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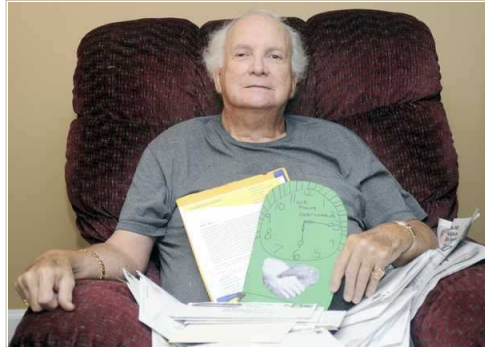
Apology lands award for former Rock Hill racist

Group lauds Rock Hill man's peaceful resolution to past racist actions

By Andrew Dys, Columnist - adys@heraldonline.com

Archbishop Desmond Tutu. Former president Jimmy Carter. Boxer Muhammad Ali. All were awarded Common Ground awards in the past quarter-century for the peaceful resolution of conflicts.

Soon you can add to that list Elwin Wilson, a 72-year-old former racist from Rock Hill. Wilson apologized earlier this year to blacks in Rock Hill, whom he berated and threw eggs at during a lifetime of bigotry. Wilson also apologized to the former civil rights activist he beat up in 1961 who later became a congressman.



By Jim Stratakos, jstratakos@heraldonline.com

Elwin Wilson of Rock Hill shows a card of forgiveness he received from Chicago school children. An international peace organization has selected Wilson for one of its 2009 awards after he apologized for his past. By Jim Stratakos, jstratakos@heraldonline.com

"I never wanted any awards or anything else, I just wanted then and want now for people to know I apologize for all those things I said and did," Wilson said at his Rock Hill home Wednesday. "I meant it when I apologized for the way I was. I was wrong and wanted to try and make it right the best way I could."

Search for Common Ground, a group of international prominence that "works to transform the way the world deals with conflict — away from adversarial approaches and towards collaborative problem solving," has named Wilson as one of its 2009 award winners, said Susan Koscis, Washington director of communications for the organization.

Wilson and U.S. Rep. John Lewis, D-Ga., a former Freedom Rider who came to Rock Hill in 1961 to protest segregation and was beaten by Wilson and others, are among 2009 recipients who will be invited to an October ceremony, Koscis said.

Wilson's January public apology to Lewis and Lewis' immediate acceptance was first reported in The Herald and later became international news. It has become what Koscis called "a national symbol" for peaceful resolution of the differences that for so long separated Americans.

Wilson and Lewis met soon after Wilson's apology, and Lewis's graceful public acceptance has become a rallying point for racial healing.

The Common Ground awards are presented annually to those who change the world in big and small ways. In 2008, three of the seven awards went to groups as varied as the government of Canada, for its apology to aboriginal inhabitants; the New York Philharmonic, for performing in North Korea; and a group formed by a pair of Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attack widows called Beyond the 11th, that works to improve the lives of Afghan war widows.

"What we do is recognize those who reach across divides," Koscis said.

The list of 2009 winners has not been completed, she said.

Lewis had long ago forgiven those who beat him in 1961. He had refused to press criminal charges because it was part of the civil rights mantra to not seek revenge.

Yet, Lewis was emotionally moved to tears when Wilson apologized and embraced Wilson in a hug that Wilson returned. Wilson is the first and only person to admit being one of the mob who beat Lewis and another protester at Rock Hill's Greyhound bus station.

"These awards represent the kind of reconciliation Congressman Lewis has talked about all of his life, and he will be proud to be there with Elwin Wilson," said Brenda Jones, communications director for Lewis's Washington office.

Lewis also will be a featured speaker in early August in California for another group, the Worldwide Forgiveness Alliance, honoring his graceful acceptance of Wilson's apology.

Wilson's initial apology to Rock Hill segregation protesters known as the Friendship Nine and the women who marched with them in January 1961 came after the inauguration of President Barack Obama in January.

At that time, Wilson admitted his role in the beating of Lewis. He apologized to everyone involved and for his life of hating blacks, which included Ku Klux Klan activities. He asked for forgiveness; the people involved all agreed to accept the apology.

David Williamson, one of the Friendship Nine members who met Wilson that January day, said the news that Wilson and Lewis will be honored is "a terrific thing."

Another man whose January apology was accepted by local protesters was retired Rock Hill police officer Steve Coleman. Coleman, who had apologized for his own racial hatred that changed in his lifetime, called Wilson's Common Ground award, "great news for being able to say you are sorry, and for people to accept it."

Wilson spoke at a civil rights rally in Georgia this spring. He has received hundreds of phone calls and dozens of cards and letters from people of different races. Some have doubted his genuineness: Most have lauded him.

"I read every letter," Wilson said. "Those letters are like vitamins for me. They strengthen me. I know they are from different states and different countries, and some people have different opinions. But I did what I did because it was the right thing to do."

Among those letters was one from a classmate from the third grade at a Rock Hill elementary school, who sent him a card saying how proud she was. Another classmate, from the Rock Hill High class of 1955, also wrote him saying how proud she was.

One letter sticks out. It came from a group in Chicago that works with what it calls "underprivileged kids." Those kids read about Wilson's apology and forgave him.

They made a handmade card of a clock, with a white hand shaking a black hand below it. They mailed it to Wilson. He proudly keeps it next to his chair in his living room.

The card stated, simply, "We shall overcome."

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