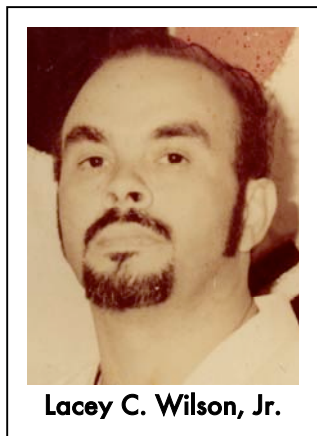


The History of The World-Famous Florida Avenue Grill

By Diasia Ellerbee

Whether you're a native Washingtonian or just live in the District, chances are you're familiar with the world-famous Florida Avenue Grill that's located at 11th Street and Florida Avenue in Northwest DC. "The Grill" as some fondly call it is not just a place to get a good home-cooked meal, but it's a place that's filled with love and a sense of friendliness that will definitely make you come back again and again. It possesses such a family-oriented and relaxed atmosphere that customers often forget about the problems in their lives and concentrate more on the food. The Grill is a place where you can be comfortable, be yourself, and feel more like a "friend" than a "customer."

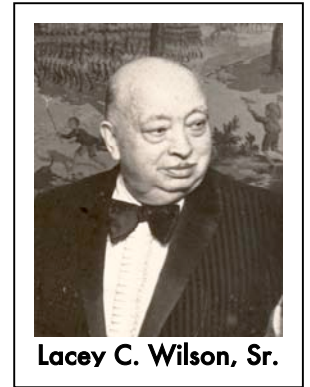
Behind this wonderful establishment stands a very strong man, filled with ambition, perseverance, patience, and virtue. Lacey C. Wilson, Jr. is an icon and a legend in the DC community and he also happens to be the person at the helm of the Florida Avenue Grill for the past 35 years. Mr. Wilson admits that owning the Florida Avenue Grill has been a blessed experience, but not always easy. He says, "A business is like a garden, you have to cultivate it."



Lacey C. Wilson, Jr.



Bertha Wilson



Lacey C. Wilson, Sr.

Mr. Wilson understands the true value of a dollar and how to put it to good use—a lesson he was taught by his parents, Lacey Carl Wilson Sr. and Bertha Wilson who founded The Grill in 1944. Mr. Wilson's father worked for years shining shoes downtown and doing other small jobs, saving his tips, while saving up the money to start The Grill. When The Florida Avenue Grill opened it had just two stools and was just a fraction of its present size. Mr. Wilson fondly recalls, "In the beginning, my father would send my mother to the supermarket to buy two chickens, and once they'd sold them, he'd send her back for two more chickens!" Mr. Wilson credits his father as "the smartest man I ever knew" and his role model in entrepreneurship and in life. He says his father taught him a great deal of morals, values, wonderful work ethics, and to always do one's best in one's endeavors because they reflect the type of person you are.

Before becoming the owner of the Florida Avenue Grill, Mr. Wilson served in the Marine Corps for thirteen years as a Platoon Sergeant, owned a very successful DC nightclub, and several other businesses. In 1970, Mr. Wilson sold some property in Maryland and purchased a majority interest in the Florida Avenue Grill from his parents.

Mr. Wilson speaks highly of The Grill proclaiming that "The Grill *represents* soul-food." He says, "the secret is that The Grill uses fresh food instead of canned or frozen foods which is satisfying to customers." Mr. Wilson believes that The Grill has survived over sixty years due to the on-the-job supervision that he provided, lack of employee theft, his understanding that the profits always had to go to the bills first, and lastly the fact that he made sure the food was always good.

The Grill has had its share of challenges but has always been able to bounce back. When asked why The Grill wasn't burned in the 1968 riots that followed the assassination of Martin Luther King and destroyed most of the businesses on U Street, Mr. Wilson replies: "Because I stayed up at that front booth all night long with a shotgun!" It was a difficult time for blacks, but the Grill remained on top and today is one of the few businesses that has stood the test of time.

Mr. Wilson says he never thought about quitting because quitting is a sign of giving up and he loathes giving up. He loves to make his own money and understands that with making money comes hard work and he's willing to do whatever it takes. Mr. Wilson has recently taken on new partners to help share some of that hard work and to insure that The Grill continues successfully into the future.

Customers speak of Mr. Wilson as a "cool" guy and one who loves his business. To his employees, Mr. Wilson is a wonderful boss full of tolerance and understanding. Linda Sharpe, who has been working at The Grill for over fifteen years, states that "Mr. Wilson is a very humble and a nice person to work for." "Mr. Wilson is a great employer and somewhat like a dad to me," explains James Buttler who has been working at The Grill for thirteen years.

"Some of my most memorable experiences," Mr. Wilson recalls, "are having dealt with the different people I was fortunate to meet. It is such a wonderful experience to meet a Congressman one day, then the guy that paint houses the next day, then a taxi driver the following day, and so on and so on. The variety of people has been quite an experience that I deeply treasure."

His words of advice include: to pay close attention to your clientele, find your own niche, and to always humble yourself!