The community has had problems with drugs before but not to the extent it exists now.

"When it was here before, the community as a whole stood up against it . . . and it made a difference," she says.

Drug deals are regularly made on the corners, according to Wilks and in the past few weeks a man was shot on her street while sitting in his Mercedes.

"They blew his brains out and there has been no outrage about that at all," she says. That's the kind of fear I sense now.

In the past, Wilks was not afraid to talk to gangs on the street. Today, she says, everyone carries a gun.

"We tried awfully hard to do some positive things here. It's hard to compete with criminals," she says.

She carries her typewriter in the back of her car because if she leaves it in the office, it would be stolen.

In fact, during the 1980s, the academy was being vandalized and robbed in broad daylight as children played during recess. "Physically, I don't have the strength anymore to fight this," she says.

Wilks continues to believe in the power of motivating young people.

Mothers for Equal Education has helped East Palo Alto's children rise above some of the social problems they face. She recalls one young man who was drinking at the age of 12. By working with him on a one-to-one basis, Wilks was able to motivate him. Today, he is the computer specialist at SRI.

Wilks remembers conducting motivation talks at 7 a.m. before the beginning of class. The group would say prayers, sing songs and hear people from the community.

"If I had the money, I'd reopen tomorrow. I have a recipe to deal with inner city children. But I couldn't work with the children by day and raise money by night."

Having worked with mothers and children for the past 21 years, Wilks sees another need in the community: a rescue mission. She is planning with others to find a house in East Palo Alto where shelter and assistance could be given for homeless women and children. She hopes the mission, in combination with the day care center, can provide women a chance to help their families.

Her other plans include resurrecting "The Possibility Book," which was being written by Danny Wilks. The book was an instruction manual on how black churches could move in new directions. Contributions to finish the book are being raised by the National Center for Religious Involvement in Washington. A goal of \$65,000 has been set.

Gertrude Wilks remembers her own family in Louisiana. She recalls how she would become angry with her father who insisted on sharing everything with their neighbors.

"He'd have us pick vegetables and then give them away. I always said that if I ever got grown, I'd never be that big a fool."

But now, Wilks says, "I feel very rich. I've had a lot of experiences and I know I have been able to help some people. If that was the 'Big Spin,' I feel like I've been there.

"It's a real joy to help others."