

Rock Hill man's apology for racism leads to reconciliation award

By Andrew Dys - adys@heraldonline.com

At the Canadian Embassy on Thursday night, magic happened.

Elwin Wilson, who had hated blacks for so long, who beat up a black man named John Lewis at the Rock Hill bus station in 1961 and then apologized 48 years later in words and actions that shook the world, told Lewis "I love you."

Lewis had helped Wilson up the stairs of the auditorium earlier that night, 48 years after Wilson beat him up for daring to enter the "whites only" waiting room at Rock Hill's Greyhound bus station. Lewis accepted the apology, and the world noticed.



Andy Burriss

U.S. Rep. John Lewis, D-Ga., and Elwin Wilson of Rock Hill clasp hands onstage at the Canadian Embassy in Washington on Thursday after receiving the 2009 Common Ground Award for Reconciliation.

The two men Thursday received the Common Ground Award for Reconciliation, given by the Search for Common Ground group that promotes world peace through conflict resolution without fists and guns.

Wilson gave a speech to thunderous applause from the audience. He told the crowd, "Well, I guess you thought the devil is here," but the crowd said no.

Wilson said he had come to his senses after a life of hating blacks, and he thanked Lewis "for forgiving me."

He said of Lewis, "You are my friend," to a standing ovation from ambassadors, Congressmen and even the Queen of Jordan.

Lewis, a Georgia Democrat in the U.S. House of Representatives since 1986 after a lifetime of civil rights activism, started his speech by calling Elwin Wilson "my friend, and my brother." Lewis said Wilson had courage and guts to apologize, and that he was proud to accept it.

That apology was reported first in the pages of this newspaper nine months ago, but it became a worldwide symbol for change of heart.

Lewis told the crowd, with many people crying with joy at what they were witnessing, these final words: "Maybe, just maybe, we can transform the world."

Then Lewis and Wilson clasped hands once more, and Lewis raised their hands together in the spotlight on the stage.

The crowd cheered, and Lewis did one more thing for Elwin Wilson.

He helped Wilson down the steps, and it sure looked like he was leading a cavalry charge into all our futures.

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