



The Youth Career Coach Inc. Career Interview #1



Wendy Wilson
Managing Editor, JET Magazine

NOTE: At the time this interview was conducted Ms. Wendy was the News Editor for Essence Magazine, NY.

Wilson is the former news editor for *Essence* magazine, where she was responsible for assigning and editing various in-depth feature stories, profiles, special reports, and commentaries for the news section. She also served as the news editor for *Essence.com*, where she provided daily news coverage and content for the site, including breaking news and exclusive stories. After joining *Essence* in 2005 as a staff writer, she contributed to several mainstay articles including, *Essence's* "25 Most Beautiful Women," "25 Best Companies," "Women of Influence," and the "12-Month Home Ownership Campaign," which won the 2007 National Association of Black Journalists Award for best magazine business story.

Source: JohnsonPublishing.com

How did I meet Wendy?

I first had the opportunity to talk with Wendy after I did a Google search for internships at Essence Magazine. I had a student share with me that she dreamed of working for Essence Magazine. I gave her some tips on how she could make that a reality, but what I didn't tell her behind the scenes I was going to try and make this connection on my own.

I used Google and must have put in so many key words including email address, internships and human resources for Essence Magazine, past Essence interns etc. After a few searches I found an email address on a press release and lo and behold it was for Wendy. I took my chances and crafted something professional and she graciously replied. I was so excited that I had accomplished this and I was then able to share that contact with my student and she became their intern.

After about a year of keeping in touch I got up the courage to email Wendy to ask if I could interview her for a book. Granted, I considered myself a nobody when it came to publishing as this would be my first book, but I thanked her so much and

Essence Magazine for taking a chance on a young professional coming out with their first book. I have yet to release this book, as I became a full-time doctoral student, and a little fear set in. However, now that I'm in my last year of my doctoral program and my confidence has since returned! I could not sit on this interview any longer without sharing it! I want to share part of Wendy's story in my speeches, on my website, and before 2015 ends, it will be in my book, thankfully by then I'll have a book writing mentor and I'll be Dr. Saunders!

So I truly thank Wendy for this opportunity to share!

About Wendy.....

Death of a Parent

You will discover Wendy's story is inspirational. In fact, she lost her dad at a young crucial age, in the middle of a cross road as she was planning to head off to college. I'm not sure if you have lost someone very dear to you and have been struggling to keep going so you too can smash through that glass ceiling, but **perhaps after you read Wendy's story it will give you that ounce of hope you need to keep going.**

THE INTERVIEW

Natascha: Wendy, let me begin by sharing a quote I read where you said, "Standing out isn't being eager." Would you still give that advice today?

Wendy: Absolutely.

Natascha: The second thing you said was "What an intern should not do is to say they're someone they're not." You actually had someone say they were a publicist's name that they weren't?

Wendy: Yeah.

Advice for Interns

Natascha: I want to make sure I note that. Students get so caught up in talking up their experiences to make it sound bigger than what it is, but they should be careful of that. Are there any other tips you can share with interns?

Wendy: Just be open in doing tasks you're asked to do. I was a graduate student doing my internship and was asked to do things I thought were menial. I did it with a smile on my face. At the end of the day it was a stepping stone leading to other things. You never want to have a bad attitude about tasks you're asked to do. You always want to have a good attitude or mindset. Even if it's mundane, it may teach you something down the line you may not recognize at this point. If I'm asking you to make copies or something, clearly it's not terribly confidential. Take a look at it, for example, maybe it's a contract and you can see how contracts are set up. That is a learning process. It's not just making a copy. Make the learning experience bigger for yourself.

Working at Essence as an Editor

Natascha: I never thought of that, thank you for that advice! I hope many interns take note. Now switching gears, what's the most challenging part of your job?

Wendy: What I do essentially is news. I do news for a monthly magazine. We work usually 3 months in advance in order to meet our production schedule deadlines. It can be difficult to do news that's fresh and interesting to the reader when I'm doing it 3 months in advance. I can't create the news, I can't make it up. I have to find creative ways to talk about things that are provocative, thought-provoking, interesting, informative, but also fresh, new and innovative. That's the struggle I deal with on a constant basis, not being so reactionary. That's what I love to do, is react to the news of the day. I've got to think longer term, and what's happening at that time in the future. For instance, we're working on our February issue. President Obama officially dedicated February as National Teen Dating Violence Awareness month. We're doing a story on that. I can plan in advance that way, if there's a specific month that something's going to happen. We know the election is coming up, we're working on that. The Olympics are happening next year. Always thinking ahead instead of being reactionary to the news today. In December we have World Aids Day, November and December, I'm thinking holiday time, family time. You think of those stories that speak to family and deal with family issues. We're doing that in the summertime. We're working on three magazines at a time, working on an issue, then preparing for the next issue after that.

Natascha: When you're writing an article, it can take 3 reviews from other editors before it makes it.

Wendy: Right.

Family & Jamaican Immigrants

Natascha: Parents, siblings, any influences there? Was your family upbringing positive or negative?

Wendy: At the time growing up, you don't realize it, but you witness other people's upbringing. I was very lucky and fortunate to have both my parents raising me. My parents are immigrants.

Natascha: You're from Jamaica, right?

Wendy: Right. I think that's a different perspective, quite honestly. I feel like immigrants that come to this country from places that don't have the same benefits or that aren't able to provide the same resources for their kids have a different mindset. My parents came here for a better opportunity. They stressed education. They didn't have formal education. It wasn't a will you go to college, it was a when you go to college speech. It wasn't a how will we be able to afford this, it was a we'll make it happen. I never heard any of that growing up; how can we do this, will we do this? It's when we do this, we'll make it happen. I think that type of language is necessary in the household to let kids know that college is a possibility. I don't think enough African American parents realize there are so many resources out there; it's just a matter of tapping into the right one.

Selecting Your College

Natascha: How did you choose your college?

Wendy: I chose my college through an after-school program. It no longer exists, but the program was called, Options. It was a college preparation program at a local community center. They sat me down and said what are you looking for in a college? I wanted something that mirrored my high school experience. My graduating class was 42 girls. I went to an all girl Catholic high school, it was very small. I wanted a school that mirrored that attention level. I was comfortable in my high school. I knew that I wouldn't excel at a place where I could get lost in the

shuffle. I needed that one-on-one attention with my professors and teachers. So the counselor plugged in all my prerequisites, and a bunch of schools came from this program she used. Skidmore was one of them, and they just happened to have one of their representatives coming to the admissions office. She invited me and 3 other ladies from my school to come in and speak with a gentleman. The four of us sat down and listened to what this gentleman had to say. He said they were planning an overnight trip for prospective students. If you're interested I can sign you up. You can come and see the campus for yourself and speak to some of the students. I can tell you what it's like, but it's better to speak to the people who are actually there. This trip was specifically for students of color. I went on the trip and was able to fit in. I think what was really integral for me was I was able to sit in on one of the fiction writing classes. I did that and speaking to the students and getting a tour and going to the classes. It was still in state, but it was 4 hours away from home, which was far enough, but not too far. It was the perfect place. I really fell in love with the school and the campus. At the time Skidmore was about \$20,000 a year. I did what I had to do. My mom and I sat down with the financial aid papers and figured it out. We applied and I got in, and I got financial aid.

Selecting Your Career

Natascha: In high school I understand you were already writing for your school newspaper, and had an internship. Did you know you were headed down that path as a career?

Wendy: I was one of those weirdo kids that always knew what they wanted to do. I'd meet so many people who are like I fell into this. I always knew I wanted to be a writer. English class came easy for me. Whenever we were assigned a paper, my teacher would say okay guys, you have to write a 6 page paper, everyone else would be moaning. I'd end up giving her 10. She'd always ask if I could give her 6. I've always been comfortable writing, I've always felt confident in my writing skills. I always saw that as a path for a career, but I didn't know what type of career. I didn't know if I wanted to write a book, be a journalist or an editor. I just knew that it would encompass writing. It wasn't until I got to Skidmore that I figured all of that out.

Do you have a Mentor?

How involved are you in college?

Natascha: Did you have an advisor or counselor at Skidmore? A mentor?

Wendy: I did have an official advisor, and a number of counselors. There were many people who helped me out. I was involved in residential life very heavily in college. I always had the Director of Student Life or the Dean of Student Affairs to talk to. I've always been a bit precocious so I always thought differently. I had one advisor in my freshman year who I didn't feel was advocating or working on my behalf enough, so I dropped him. I looked for someone else. I found another professor who was more in line and in tune with me and my needs. I asked her if she would be willing to take me on and she said yes. I added her as an advisor, and then she went on a sabbatical, so I got another advisor who was pretty good. She ended up being my advisor throughout the rest of the time.

Taking the Lead | Death of a parent | Single Mom

Natascha: It seems like you took the lead in creating your own pathways.

Wendy: I always take the lead. I'm a true believe that especially in college, if you pay for something, you value it more. Because I was paying for school, I would give myself two breaks per semester, if I was tired or exhausted, where I didn't go to class. Otherwise, that was money that I was spending down the drain. That's how I saw it. If I felt like I wasn't getting something toward my needs or specifications, what am I paying all this money for? I went in with a different mindset. I didn't have mommy and daddy paying for me. I had a grant, student loans and I had to work in order to pay tuition. I wasn't involved in state programs or anything to help me out. My father passed away when I was 17, a couple of months before I started college. My mother was a very new and young widow and was dealing with my sister at the time, and me leaving. It was a very hard year.

How did you stay focused?

Natascha: How did you stay focused? Did you go home to check on your mother?

Wendy: It was hard. My father passed in 1992, he got sick earlier that year and died in April of 1992. I was accepted into the International Living Abroad program, and I was able to get a scholarship to go to France to study for the summer. I graduated from high school in June, left for France in July, came back in August, and started college in August. I was too busy to deal with it. It drove me to keep pushing along because my father knew I was going to be successful before he passed. I remember the nurses telling me that he would talk about that all the time. That was one of the things that stayed in my head. I used that as motivation. It was not easy. These were the things he prepared me for. I felt I had an obligation to do it all.

My Sister

Natascha: So you have one sister? She's younger than you?

Wendy: Yes. My sister is in education. She's an educational coach. She teaches teachers how to be better teachers. She's also a high school teacher. She graduated from U Penn with a degree in African American Studies. She went back and got her Masters at Columbia Teacher's College in Education. There's a thread of education. My family is very much pushed. My parents never made us believe mediocrity was good enough. Average was never good enough. We brought home a C and that was failing. We were constantly pushed to get that A or B. Above average is what you should be.

First Generation College Graduate

The Parental Influence

Natascha: A lot of parents aren't college educated. How did she push you when she herself didn't have a higher level of education?

Wendy: They both were involved. That doesn't take a degree. We have photos of me as a toddler and my mom taking me to the museum in New York. My parents would take me to museums all the time. We would go to amusement parks. My parents would order books for me all the time. We used to get this book called Weekly Reader, and you could order books and they would come in the mail. As a kid, it's exciting to get mail. It was exciting to order something and get something with my name on it, and have it be an incredible book. My parents also ordered encyclopedias, so we had them in the home. Whenever I had research to do or papers to write, I had my own set of encyclopedias. They invested in my education. I'd never gone to public school. My parents paid for school. It's not necessary to have a college degree in order to be invested. My mom would bake cupcakes for my birthday and bring them to school. My dad took me to the Red Cross to do a paper in 5th grade. My parents took me to the library at least once a week. It's being involved that I think is key. All it takes is being creative; **maybe not going out shopping with your girlfriends one afternoon, but putting time in with your kids instead.**

Obstacles at Work

Natascha: Thank you for that terrific advice, switching gears to your amazing profession; what's the biggest obstacle you've had to overcome at work?

Wendy: The media is an extremely competitive field. **There are people who advance based on who they know and not necessarily what they know.** I've had people say to me that having a Masters degree doesn't make you a better writer; it doesn't do anything for you. I usually say well that's because you don't have one. And that's usually the case. The biggest professional obstacle has been continuing to prove one's self in the industry. It's often like a song and dance. Those who dance the hardest and sing the loudest get chosen. Not necessarily singing the best or dancing the best, but that sing the loudest and dance the hardest. It's all about staying true to yourself. That might mean that I won't advance as quickly as others

who have chosen to take the shorter way out. At the end of the day I'm true to myself. It's important to me that I'm known as being truthful, authentic, credible and sincere. People say I tend to be on the negative side, but I personally don't see myself as negative. I think it's all about my experience. No one knew how I grew up, what the circumstances were. For someone to label me as negative is a misnomer. I think I'm authentic, and I'm authentic to my experience.

The Glass Ceiling

Natascha: Do you feel as though you've broken through the glass ceiling?

Wendy: I think its perspective. I think people from the outside will say if you knew where I came from, I'm a kid from the Bronx whose parents were immigrants, I lost my dad when I was 17, I've been doing a lot on my own, for myself and for my family for a very long time. I've been able to penetrate this media world in a really fundamental way and I'm very happy for that. People are impressed by what I do. I don't see that. If I met me, I wouldn't be impressed with me. **It's because I'm an overachiever.** I'm always thinking what's the next thing. **I'm always thinking about age.** At this age I want to do this, at this age I want to do that. I'm always thinking career wise, being driven. It's great because I've been able to do all of this coming from the community I come from. **Your community should not determine who you become. I grew up next to people who are dead. What was the difference? We grew up in the same community. Your community doesn't have to dictate who you will become.** I think that people from the outside of my community may think wow, you're doing big things. For me personally, there's so much more I want to do.

Natascha: Wendy I thank you so very much for sharing your story with us here at The Youth Career Coach Inc. and we look forward to sharing your story with youth around the world!

Wendy: You are welcome!

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