

# An Overdue Reunion

## After 47 years, Donald Wilson meets his biological mother

BY KYLE CAMPBELL



Donald Wilson hugs his biological mother, Carol Marchiano, outside his home on Saturday afternoon.

KYLE CAMPBELL



**From left, Richard Marchiano, Erika Giblin, Donald Wilson and Carol Marchiano outside Mr. Wilson home on Saturday.**

**KYLE CAMPBELL PHOTOS**



Donald Wilson's extended family gathered at his East Quogue home on Saturday for his wife Maur

Before turning 47 last October, Donald Wilson Jr. said there were two things he wanted for his birthday: for the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, to have never happened, and to have dinner with his biological parents.

He explained this week that he considered both equally impossible.

But his wife, Maura Sullivan, was less skeptical about his second request, noting that she was determined to make the family reunion happen. She did her research, considered her options and, within a few days, the East Quogue couple embarked on a journey to find Mr. Wilson's biological family—a quest he was certain would take several years while also requiring a small fortune.

Little did he know that, before the end of the month, he would be on a plane headed for Tucson, Arizona, preparing himself to meet his mother for the first time since she reluctantly put him up for adoption.

“I really didn't have any expectation that it would ever actually happen,” Mr. Wilson said. “Let alone finding out in a week.”

### **A Budding Curiosity**

A volunteer with the Quogue Fire Department and a sergeant in the Army National Guard, Mr. Wilson knew from a young age that he was adopted. His adoptive parents, Carol and Donald Wilson Sr., shared that information with him because they had previously told their daughter, Laura, that she was also adopted before looking to adopt a second child.

Although he'd never vocalized it, Mr. Wilson has always had a curiosity about his past.

“This shocked me, as he had never mentioned such a desire,” Ms. Sullivan said, referring to her husband's birthday request last fall. “Donald had known since he was little that he was adopted, but he had never seriously pursued finding his birth parents.”

Carol Wilson said it came as no great surprise to her when her son called and told her that he'd found his biological mother.

“Knowing my son as I do, I knew he had to find out one way or another—

where he came from, what his roots are,” said Ms. Wilson, who now lives with her husband in Florida. “I gave him all the information I had that would help him.”

Ms. Sullivan and Mr. Wilson weighed their options in the fall, which consisted primarily of hiring a lawyer to conduct the search, or trying to go through one of the various services that reunite families.

The couple found a third option in Pamela Slaton, a New Jersey-based genealogist and private investigator who specializes in tracking down parents and children. Ms. Slaton’s services came with a guarantee—she would find the family member in question within four weeks or waive her fee, which tops out at \$2,500.

“I still didn’t believe it was gonna happen,” Mr. Wilson said. Within a week, Ms. Slaton had a phone number and a Facebook profile for him.

## **A Difficult Decision**

Mr. Wilson was born Michael Ryan in New York City in 1966, to Carol Ryan. His mother was only 19 at the time, had a boyfriend who was headed for Vietnam, and had a family that wanted nothing to do with her.

During her pregnancy, some of the people closest to her insisted that she get an abortion, but after much consideration she decided the best route for her would be to put the child up for adoption through the New York Family Home.

And, although she’d hoped to one day see her son, she wanted to respect his privacy and opted for a closed adoption.

“I figured that his parents might not tell him, and I didn’t want to intrude on his life,” Carol Marchiano said while sitting at a picnic table in her son’s backyard on Saturday. “His sister and brother wanted to find him, and I told them if Donald wanted to find me, he would find me, but I didn’t think

it would be fair to interfere in his life.”

Carol Ryan went on to marry Mr. Wilson’s father, Richard Schooff, when he returned from Vietnam after serving as a motor pool sergeant in the Army. However, as the young couple tried to start a family, the guilt of giving up their son hung over her.

She miscarried during her second pregnancy and viewed it as a punishment from God for giving her first child away. She still had her doubts even after the joy of giving birth to her daughter, Erika.

“When I had my daughter, it was amazing, absolutely amazing, but I was sure I would never have a son because I felt God had gave me a perfectly beautiful, wonderful son, and I gave him away,” Ms. Marchiano said. “And when [Richard] was born ... honestly, he has always been, and I’ve told him since he was small, he was my miracle baby, because I thought I would never have another son. But now I have both my miracles—all three of them.”

Ms. Schooff and her husband eventually separated, although they remain close to this day. She moved to New Jersey, where she met Tony Marchiano. The two have been married for 35 years and he helped raise her two younger children, having such a strong impact on them that they took his last name.

The Marchianos moved to Pennsylvania and then to Tucson, where they’ve lived for the past 12 years, around the block from their son, Richard.

“My children and I have always been extremely close, and my fear has always been that if something happened to me, I was afraid of how they would handle it,” Ms. Marchiano said. “I was always terrified of something happening to me and them being left alone and, to me, the greatest gift now is that they have their older brother.

“If something happens to me, they all have each other,” she continued.

## A Family United

After investigating his biological mother's Facebook page, with a little help from his 21-year-old son, Ryan, Mr. Wilson made the call that would change his life last fall.

He asked for Carol Ryan, and the woman on the other end confirmed that she once went by that name.

"I said, 'I was born Michael Ryan in 1966,'" Mr. Wilson recalled. "She said she'd been waiting 47 years for this call."

After spending the majority of her life thinking about her firstborn son daily, missing him, telling people that he was out there and wondering if she'd ever get to see him, Ms. Marchiano said she was unable to put her thoughts into words after finally getting the chance to speak with him.

"Honestly, I couldn't do anything but cry, cry hysterically," she said. "My son [Richard] actually thought someone had died when I called him, because I was so hysterical he couldn't understand me. All I could say was, 'Your brother, your brother, your brother.'"

A week later Mr. Wilson made the trip to Hasbrouck Heights, New Jersey, in mid-October to visit his biological sister, Erika Giblin. The following week, he and his wife flew to Arizona and met his mother. His newfound family helped Mr. Wilson get in touch with his biological father, who lives in West Point. The two met on Christmas, thus completing Mr. Wilson's search.

Since then the family has put in the effort to get to know one another, with Mr. Wilson flying to Arizona for a second time in January to go dirt bike riding with his younger brother, who, in return, flew to New York for a three-week stay shortly after.

"I'm still reeling from it," Richard Marchiano said. "It's a great experience

having an older brother, but I'm still taking it in." Most recently, Mr. Wilson's biological family and his adoptive family gathered at his home in East Quogue to celebrate Ms. Sullivan's birthday on Saturday. And while everyone is still in the process of getting to know each other, both sides have nothing but positive things to say about the other, with Ms. Wilson sharing baby photos of her son with Ms. Marchiano, and Ms. Sullivan making fast friends with her new mother- and sister-in-law.

Family resemblances, both in terms of physical appearance and characteristics, quickly became apparent, prompting Ms. Giblin to describe her two brothers as "twins that happened to be born seven years apart." While trying to take their first family photo, Richard Marchiano was making silly faces and trying to get everyone else to laugh—as he always does in those situations; on the other side, Mr. Wilson was doing the same thing. "[Richard] and Donald are making the goofy faces with [Erika] in the middle with the face that says, 'Oh my God, I'm related to both of 'em,'" Ms. Marchiano said.

Both Mr. Wilson's biological and adoptive fathers served as motor pool sergeants in the Army and his brother was a Marine sergeant, being deployed to Iraq shortly after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Meanwhile, Mr. Wilson joined the Army National Guard in 2009 at the age of 41, fulfilling a longheld desire to serve his country. "I'm really proud of him and what he's been able to accomplish," Mr. Schooff said on Saturday.

### **Credit Where It's Due**

Over the past eight months, the Wilsons, the Marchianos and the Mr. Schooff have each seen their respective families more than double in size—and everyone credits Ms. Sullivan for making that possible.

While Mr. Wilson had been curious about his biological family for a long time, he admits that he would not have initiated the search on his own. "What I owe it to is my wife," he said.



Mr. Wilson and Ms. Sullivan met in 2002 in Emergency Medical Technician school, while Mr. Wilson was with the Southold Fire Department and Ms. Sullivan was with the East Quogue Fire Department. Both now volunteer with the Quogue Fire Department.

The two began dating and eventually moved in together in East Quogue, although they put off getting married until Mr. Wilson's son graduated from high school. Ms. Sullivan's three children—Erik Lofstad, 30, and Erin Despres and Colleen Kolb, both 29—were already adults by the time she began dating Mr. Wilson.

On October 10, 2010, Mr. Wilson and Ms. Sullivan exchanged vows, officially linking their family together although, at the time, they were unaware just how big their family would soon grow.

Ms. Marchiano said she will forever be grateful of the work her newest daughter-in-law put in to bring her family together. "This woman I am indebted to until the day I die," she said. "She's the one who initiated finding me and I will be indebted to her until the day I die. No one could ever give a better gift than what she gave me."