

# A STUDY IN SELF-IMPROVEMENT



JAMES WOOTEN'S CAREER HAS VEERED FROM BEING AN ACCOUNTING CLERK FOR THE BURLINGTON RAILROAD TO SERVING AS A SERGEANT IN THE CHICAGO POLICE DEPARTMENT.

YET EACH JOB ALONG HIS PATH HAS GEARED HIM FOR HIS CURRENT ROLE AS SENIOR VICE PRESIDENT AND GENERAL COUNSEL FOR ILLINOIS TOOL WORKS

BY DEBORAH L. COHEN

PHOTOGRAPHY BY LLOYD DEGRANE







t's fitting that **James H. Wooten Jr.** '78 LAS should hold the senior legal post at Illinois Tool Works Inc., a down-to-earth Midwestern company best known for numerous patents and inventions ranging from the plastic six-pack rings that hold soda cans together to a variety of industrial fasteners.

ITW's 60-year-old senior vice president and general counsel is himself a study in retooling, a man who has been shaped by a combination of happenstance and hard work. Wooten is the product of a South-Side, African American family that stressed the importance of education and faith, a formula he credits with his success on a winding career path.

From humble beginnings as the son of a Chicago police officer to a string of clerical jobs, a stint in the Army, his own early career in the Chicago Police Department and an educational record that spans junior colleges, UIC and the hallowed halls of the University of Chicago Law School, Wooten has constantly revamped his life.

"He came from a strong family background, very close to his mom and dad," recalls John Ervin, Wooten's longtime friend and former partner in the CPD when the two worked a beat together in the early 1970s. "He grew up in the church. I know that had a lot of influence on him."

Wooten's office at ITW's corporate headquarters in Glenview is adorned with artwork celebrating the African American struggle. A lithograph on the wall near his desk portrays a revisionist take on an antebellum plantation scene. As slaves toil under the watchful eye of an overseer, a woman in the foreground holds a book tightly under her arm, an apparent homage to the theme of self-improvement. It's a topic that was reinforced throughout Wooten's formative years.

"One of the things she represents, at least in my mind, is the hope that education offers to lift someone up," says Wooten. "It's

the only way out."

Wooten's parents and grandparents created a structured home life. He has fond memories of time spent with his maternal grandfather, who awakened in Wooten a sense of cultural awareness. Together, they would pour over the latest issues of *Crisis* magazine, a former publication of the NAACP that covered topics ranging from news and opinion to literature and arts affecting the black community.

"That's where I first got a sense of what African Americans were doing," says Wooten, a soft-spoken man with a measured way of talking that matches his calculated approach to issues. He enjoyed being exposed to the stories his grandfather read to him from the magazine and, in the process, developed an early love of reading.

#### FROM ACCOUNTING CLERK TO COP

Even so, Wooten didn't really start out with discipline and self-direction as strong suits; he honed them after a series of life experiences. His varied work history is a testament to that: newspaper delivery boy, holiday-season truck loader, grocery clerk, computer operator, telephone bill collector, accounting clerk, bookkeeper, U.S. Army artillery gunner, police sergeant—the list is long.

Despite natural ability that allowed him to take honors classes and perform well on standardized tests, Wooten says he was not much of a student growing up; he was more interested in hanging out with friends and playing neighborhood sports than hitting the books. In fact, his early choices about college and career were largely unplanned.

"I think my mother expected me to attend college," he says. "I didn't prepare—didn't give it any real thought."

Because he had a flare for math and science, Wooten enrolled in UIC's electrical engineering program in 1965. But he flunked out after just one quarter, a result he blames jokingly on too much time spent socializing and playing *Bid Whiz*, a card-game cousin to bridge.

"I went to the Pier Room," he remembers of Student Center East (formerly Chicago Circle Center) at what was then the newly constructed South Loop campus. "I played cards every day."

Wooten's affinity toward math led to a host of clerical accounting positions at companies ranging from Burlington Railroad to Standard Oil Co., interspersed with efforts to complete an associate degree at junior colleges such as Olive-Harvey and Kennedy-King. The Vietnam War interrupted this pattern; Wooten was drafted into the Army and soon after was stationed in Germany. He served for two years.

Upon returning home, another twist of fate intervened when some roommates unknowingly signed Wooten up for the entrance exam to the CPD's Training Academy. Beginning in 1972, he spent seven years on the force, part of it working nights while attending UIC during the day to earn a bachelor's degree in criminal justice.

"I knew that if I ever wanted to achieve anything, I had to go back there and prove to myself that I could do it," he says, the resolve still in his voice.

Indeed, it was during the mid-1970s that Wooten became more serious about his career goals, the likely consequence of daily work that brings with it constant worry over one's own mortality.

Being a policeman, however, allowed Wooten to sharpen his powers of observation; he was adept at quickly sizing up a situation and approaching conflict with a conciliatory style that served as a complement to his more reactive partner.

"Jimmy would try to talk to people and figure out what was going on," recalls Ervin. "His demeanor never changes, whether he's mad or glad or sad. When you're in the middle of confusion, if you're calm, then the person you're talking to will eventually calm down and sit down and talk to you."

Even though the CPD of the 1970s was a far cry from the days when Wooten's father served—he notes that black officers then weren't even given their own squad cars and typically worked separately from their

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**James Wooten spent seven years as an officer and sergeant in the Chicago Police Department. He often worked the nightshift, so he could attend UIC during the day.**



white counterparts—there were still barriers to advancement and Wooten didn't hold out much hope for rising above his rank of sergeant.

"It's a job that had a lot of political overtones in terms of who you knew," he explains. "And because blacks traditionally had not had much of a role in the political landscape, it was difficult to get promoted."

#### SHOT AT TWICE IN TWO DAYS

Wooten, who has maintained a strong sense of faith largely instilled by his mother's example, says he received what he considers a sign to move on from police work: he was shot at twice in two days but emerged unharmed. He set his sights on law school and took a leave of absence from the force to attend the University of Chicago.

"I was old enough and had been through enough to be comfortable with who I am," he says of his experience at one of the nation's top legal programs. "So I wasn't as intimidated as I might have been if I were a younger student."

By then, he also had the unwavering support of his wife Gertrude, whom he had met through a local ski club. In what she says was uncharacteristic behavior, he proposed to her after just two months following what she describes as a "whirlwind romance."

The two later purchased an apartment building and became landlords; they used the rent money and salary from Gertrude Wooten's job as an IRS revenue agent to support them while Wooten dug into the rigors of full-time academic life at U of C.

"It was an awful lot of work," recalls Gertrude, who soon after had a son, James III. (He is now an attorney at Baker & McKenzie in Chicago.)

"We had a plan, we had a commitment to it, and that's what we did," she says, noting that their 32-year marriage is successful because opposites attract. "He's sort of pensive and deliberate and I'm sort of—give me the information and I'll make a decision."

Wooten's speculative nature has proven invaluable to his colleagues in the legal profession. A prime example is his approach to

selecting juries, a frequent occurrence for a corporation such as ITW with multiple products and exposure to ongoing lawsuits.

"He's quite intuitive that way, picking up vibes and being very observant," says Stewart Hudnet, ITW's former senior counsel and a mentor to Wooten who groomed him for the top job. This quality was "sharpened from being a cop."

ITW's corporate headquarters are not a fancy place. The relatively small executive offices and no-nonsense decor cultivate a shirtsleeves environment where people don't stand on ceremony. That may be one reason why Wooten has spent more than 20 years of his career there, beginning as a senior attorney in 1988, moving up to associate general counsel in 1995 and assuming the post of general counsel in 2005. That year, he took on the additional titles of vice president and corporate secretary; in 2006 he became senior vice president.

#### FINDING HIS NICHE IN LAW

Wooten was recruited to ITW from the former Gardner, Carton & Douglas, an old-line Chicago law firm that ITW counted on for much of its legal work. After graduating from law school in 1982, Wooten spent time as a trial attorney and later moved into bankruptcy work. He soon tired of conflict. ITW, with legal work ranging from merger-and-acquisition related transactions to securities, offered a set of more positive challenges.

"I thought my personality was better suited to try to put things together than fight about them once they'd fallen apart," says Wooten.

Today, he supervises the legal operations of a publicly traded company with revenues of \$16 billion and products ranging from industrial adhesives to automotive components. The company's decentralized organizational structure (it operates some 800 companies in 50 countries) is in tune with Wooten's own stand-back approach.

"The decentralization applies to the legal department almost the way it does to the [business] units in the sense that each per-

son here is almost like a mini general counsel," explains Wooten, who supervises 10 attorneys and additional staff of about 30 in departments that include risk management, government affairs, and environmental health and safety. "There is an incredible variety to the legal work that we do here."

Employees describe Wooten's management style as one that gives them ample latitude. Come in for advice and you will likely be drawn into a discussion of the pros and cons of various strategies for handling a problem, but given no clear dictates from the boss, who prefers to assist by helping lay out all the options.

"He's just not heavy handed at all," says Maria Green, ITW's deputy general counsel and head of risk management. "He's someone who sort of suggests what the best course would be. By the time you come out of there you know whether you should do A or B without being told."

Green first met Wooten in the early 1980s when the two did volunteer work in a program to mentor recent minority graduates of law school in preparation for the bar exam. She says Wooten has maintained a strong sense of idealism throughout his life.

To that end, Wooten is active in several non-for-profit organizations. He is a board member of Children's Memorial Hospital, Goodwill Industries of Metropolitan Chicago and Congo Square Theater Co. "He always has been very passionate about children, and he's always been very passionate about causes in the African American community," notes Green.

In addition, Wooten has strived to build diversity among his employee ranks. "There's a great deal of satisfaction in being able to put together a team that has so many different people from so many different cultures, and really getting people to appreciate their differences," he says. It's a worthy goal for a man who has viewed life from a range of distinct vantage points—minority, peacemaker, advocate, top dog and, ultimately, inveterate student of self-improvement.

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