



THOUGHTFUL LIVING

# RALPH C. WILSON, JR.

LASTING IMPACT

BY TOM WALSH



RALPH C. WILSON, JR.  
FOUNDATION



## WHO WAS RALPH C. WILSON, JR.?

AND WHY DID HE DECIDE THAT A \$1.2 BILLION FORTUNE FROM THE SALE OF HIS BUFFALO BILLS FOOTBALL TEAM — AFTER HIS DEATH AT AGE 95 — BE SPENT WITHIN 20 YEARS, TO HELP IMPROVE THE QUALITY OF LIFE FOR PEOPLE IN WESTERN NEW YORK AND SOUTHEAST MICHIGAN?

The answer to the first question is complex, but critical to answering the second.

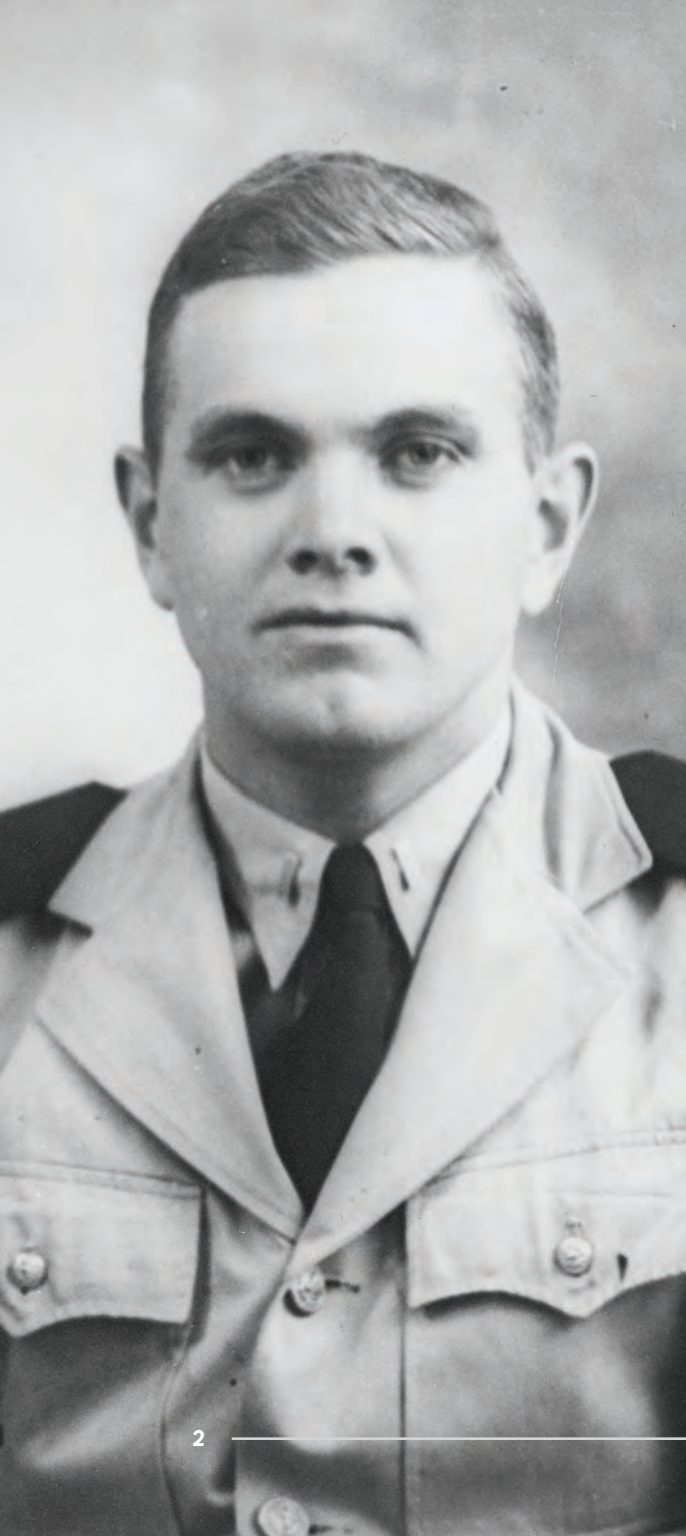
Ralph was man of many passions, pursuits and personal traits. His values are what drive the unique approach of the Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Foundation, his parting gift to his fellow citizens.

“Ralph was fun, humble, and even though he grew up with many advantages, he identified with and admired the hard-working people who made it on their own,” said his widow Mary McLean Wilson.

In many ways, Ralph was a character of contrasts:

- A private, low-profile billionaire in his hometown of Detroit, he was a famous sports team owner in Buffalo, where he was beloved, cheered and occasionally jeered amid the Bills’ ups and downs on the football field.
- A fierce competitor in business and on a tennis court, yet a humble, generous man with a common touch.
- A risk-taking “Go for it on 4th-and-1” guy, but gracious in defeat.
- A patriot but not a partisan. An officer and commander of a U.S. Navy minesweeper in World War II, he dealt easily later in life with presidents, governors, senators and judges of different political persuasions.





Ralph Wilson, Jr. was born Oct. 17, 1918 in Columbus, Ohio and moved to Detroit with his family as a two-year-old.

He died March 25, 2014 in his suburban Grosse Pointe Shores home. And while he had a close circle of friends and raised his family here, very few in the greater Detroit community knew much about him.

“That was by design. It was deliberate. He loved his privacy here in Detroit,” said Jeff Littmann, chief financial officer of Ralph Wilson’s far-flung business interests since the mid-1980s. “He could go to the movies, go to a restaurant, people wouldn’t recognize him – and he loved it.”

In Buffalo, conversely, he was one of the most recognized personalities in the market. He accepted that, even though he was something of an introvert. “He did enjoy being the owner. He loved being in Buffalo, going to practices. But he also just loved being an average citizen in this community,” said his widow Mary, recalling stories told by local Buffalonians about running into Ralph shopping in a Wegmans grocery store.

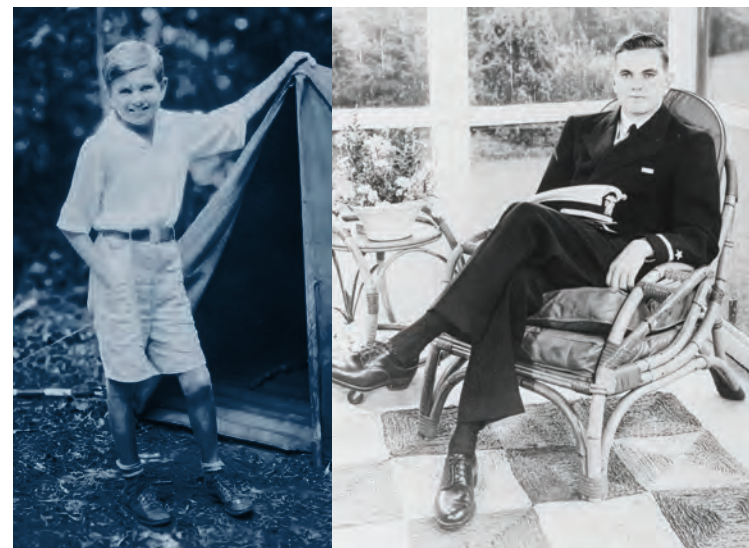
“I always loved that he had a Taurus as a rental car in Buffalo, and that he would leave the keys in the car, in the ignition, outside his condo – which had rental furniture for a long time,” said Mary Owen, Ralph and Mary Wilson’s niece.

As one of eight original American Football League owners, Ralph was respected as a pioneer in negotiating TV contracts for the fledgling AFL in the 1960s, and

for loaning money to Al Davis and Billy Sullivan to help keep the Oakland Raiders and New England Patriots afloat before the merger with the NFL. He was also regarded as the “conscience of the NFL” and champion of small-market teams for voting against the Cleveland Browns move to Baltimore in 1996, and against the NFL’s 2006 collective bargaining agreement.

Wilson graduated from the University of Virginia in 1940 and enrolled in law school at the University of Michigan, but joined the Navy a year later with the outbreak of WWII, seeing action in the Mediterranean and later in the Pacific theatre off Japan’s coast at the war’s end.

He returned home to Michigan in 1946, joining his father’s insurance business. But father and son soon began expanding into a variety of industries.





WE DROVE OUR CAR  
TO  
Pikes Peak Alt. 14,109 Ft.  
GLEN COVE  
A 16 AUG. 16 1936

“HE LOVED HIS PRIVACY HERE IN DETROIT,” SAID JEFF LITTMANN, CHIEF FINANCIAL OFFICER OF RALPH WILSON’S FAR-FLUNG BUSINESS INTERESTS SINCE THE MID-1980S. “HE COULD GO TO THE MOVIES, GO TO A RESTAURANT, PEOPLE WOULDN’T RECOGNIZE HIM — AND HE LOVED IT.”



## WIRED FOR RISK

The most lucrative business early on was trucking: operating car-haulers during the heyday of the postwar automobile boom was the Wilsons' cash cow. Over time, the elder Wilson focused on the manufacturing and construction industries, while Ralph Jr. diversified into football, television stations, breeding racehorses and eventually venture capital.

"He loved to be in a whole bunch of different businesses, loved to make hard decisions," Littmann said of Ralph Jr. "He would be bored stiff if there wasn't a crisis someplace."

"He was a fierce, fierce competitor and he relished it. Yet this same man had tremendous empathy for people who had real needs. One moment he could have that set jaw, and that steely look, and could be very hawkish and very determined, and the very next moment he could be the softest teddy bear in the world."

Detroit attorney Eugene Driker, Ralph's lawyer for the last 15 years of his life, called his client "a gutsy guy – not foolish, not reckless, but a kind of a fearless guy. He had his ups and downs in business, but he was just a fun guy with a great outlook on life."

Skip Simms, who ran TV stations for Ralph and later a venture capital fund, put it this way: "He was a risk-taker, no question. Not everything he touched was gold. He lost money here and there, then made a whole lot more money elsewhere. But he enjoyed life, the action, no matter what the outcome. He loved to tell stories, and he just laughed

“HE WAS A FIERCE, FIERCE COMPETITOR AND HE RELISHED IT. YET THIS SAME MAN HAD TREMENDOUS EMPATHY FOR PEOPLE WHO HAD REAL NEEDS. ONE MOMENT HE COULD HAVE THAT SET JAW, AND THAT STEELY LOOK, AND COULD BE VERY HAWKISH AND VERY DETERMINED, AND THE VERY NEXT MOMENT HE COULD BE THE SOFTEST TEDDY BEAR IN THE WORLD.”

- JEFF LITTMANN



all the time. And he made you feel very comfortable, very at ease. Just a down-to-earth guy.”

Throughout his life, Ralph was a prolific letter writer – personal, handwritten letters of thanks or congratulations to scores of employees; letters to his niece Mary Owen when she was in college; letters to his wife Mary McLean Wilson at the beginning of their courtship back in 1990.

“He was always so intentional and thoughtful about the letters or messages he would craft – whether it was for a birthday card or a thank you note,” Mary Wilson said. “I know of so many people who held onto those notes to this day.

“And in the letters that I’ve read that he wrote to his father when he was in his early 20s and serving in WWII, it was always signed ‘Your pal, Hack.’ How sweet is that?”

Hack was a nickname of Ralph’s from high school, when he was a scrappy baseball player who reminded people of combative slugger Hack Wilson, a Hall of Fame outfielder who played for four teams in the 1920s and ’30s.

In one of his many wartime letters home, he described the burden carried by young officers on a small ship sailing in mine-infested waters:

“You learn that you have to be right when you give an order, for the lives of many men and the ship itself may depend on one little order,” he wrote. “It all boils down to the fact that you can’t be wrong. I sincerely believe that this is great training that will be invaluable to young men later on in civilian life. It gives one self-confidence, which is a great asset, to my way of thinking. It teaches a person to depend on himself rather than on others.”

For his “efficient and courageous performance of duty” which enabled U.S. forces to land on the beaches of Anzio, Italy in late January, 1944, Lt. Ralph Cookerly Wilson Jr. “showed courage, stamina and initiative,” according to his commendation letter.

Rear Admiral J.A.V. Morse of Britain’s Royal Navy took special note of the U.S. minesweepers’ role in the Anzio landing in a memo a few months later: “I have watched these operations with the greatest admiration of all concerned, both afloat and ashore,” he wrote. “This invaluable effort has been of the greatest importance in the progress of the war in Western Italy and I am confident, at a later date, will be regarded as an achievement in minesweeping history.”

## NEVER DOWN FOR LONG

Ralph, twice divorced with three daughters before his nine-year courtship and 1999 marriage to Mary, was a man who “woke up every day on the right side of the bed. He was always joyful and ready to face the day’s challenges,” Mary said.

Asked to recall how Ralph handled a major disappointment, Mary zeroed on the Buffalo Bills’ 52-17 loss to the Dallas Cowboys at the 1993 Super Bowl in Pasadena. It was the third of four consecutive Super Bowl defeats for the Bills. Star quarterback Jim Kelly had been knocked out of the game and the team committed nine turnovers.

“That was the worst I’ve ever seen Ralph after a game,” she said, “but that moment only lasted a day. Ralph was resilient.”

So where did Ralph’s resilience, his tolerance for risk and commitment to community come from?

Perhaps his World War II service was an influence. “When you’re sailing your ship and crew toward the mines,” Littmann said, “you have to have a pretty steely determination. That was Ralph. He loved to have people around him who tried, and who took risks. If you stumbled, he would pick you up and dust you off and say, ‘Let’s go try again.’ But if you didn’t try, you weren’t going to be on the good side of Ralph Wilson.”

Russ Brandon, a 29-year-old who Ralph hired into the Bills’ front office in 1997 and rose to become team president a decade later, said, “I give Mr. Wilson a lot of credit for allowing a young guy to sort of white-paper things and think outside the box.”

Former U.S. Sen. Carl Levin, who chaired the Senate Armed Services Committee, only met Ralph once, at a lunch with Driker, but said he had a “vivid recollection” of it.

“He was unassuming, very direct, with a kind of a quirky sense of humor,” Levin said of Ralph. “I was struck by his patriotism, his loyalty to the United States.

“He had given so much – in terms of the businesses he created and his service during World War II – but he nonetheless felt an obligation and he got a lot of pleasure out of giving back. He loved Detroit and being able to give back to Detroit. And I think he had a special gleam in his eye for Buffalo, because it’s kind of a smaller town, where he was obviously beloved, and everybody knew him. He really had that sense of being part of two communities.”



“THAT WAS RALPH. HE LOVED TO HAVE PEOPLE AROUND HIM WHO TRIED, AND WHO TOOK RISKS. IF YOU STUMBLED, HE WOULD PICK YOU UP AND DUST YOU OFF AND SAY, ‘LET’S GO TRY AGAIN.’ BUT IF YOU DIDN’T TRY, YOU WEREN’T GOING TO BE ON THE GOOD SIDE OF RALPH WILSON.”

- SEN. CARL LEVIN



## A PLAN FOR “WHEN I CROSS THE GOAL LINE”

Ralph didn't like discussing mortality.

He accepted its inevitability, just as he had accepted giving up competitive tennis when neuropathy robbed him of the ability to play the sport he loved in his late 80s.

He just didn't like talking about it.

“Ralph didn't really talk about leaving this earth,” said his widow Mary, “and he's not necessarily very happy about it now, either. He had a lot of fun and he loved absolutely everything.”

Driker, his attorney and friend, said Ralph would revert to football jargon and talk about “when I cross the goal line,” but he would never say, “when I die.”

“This is a guy who, at the end, wasn't sitting worrying and waiting to die. He was about living. He enjoyed life, enjoyed the companionship of family and friends. He was spry and alert and sure had his mental faculties right up to the end of his life,” Driker said.

While Ralph didn't like talking about “crossing the goal line,” he did have a game plan for it. In fact, the basic element of Ralph C. Wilson, Jr.'s estate plan was decided about 30 years before his death.

The Buffalo Bills would be sold, not kept in the Wilson family, and the proceeds would go to fund his charitable foundation – the Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Foundation.

What Ralph could not know – or hardly imagine back in the mid-1980s – was that the Buffalo Bills, in the second smallest of the 32-team NFL's markets, would sell for \$1.4 billion to Terry and Kim Pegula in October 2014. That's 56,000 times the \$25,000 that Ralph threw into the pot along with the other seven original American Football League owners to fund the league office in 1959.



Back then, those eight were derided as the “Foolish Club” for their audacity in challenging the NFL.

Ralph saw the value of television – that the game was perfectly fitted for the screen and advertising and would grow in popularity. “But he never thought it was going to be any significant economic success. He always thought he’d have to have other good businesses to support its losses,” Littmann said.

Over his 55 years as Buffalo Bills owner, Ralph Wilson, Jr. made frequent philanthropic gifts in both the Detroit and Buffalo regions. Those ranged from football tickets for U.S. military, first responders and youth groups, to support of various colleges and the Wilson Medical Research Foundation, which funded research in Detroit, Buffalo and elsewhere, into cancer, paralysis and other diseases.

But a decade or so ago, Ralph concluded – with the onset of the 2008 economic crisis – “that there were basic human needs that were not being met at a time of great recession,” said his niece, Mary Owen, a former Bills’ executive who moved to Detroit in 2003 to oversee his philanthropic efforts. So, they began to wind down the Wilson Medical Research Foundation and moved charitable resources to a foundation, created by Ralph’s father in the 1950s, to focus on things that would have more tangible, immediate impact on people’s lives. The Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Foundation was established in 2011 as the permanent vehicle for Ralph’s philanthropy. The Foundation would later become the principal beneficiary of his Trust.

Ralph never dictated what specific causes or geographic areas would be funded by the Foundation. Rather, he named a small group of people closest to him as “life trustees” to make those decisions. The first three were his wife Mary Wilson, Littmann and Driker. He later added Mary Owen as the fourth life trustee.

Ralph had experienced so much in life, seen so many changes in his first 90 years, that he knew needs would change in ways he could never predict. “I think he felt that as long as he appointed four people that he knew and trusted as the life trustees, that he was going to rely on us to set the course appropriately,” said Driker.

“THIS IS A GUY WHO,  
AT THE END, WASN'T  
SITTING WORRYING AND  
WAITING TO DIE. HE  
WAS ABOUT LIVING. HE  
ENJOYED LIFE, ENJOYED  
THE COMPANIONSHIP OF  
FAMILY AND FRIENDS.”

- EUGENE DRIKER



*“The Foolish Club” American Football League owners 1961*



## THE 20-YEAR SPEND-DOWN

Then, in addition to naming life trustees and giving them wide discretion to set the Foundation's course, Ralph made one more crucial decision: all the Foundation funds must be spent within 20 years, by 2035.

"I don't want people that I didn't know, and who didn't know me, spending my money," Ralph told Littmann. "I want you guys doing this, and get it done over that period of time and then fold it up."

He had seen other foundations drift over time, to focus on places or issues far different than their long-deceased founders would ever have supported.

"He thought it would be wise to have as prompt and as big an impact as possible, versus having this go on for hundreds of years," Driker said. "He also felt that he'd like people in charge of the

Foundation who knew him. After you put people in place and they pass on, then you get a cadre of people who didn't know the founder. He didn't like that prospect so much."

The 20-year spend-down was Ralph's way to see that his Foundation's work would be completed in the lifetimes of those who knew him best, the four life trustees:

**Mary McLean Wilson**, then in her mid-40s, met Ralph in 1990: "We hit it off," she recalled. "Who didn't with Ralph? He was a very charming, amazing man, and he went after what he wanted. And he thought he was perfect for me... I said, 'You know, you're too rich for me. You're too old for me, and I don't like commitment.' And he said, 'I'm going to work on changing your

mind.' I just sort of was floored by that. He really changed my mind right in that moment." They married in 1999.

**Mary Owen:** "When Ralph asked me to be a trustee of his estate, that was a significant, defining moment in my life. He trusted me with his plan and explained, at a very high level, his wishes, including the responsibility that the team would be sold and that we were to fund a private grantmaking foundation with a majority of the proceeds. I knew it would be a hugely important task and was so honored to join my fellow trustees in carrying out his wishes."

**Jeff Littmann**, longtime CFO for the Buffalo Bills and other Ralph Wilson enterprises: "The only mandate given by Ralph in his will and his trust to

the Foundation is 'get it done in 20 years and go away.' Everything else is a blank slate. I call it a canvas. He gave us a blank canvas, selected his artists and said, 'Go paint. You knew me, go figure it out.'"

**Eugene Driker** met Ralph in 1999. "The whole notion of entrusting us with the task is based on his belief that things change, needs change. Even in the years since he died, the world has changed. Detroit has changed greatly. So we're not sitting there with a divining rod, a Ouija board, trying to figure out would he have said yes or no to this \$10,000 or \$400,000 grant."

THE 20-YEAR SPEND-DOWN WAS RALPH'S WAY TO SEE THAT HIS FOUNDATION'S WORK WOULD BE COMPLETED IN THE LIFETIMES OF THOSE WHO KNEW HIM BEST, THE FOUR LIFE TRUSTEES.



## MISSION-CRITICAL DECISIONS

Once Ralph had decided the Bills would be sold after his death, with most of the money going to the Foundation controlled by the four life trustees he had chosen, those four had some key to decisions to make after he “crossed the goal line”:

- Where, geographically, would the Foundation target its giving?
- Who would they hire to run and staff what clearly would become a huge philanthropic institution?
- Would the Foundation be a grantmaker, or a hands-on operator?

An opening challenge for the life trustees was to get their heads around the magnitude of the gift.

“Ralph thought the team would sell for about \$1 billion,” his widow, Mary, said, “but \$1.4 billion? I think the entire NFL was surprised. Ralph would have been thrilled.”

“He never quite got used to it being as valuable a property as it became,” Littmann said of the team. “There were times when we realized it was going to be a several-hundred-million-dollar-foundation, pretty substantial. Then later it’s going to be a half-billion-dollar-foundation, then a \$1-billion-foundation, and all of a sudden it’s more than that. So incrementally along the way, we started to appreciate the magnitude of what he was doing.”

*(Top row, left to right): Jeffrey C. Littmann, Chairman; Jerry Mazurkiewicz, Trustee; David Colligan, Trustee; W. Frank Fountain, Trustee (Bottom row, left to right): Mary Owen, Life Trustee; Mary Wilson, Life Trustee; Eugene Driker, Life Trustee*

## AN EASY CALL: TWO HOMETOWNS

The first key directional decision, which Ralph himself had never spelled out, was an easy call for the four trustees. They agreed to focus most of the giving in the Detroit and Buffalo regions – southeastern Michigan and western New York – where Ralph had spent most of his life and invested the most emotional energy.

Both were communities with great manufacturing legacies – automobiles, steel – that had fallen on hard times, marked by population decline, disinvestment and poverty. But both are now showing signs of revival with new waterfront developments and young workers moving into the city centers.

“Ralph had a sense of pride in being in Buffalo. He relished that role as kind of an underdog. Rather than looking for a lucrative offer to move the franchise, he gutted it out and made it work and I think he was proud of that,” Littmann said. “I also think he had a certain affection for the rust belt areas, Detroit and Buffalo. Remember, when he was coming of age and spent five years in the service, that was the ‘Arsenal of Democracy’ period – and you’d certainly develop a strong affection for the markets that produced the tools that enabled us to prevail in that conflict.”

While the life trustees focused on a mission and staffing search for the larger Foundation in the year after Ralph’s death, Mary Owen also served as its sole employee. Having helped manage Ralph’s charitable gifts through

the Buffalo Bills, she had a deep understanding of his past philanthropic relationships and interests and was tasked with building out the first slate of recommended grants for the life trustees to review. In 2015, the trustees authorized \$60 million in so-called “Transitional Legacy Grants,” which included many endowments, to organizations that Ralph had supported during his lifetime.

“Ralph would have been so proud of Mary and her work in helping get the Foundation off on such a strong step,” Mary Wilson shared.

At the start of 2016, David Egner became president and CEO of the Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Foundation. He previously headed the Detroit-based Hudson-Webber Foundation and has also led the New Economy Initiative (NEI), a special project of the Community Foundation for Southeast Michigan.

“We were thrilled to find somebody that was so perfectly fitted to our challenge,” Littmann said.

By early 2017, Egner had built a staff of 17 to move forward with an aggressive agenda. And three trustees with deep roots in the philanthropic communities of the target regions were added to the board: former Chrysler executive Frank Fountain from Detroit; and attorney David Colligan and accounting executive Gerard “Jerry” Mazurkiewicz from Buffalo.

The staff embarked on face-to-face meetings in the Detroit and Buffalo regions to show respect for people and agencies already working in the Foundation’s core funding areas – children and youth; young adults and working families; caregivers; and livable communities.

“Ralph wouldn’t want us to come in and pretend that we had all the answers,” said Littmann. “He would want us to find the difference makers, or ‘Pro Bowlers’ as he would call them, in areas where we wanted to have impact. So, we engaged in a lot of listening tours where we met with local leadership. It was all part of us coming in and learning first. We wanted to aim before we shot.”

Acting as a grant-maker rather than a hands-on operating fund, they initiated research studies, such as field scans by the Aspen Institute in youth sports and recreation, and an early childhood study.

“HE RELISHED THAT ROLE AS KIND OF AN UNDERDOG. RATHER THAN LOOKING FOR A LUCRATIVE OFFER TO MOVE THE FRANCHISE, HE GUTTED IT OUT AND MADE IT WORK AND I THINK HE WAS PROUD OF THAT.”

- JEFF LITTMANN



“RALPH HAD A GREAT AFFINITY FOR DETROIT AND BECAME A SUCCESSFUL BUSINESS MAN HERE. AND WHILE HE DIDN'T SELF-PROMOTE, HEAD BIG CIVIC GROUPS OR ATTEND GLITZY SOCIAL EVENTS, HE DEVELOPED A LOT OF GREAT FRIENDSHIPS ACROSS THIS COMMUNITY.”

- MARY WILSON

## A TALE OF TWO LIVES; DETROIT RALPH AND BUFFALO RALPH

### DETROIT RALPH

For a guy who was wildly successful in business, witty in conversation, captivated by sports from football to tennis to horse racing, Ralph Wilson, Jr. maintained a low public profile in his hometown of Detroit.

He owned a small minority slice of the Detroit Lions in the 1950s, one of 144 Detroit Lions stockholders before William Clay Ford purchased sole possession of the team in 1963. Ralph's high profile as a pro football team owner would happen in Buffalo, N.Y.

"Ralph had a great affinity for Detroit and became a successful business man here. And while he didn't self-promote, head big civic groups or attend glitzy social events, he developed a lot of great friendships across this community," said Mary Wilson.

Ralph had some Detroit pals who would meet for lunch once or twice a month at Roma Café, an Italian restaurant near Eastern Market in Detroit that dated back to 1890.

Bernard Friedman was invited to one such lunch in June, 1988 by U.S. District Judge Robert DeMascio, who Friedman had joined on the federal bench a few months earlier.

There was no agenda for the lunch, DeMascio told him, and the guys would mostly talk sports. Friedman mentioned that he was not a sports fan, but DeMascio said come along anyway. Friedman did, thus leading to a fast friendship with Ralph Wilson that would last until the latter's death 26 years later.

Friedman, who served as chief judge of the U.S. District Court in Detroit from 2004-2009, never did become a sports fan, but he and Ralph found plenty of other things to talk about – Ralph's businesses, his support of medical philanthropy at Wayne State University and elsewhere.

Friedman later introduced Ralph and Mary Wilson to another federal judge, Paul Borman. He was a good tennis player and loved following football – two of Ralph's passions.

When Borman was first invited to one of the Roma Café lunches with Ralph, he was late, having just flown back to Detroit from attending the Wimbledon tennis matches in London.



Ralph asked him, “You play tennis?”

“Yes,” Borman replied.

“You any good?”

“I get around,” said the judge.

“I have a friend I want you to play tennis with,” said Ralph, who’d never met Borman before. “I’ll call you tomorrow.”

Ralph’s friend, of course, was Mary.

Soon, Borman became a close friend of Ralph and Mary, joining them for Bills games home and away, Super Bowls and tennis matches.

“Ralph was a fierce competitor,” Borman said. “It was fun. Every day with Ralph was fun. And he was so proud of Mary and the philanthropic work she did in Buffalo with girls and sports – and she was so proud of him, and still is.”

Back home in Detroit, Ralph would drop into Friedman’s courtroom on occasion and sit in on a case – just out of curiosity.

“He was wonderful, the nicest, most unassuming man,” Friedman said. “I must have known him 10 years before even hearing of his Navy service.”

“HE WAS WONDERFUL,  
THE NICEST, MOST  
UNASSUMING MAN.  
I MUST HAVE KNOWN  
HIM 10 YEARS BEFORE  
EVEN HEARING OF  
HIS NAVY SERVICE.”  
- BERNARD FRIEDMAN



In the years following Ralph's death, Borman continued to attend Bills' home games with Mary. He remembers "People come up to her and say, 'Thank you, not just for what you did but for what you're still doing.' Walking by the statue of Ralph at the stadium, people will stop her and want to take pictures of her and the Ralph statue."

Ralph would rather spend an afternoon with a local fisherman than at a club with other millionaires. "He had a friend he called 'the fish,' who he met on a tennis court one day," Littmann recalled. "The guy was kind of retired, and he'd come over to Ralph's house, dig around in the garden for worms and go out perch fishing. He'd bring the fish back and they'd have a little fish fry. That was Ralph."

One line of business Ralph entered in the 1970s, and expanded through the late '80s and '90s, was owning local TV stations.

In the mid-1980s, after an interview over lunch in the Renaissance Center, he hired Skip Simms to run a TV station for him in Cadillac, Mich., which Simms did for five years. Then Simms ran another Wilson-owned station in Evansville, Ind. for 10 years before telling Ralph to sell it for a handsome profit.

"Ralph hated selling. He loved to buy, but hated to sell," Simms said, but eventually was talked into it. And then in 1999, at age 80, Ralph decided to jump into the venture capital business and hired Simms to work with Littmann to open and run the Ralph Wilson Equity Fund for the next six years.

"That was classic Ralph. For somebody to get into that kind of business at age 80 and make those kinds of investments that might take 10 years to play out was kind of unusual, but that was Ralph," Simms said. "Ralph was going to live forever, and he loved the action, and so he was willing to take risks."

*(Right) Ralph and Judge Paul Borman*





Ralph with Carl Levin and Eugene Driker

One person Ralph had never met during his first eight decades as a Detroiter was Carl Levin, a Detroit City Council member in the 1970s and then a six-term U.S. senator from Michigan.

Their meeting happened after Driker, a longtime friend of Levin, a Democrat, became Ralph's lawyer in 1999. Driker was raising money for a Levin campaign and sent a letter to his wealthy client Mr. Wilson, who was on a tennis vacation with his wife Mary at the time.

When the letter caught up to the Wilsons, Driker got a phone call. "Hey, Gene, I've got this letter about Senator Levin," Ralph said.

"Oh, you didn't have to interrupt your tennis holiday, this could wait," Driker replied.

And then Ralph said, "Gene, don't you know any Republicans?!"

"Of course, he made a generous contribution to Carl's campaign," Driker said, "and when he got back to town, I arranged for Carl and Ralph and me to go to the Roma Café together. I have a great picture in my office of the three of us at the Roma. I sat like somebody in the middle of a tennis tournament and watched these two great Detroiters volley the ball back and forth across the court for an hour and a half. It was a special day. I'll never forget that day."

"I THINK THE RALPH WILSON FOUNDATION STANDS TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE IN A VERY UNIQUE WAY BECAUSE OF THE SIZE OF GRANTS, AND IN AREAS OF FOCUS SUCH AS CAREGIVING AND CAREGIVERS, WHICH IS SOMETHING THAT MR. WILSON FELT VERY PASSIONATE ABOUT."

- FRANK FOUNTAIN

Frank Fountain, former president of the Chrysler Corporation Foundation and a past board member of Hudson-Webber and other foundations, was named a trustee of the Wilson Foundation in June 2016.

He said Detroit's foundation community "has never been stronger," due to support from many of them for the so-called Grand Bargain that paved the city's successful exit from Chapter 9 bankruptcy.

"I think the Ralph Wilson Foundation stands to make a difference in a very unique way," he added, "because of the size of grants, and in areas of focus such as caregiving and caregivers, which is something that Mr. Wilson felt very passionate about."

## BUFFALO RALPH

Buffalo, N.Y. became Detroit's Ralph Wilson, Jr.'s adopted second hometown – and thus a target of his extraordinary generosity – quite by accident. In 1959, Ralph was eager to own a team in the new upstart American Football League. His first choice of location was Miami (he already owned a winter home in Florida), but he wasn't able to strike a deal to lease the Orange Bowl from the city.

His fallback was Buffalo.

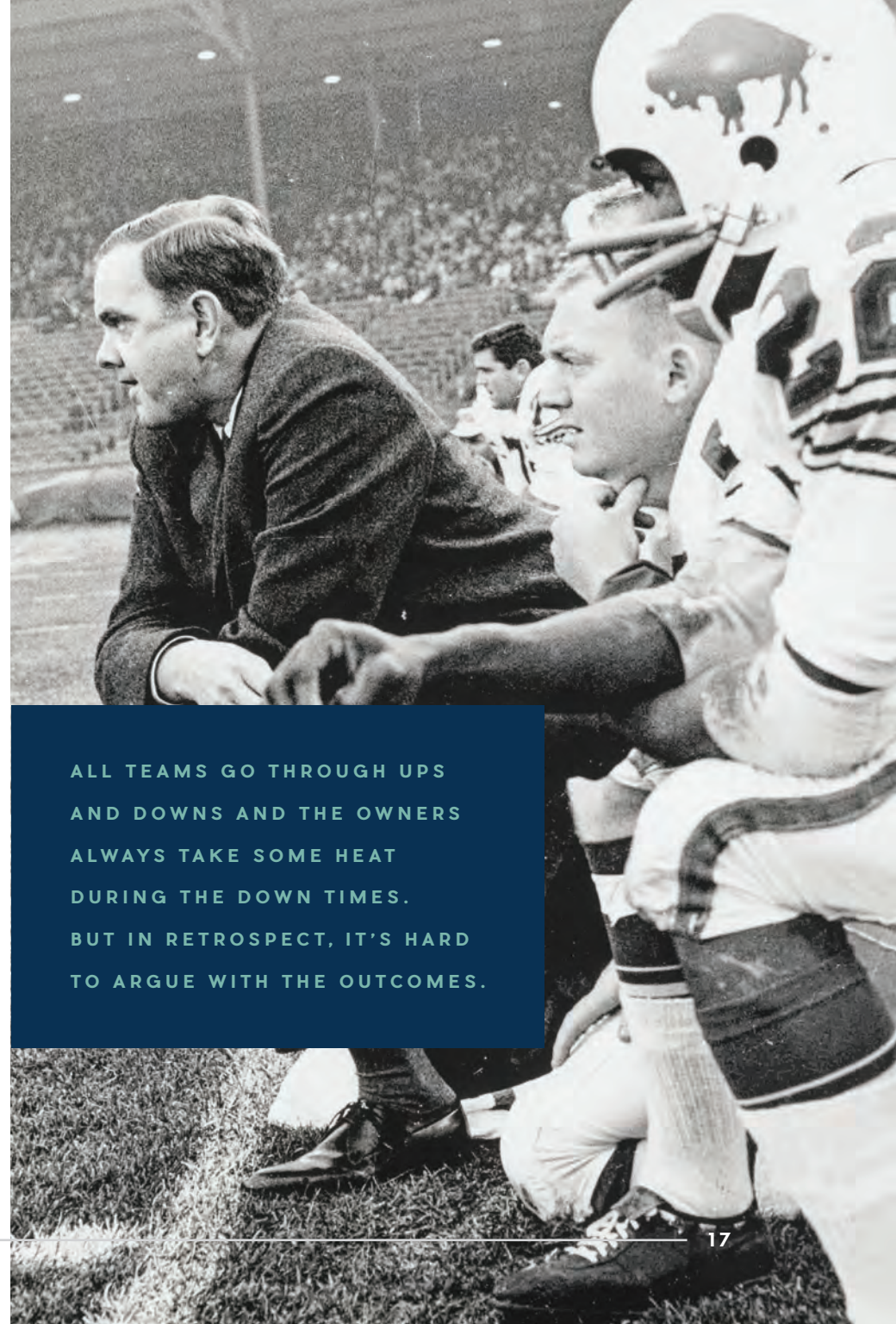
He knew little about the city, but journalists from Detroit and Buffalo told him interest in pro football was strong there. And a Navy shipmate from his World War II minesweeper days, George Schaaf of Buffalo, agreed and helped convince Ralph to take the leap.

The result was an enduring marriage of 55 years between Ralph and his Bills and the people of western New York.

It wasn't always smooth sailing; all teams go through ups and downs and the owners always take some heat during the down times. But in retrospect, it's hard to argue with the outcomes.

Despite the economic struggles that beset the Buffalo region – now the second smallest market among the 32 NFL teams – Ralph kept the team in Buffalo and then his trust sold it to the Pegula family, which also owns the NHL's Buffalo Sabres hockey franchise. And western New York, along with the Detroit region, is a primary target for grants from the Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Foundation, which received \$1.2 billion from the sale of the Bills.

Buffalo had some highs on the football field during Ralph's reign – AFL championships in 1964 and 1965 and four straight Super Bowl appearances (losses, unfortunately) in the early 1990s.



ALL TEAMS GO THROUGH UPS  
AND DOWNS AND THE OWNERS  
ALWAYS TAKE SOME HEAT  
DURING THE DOWN TIMES.  
BUT IN RETROSPECT, IT'S HARD  
TO ARGUE WITH THE OUTCOMES.



INDIVIDUAL STARS LIKE THURMAN THOMAS AND BRUCE SMITH SET RECORDS; QUARTERBACK JIM KELLY, COACH MARV LEVY AND OWNER RALPH WILSON ARE ALSO AMONG NINE BILLS INDUCTED INTO THE NFL HALL OF FAME TO DATE.

Individual stars like Thurman Thomas and Bruce Smith set records; quarterback Jim Kelly, coach Marv Levy and owner Ralph Wilson are also among nine Bills inducted into the NFL Hall of Fame to date.

On the low side, the Bills were the only NFL team not to make a postseason playoff appearance from the 1990s until the drought ended Dec. 31, 2017. And Ralph had to frequently respond to worries that he might move the Bills to a more lucrative market, especially during negotiations for stadium improvements or lease renewals.

For many Buffalonians, or those who traveled there to watch Bills games, the lasting image of Ralph is of him in the owner's suite on game days, window open to the frigid air outside – so he could experience the game the same way as the fans, some sitting so close he could touch them.

“No matter what the climate outside was, Ralph would open up the window. It was cold as could be in December, but he could care less. Ralph loved his football and he was focused on the game,” said Buffalo banker Erkie Kailbourne, who helped finalize and finance a deal for New York state support of stadium improvements to help keep the Bills in Buffalo.

Draker recalled a game on Ralph's birthday, when he opened the sliding glass window: “There was a big sheet cake in the owner's box, and he handed down pieces of cake to fans through the open window. That left an impression on me. He did not elevate himself above ordinary people.”

Skip Simms had a similar reaction when he attended the last Bills home game of the 1994 regular season, when the team failed to make the playoffs after four consecutive Super Bowl appearances.

“There was a row of seats of regular fans that were literally right up against Ralph's suite, where he could reach out and touch people,” Simms said. “When that game was over, I was awestruck, impressed, surprised, filled with joy to watch all of these fans that were in the sections in front of his suite, as they walked out – and as they were going by, thanking Ralph for such a great run.”

Judge Borman, who would often sit in the owner's box with Ralph at games, shared that before games Ralph would go down to the locker room and talk to players and afterwards he'd go down again, “first to the sick bay to see how guys were doing, then he'd go talk to coaches,” Borman said. “But he was not a ‘sideline owner,’ someone who wanted to be on the TV.”



Later in life, when Ralph wasn't able to travel to attend the Super Bowl, Borman would accompany Mary Wilson to the host city to attend the pre-event festivities and celebrations for the NFL owners, but would then travel back home to Detroit to watch the game on TV with Ralph.

In Buffalo, Ralph and his family were much more visible and familiar to the community than they were in Detroit.

Ralph had three daughters: Linda Bogdan, who died in 2009 five years before her father, had worked for the Bills as the NFL's first female pro scout; Christy Wilson Hofman, who had a retail dress shop in New York City and thus knowledge of the retail clothing industry, helped oversee the Bills' merchandise and team store for a period of time; and Edith “Dee Dee” Wilson, who was an avid tennis player like her father and with a shared love for the Buffalo Bills, attended many games.

“NO MATTER WHAT THE CLIMATE OUTSIDE WAS, RALPH WOULD OPEN UP THE WINDOW. IT WAS COLD AS COULD BE IN DECEMBER, BUT HE COULD CARE LESS. RALPH LOVED HIS FOOTBALL AND HE WAS FOCUSED ON THE GAME.”

- ERKIE KAILBOURNE





Ralph's niece, Mary Owen, joined the Bills front office as a college intern in 1997, rising through the ranks to become executive vice president for strategic planning before leaving the team when it was sold in 2014.

Mary Wilson, Ralph's widow, "gets recognized by fans just as much as the football players do," said Mary Owen, thanks to her aunt's longtime community involvement, support of athletic and health-related programs for local youths, plus charity efforts on behalf of Hospice Buffalo, Food Bank of WNY, SPCA Serving Erie County and Roswell Park Comprehensive Cancer Center.

"She's been engaged in the community from the day she first stepped foot in Buffalo and always enjoys getting stopped on the street by a fan who has a story or memory to share about Ralph or the Bills. Compared to Detroit, Buffalo's not like a small town, it's like a large living room. It's that small and interconnected," Owen added.

Aside from being more visible and recognized in Bills-related settings, Ralph himself was mostly the same low-key guy in Buffalo that he was back in Michigan. He stayed in a rental condominium with rent-to-own furniture in the village of Williamsville, near Buffalo, and drove himself around in a Taurus rental car until late in life when he wasn't driving anymore. Los Angeles sports columnist Mel Durslag, a longtime friend of Ralph's, tagged him with the "Rental Ralph" moniker.

Scott Berchtold, the Bills' former head of media relations, said his owner often did charitable endeavors in the community, "but there were so many times he didn't want me to publicize them. I was kind of surprised; he didn't want the attention on himself," Berchtold said.

Ralph's popularity hit a low point in Buffalo just a few years after the Bills' Super Bowl teams of the early 1990s. The NFL installed its first salary cap in 1994, making it difficult for strong teams to hold on to groups of star players. Buffalo's all-pro quarterback Jim Kelly retired in 1996 and in the next few years, salary-cap constraints prompted the Bills to release popular star players – running back Thurman Thomas, defensive end Bruce Smith and receiver Andre Reed.

"He hated losing those guys; they were his friends," Littmann said. "The salary cap was very hard on Ralph, because he came from an era where you didn't have that, and you hung on to your players, and they retired and remained part of the family. It took him more than a few years to sort of get used to it."

To make matters worse, the Bills' 25-year lease on Rich Stadium, built in 1973, was set to expire in 1998, fueling rumors that Ralph might move the team unless New York state and Erie County helped pay for a major renovation.

That was a serious worry, because the NFL was experiencing a wave of teams leaving one city for another, tempted by new stadiums or sweet financial deals from cities desperate to get a pro football team. In the 1980s, the Baltimore Colts bolted for Indianapolis and the

Cardinals left St. Louis for Phoenix. A few years later, Art Modell shuffled the Cleveland Browns to Baltimore and renamed them the Ravens; the Los Angeles Rams moved to St. Louis; the Raiders moved back to Oakland; and the Houston Oilers took off for Tennessee.

The Buffalo Bills, in a rust belt city with an aging stadium and few mega-rich corporations able to pay big bucks for luxury suites or other modern amenities, was a natural target for other cities and states seeking a team.

"Ralph's reputation was suffering badly as the lease expired," recalled Dave Colligan, a Buffalo attorney who was then president of the Monday Quarterback Club, a business booster group that met every Monday after a Bills home game.

"Ralph was low-key, he wasn't out there promising the world and reassuring everybody. And he had a bad back at the time, so he wasn't as visible, coming to every Quarterback Club meeting as he once did. The team was struggling on the field and people didn't know if he would stay committed to the team," said Colligan, who became a Wilson Foundation trustee in 2015.

Another twist to the plot in the mid-1990s was that the Bills were hoping the state of New York would help pay for a renovation of the aging stadium, which was owned by Erie County. But state politics were in flux then, too, after George Pataki upset three-term incumbent Gov. Mario Cuomo and took office in 1995.



With rumors flying that other cities were courting the Bills, Pataki – not wanting to lose Buffalo’s NFL team on his watch as a first-term governor – called Erkie Kailbourne, a prominent banker in western New York.

Did Kailbourne know Ralph Wilson? Erkie said he did.

Pataki asked if he would sound out Ralph about the team’s future and arrange a meeting to discuss it. Kailbourne made the phone call and was rattled by the response.

“It was the only time I ever got pushback from Ralph,” he recalled.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” Ralph said. Kailbourne feared Ralph Wilson was leaning toward accepting what was rumored to be a “very rich” proposal to move the team to Houston, which had just lost the Oilers.

“As his banker,” Kailbourne said, “I told him I couldn’t fault him for moving the team, in financial terms. But as a football fan and western New Yorker, I asked if he would talk with the governor’s people.”



*Ralph and Thurman Thomas*

“THE SALARY CAP WAS VERY HARD ON RALPH, BECAUSE HE CAME FROM AN ERA WHERE YOU DIDN’T HAVE THAT, AND YOU HUNG ONTO YOUR PLAYERS, AND THEY RETIRED AND REMAINED PART OF THE FAMILY. IT TOOK HIM MORE THAN A FEW YEARS TO SORT OF GET USED TO IT.”

- JEFF LITTMANN





THE STADIUM WAS RENOVATED AND RENAMED RALPH WILSON STADIUM IN 1999. NAMING RIGHTS WERE SOLD IN 2016 TO WHAT IS NOW OFFICIALLY NEW ERA FIELD, THOUGH SOME FOLKS STILL CALL IT "THE RALPH."

“I really don’t want to move it,” Ralph told Kailbourne, and said he’d listen if Kailbourne and Littmann could work out some details with state officials.

Pataki said the only reason the Bills are still in Buffalo was Ralph Wilson. “He loved western New York, he loved the Bills and the fact that they were in Buffalo, and he was fighting a huge battle against big-market teams with skyboxes,” Pataki said. “Once free agency occurred, he was concerned not about his economics, but about the team’s economics – that they wouldn’t be able to compete and sign the expensive free agents they needed to give the Bills a competitive team.”

“There came a point, though, where he had made up his mind that he could no longer keep the Bills in Buffalo,” Pataki added, “and I remember talking to him for hours on end ... trying to convince him that Buffalo was still the place where the Bills could have a strong future.”

“He had truly made up his mind to leave,” Pataki said, “but his fondness for Buffalo was such that after a lot of talking for hours in different places, he said if it can be worked out, that he would take another look.”

The state took an active role in talks to modernize the county-owned stadium and funded a major indoor practice facility, as the team ramped up efforts to market the Bills to Rochester and other western New York towns, as well as across the border into Canada.

“I remember Erkie Kailbourne taking the reins, on behalf of Ralph, to market the luxury boxes from Syracuse to Jamestown, to help make it an economically viable franchise,” Pataki said. “Fortunately, we were able to turn it around and succeed, but quite simply, if it wasn’t for Ralph Wilson’s love and commitment to Buffalo and the people of western New York, his fans, the Bills would have been long gone.”

Littmann said Ralph never seriously sought to move the team, but what got everybody rattled as the stadium lease was about to expire in 1998 was when Ralph broke off stalled negotiations with Erie County. The Bills wanted a major stadium renovation, the county was unable or unwilling to help much with the cost, and the state of New York had been more an observer than a participant in the talks. Having already lost a year to start a renovation project, Ralph had decided to go forward on a year-to-year lease extension and take a break from bargaining.

To get things moving, the state moved into the lead bargaining position and a deal was struck. Part of the deal was corporate support to sell \$11 million a year in premium seating for the renovated stadium.

A private group of 18 CEOs, headed by Kailbourne and called “Business Backs the Bills,” was formed to sell the premium seating. They did so. The stadium was renovated and renamed Ralph Wilson Stadium in 1999. Naming rights were sold in 2016 to what is now officially New Era Field, though some folks still call it “the Ralph.”

Young Russ Brandon, whom Ralph would later elevate to team president, worked tirelessly with the business leaders to expand the Bills’ brand beyond Buffalo to Rochester, Toronto, Syracuse and other towns with more corporate sponsorship dollars to tap.

Ralph, who loved to tag his players, employees and friends with nicknames, took to calling Brandon “98 percent.”

“He knew we were behind the times when it came to how we built our business,” Brandon recalled. “So he used to say to me, ‘Russ, I don’t need Knute Rockne running the department. I need 98% perspiration and 2% inspiration.’”

Colligan believes that Business Backs the Bills was a turning point for Buffalo and the western New York region.

“It was a completely balkanized region. Nobody believed it could be done, kind of like the ‘Grand Bargain’ in Detroit,” said Colligan, referring to a foundations-backed fundraising push that cleared the way for Detroit’s bankruptcy exit, saved its art museum and eased cuts to city worker pensions.

“In a way, we can thank Ralph for a more inclusive community. When we hit the goal in 1998, barriers broke down. There was a sense of community rallying around a cause. Lots of good things have happened since. There’s a whole new cooperative environment,” said Colligan.



## MISUNDERSTOOD IN LATER YEARS

Even after sealing the deal for a stadium renovation and new lease in Buffalo, rumors persisted that Ralph, by then in his 80s, might sell or move the team. Bills management aggressively expanded the fan base not only throughout western New York, but also into Canada.

In February, 2008, the Bills announced a five-year deal to play one regular-season home game each year in the Rogers Centre in Toronto. At a press conference to announce the Toronto deal, however, a question-and-answer session resurrected fears that the Toronto games might be a prelude to moving the team.

A CBC-TV reporter asked Ralph, “What’s your assessment of Toronto as a viable city to host an NFL franchise?”

“Well, I can answer that in the affirmative,” Ralph responded, “just driving in from the airport and seeing all the buildings, all the construction that’s going on here in Toronto... cranes, brand new structures.”

Then another reporter followed up with a question about the anxiety of Bills’ fans. “In Buffalo, it’s been made clear that this is a move to help increase revenues for your football team,” he said, “but there’s a great deal of concern among Bills fans that this is the first step toward an eventual move into Toronto – speculation on both sides of the border. What do you say to fans who have those fears?”

That’s when Ralph, with his straightforward candor, said, “I can answer that by saying the town of Buffalo – and it’s no secret – is diminishing in size. Buffalo is dwindling in population, in jobs – people don’t have jobs, they move out of Buffalo, they move out of western New York.

“So, I would say to keep the team there, a number of years ago, we decided we had to regionalize,” Ralph added.

“We had to go out into western New York because the team could not be maintained in Buffalo (alone) and I did not want the team to leave Buffalo because they still had hundreds of thousands of very passionate fans. I thought it would be a death knell to the city of Buffalo.”

Ralph confirmed, saying “We had to increase our visibility, so we moved to the east and we set our training camp up in Rochester and we developed fans in Rochester. Now we’ve overturned all the rocks in western New York, so we looked this way, to the north. And we came up with some great partners, suggested this format of five years of games to get a little excitement, folks.

“What am I going to say to the fans in Buffalo? I’m going to say, hey, I can’t speculate. I can’t speculate what’s going to happen in the future. But don’t worry right now.”

After that, the Bills did what Ralph said they would. They played a series of home games in Toronto and continued to market the Bills aggressively in New York and parts of Canada.

The team didn't leave Buffalo. The Toronto series got mixed reviews and was canceled after 2012, but Littmann and Mary Owen, who was serving as executive vice president of strategic planning for the team at the time, said it spurred a big jump in Canadians crossing the border to attend Bills games in Buffalo. The series helped to keep the franchise viable right where it was and played a role in the successful sale of the team.

"When you look at what Mr. Wilson did, it's like a two-fer," said Jerry Mazurkiewicz, one of two Buffalo area trustees on the Foundation board. "The Bills were sold in a manner, with a strategy that almost necessitated that the Bills stay in Buffalo.

"It was a great thing that Ralph did to be able to keep that team in Buffalo. And then, when you double up and proceeds from the sale are dedicated to helping the two cities, you can't say enough about something like that. It's just so unique, that should be an example for every professional sports owner."

As the Foundation's life trustees decided, much of the work funded by the Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Foundation will be carried out by people and groups with expertise in the focus areas. And often coordination will be provided by community foundations in the two regions.

Clotilde Perez-Bode Dedecker, president and CEO of the Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo, said Ralph Wilson "was someone committed to real people living real lives. He was driven by his love and his loyalty to the places that shaped him – and the approach of his life trustees to philanthropy is a great combination of urgency with a value for partnerships and collaborations. They understand that strengthening community is a team sport."

Mariam Noland, president, Community Foundation for Southeast Michigan commented, "Since Ralph Wilson was an innovator, it is only appropriate that the Wilson Foundation is following in his footsteps. Since the formation of the Foundation, the Trustees' actions have demonstrated their commitment to identifying and addressing big opportunities that align with his interests. Establishing legacy funds supporting Ralph's interests with two community foundations and seeking strong, long-term relationships with key partners were more innovative than they may sound. The way the Foundation is leveraging their 20-year limit to inspire thoughtful action aptly reflects how their benefactor created change."

"IT WAS A GREAT THING THAT RALPH DID TO BE ABLE TO KEEP THAT TEAM IN BUFFALO. AND THEN, WHEN YOU DOUBLE UP AND PROCEEDS FROM THE SALE ARE DEDICATED TO HELPING THE TWO CITIES, YOU CAN'T SAY ENOUGH ABOUT SOMETHING LIKE THAT."

- JERRY MAZURKIEWICZ



*Ralph and Andre Reed*



## RALPH STORIES (EVERYONE HAS ONE)

### THE ONE ABOUT EUGENE DRIKER'S MOM

“About three months after I started representing Ralph,” attorney Driker said, “my mother died. She was a Russian Jewish immigrant with no formal education. She was a very cultured woman, but all self-taught. The Detroit Free Press did a nice obituary about her and noted that she’d been active in the Jewish Community Center in Oak Park.

“A few days after the funeral, I get a call from the director of the JCC, asking ‘Do you know somebody named Ralph Wilson?’ I said yes, and she said, ‘Is he Jewish?’ I said no, why do you ask? ‘Well, he’s made a contribution in your mother’s memory, but it’s an unusual amount, \$10,000,’ Driker remembers.

“I had only known Ralph for 90 days when this happened. I called him up and I said, ‘Ralph, you barely know me,’ and he said, ‘Well, I read this obit about your mother.’

“Ralph was a great believer in America. And my mother and father, having crawled out of Europe and escaped pogroms to come here, believed greatly in this country. And he just identified with her story and made a gift of \$10,000 in her memory. Who aside from Ralph Wilson does such a remarkable thing? I’ve never forgotten his amazing thoughtfulness and generosity.”

“RALPH WAS A GREAT BELIEVER IN AMERICA. AND MY MOTHER AND FATHER, HAVING CRAWLED OUT OF EUROPE AND ESCAPED POGROMS TO COME HERE, BELIEVED GREATLY IN THIS COUNTRY. AND HE JUST IDENTIFIED WITH HER STORY AND MADE A GIFT OF \$10,000 IN HER MEMORY.”  
- EUGENE DRIKER

## JIM KELLY WAS “DEAD WRONG” ABOUT RALPH

When Kelly came out of college a star quarterback, he was drafted by the Buffalo Bills but signed with the rival U.S. Football League Houston Gamblers. When the USFL folded three years later, the Bills had his draft rights, but he didn't want to play in Buffalo.

“I didn't really want to come there because I didn't think Mr. Wilson was dedicated to bringing championship people there – and boy, at the time, I was wrong,” he said. “My agents tried to work out a trade to either the Steelers or the Raiders, and Mr. Wilson said, ‘You're either playing for the Buffalo Bills or you're not going to play [in the NFL].’ I think he said, ‘If we don't sign you, we might as well kiss the fans goodbye.’

“One of the best decisions I ever made was becoming a Buffalo Bill in 1986 and having Ralph Wilson as our owner. He was a guy who always came to practices, never wanted to be in the limelight, but after games, came around talking to everybody. I loved him. He was a guy who told it like it was and he never sugar-coated. You knew when he spoke, whatever was coming out of his mouth was going to be something that you would learn from, wrap your arms around and understand that he was usually right,” Kelly concluded.

## WHEN MARV LEVY GOT RALPH TO BACK OFF

“What I liked so much about Ralph was he was such a straight shooter,” said Levy, head coach of the Bills from 1986–97. “He was very involved in what was going on with the team. He would make suggestions, but he would always listen closely to what you had to say.

“I remember one time he wanted me to get rid of a couple of assistant coaches and I just couldn't do it, because the reasons were not right. We went on and on for a while and I figured I was putting my own head in the guillotine. But he finally said, ‘Ah, I still don't agree with you, but you're the coach’ – and two years later, those coaches were among his favorites. They'd been accused of stuff that wasn't true.

“I'll tell you how much I trusted him: I never had an agent, I never negotiated. Whenever my contract ran out, I'd go in and he'd say, ‘Marv, I'm gonna do this,’ and I'd say, ‘OK Mr. Wilson, thank you’ and walk out.

“He had a great sense of humor, he cared about the players. He was demanding of high performance, but he was also very aware of what was happening. He was a wonderful man.”

## “RETIRE AS A BUFFALO BILL”

Thurman Thomas was a Heisman Trophy candidate and All-American college running back, but wasn't selected in the first round of the 1988 NFL draft. Bills General Manager Bill Polian liked Thomas, but told Ralph that his career could be short if a college knee injury recurred. Ralph replied, “Take a chance in life. Let's take him.” Thomas went on to have a Hall of Fame career in Buffalo and forged a special bond with Wilson, who told him, “You're like a stepson to me.”

After 12 years in Buffalo, Thomas played a partial final year in Miami after the Bills chose not to re-sign him due to NFL salary cap constraints. Ralph felt bad that he didn't break the news to Thurman personally at that time.

At a preview screening of the WNED-TV documentary “RALPH” in November 2017, Thomas shared with the audience that he was planning on retiring from the NFL as a Dolphin until Ralph called. “He said, ‘Thurman, I would love for you to come back to Buffalo and sign a one-day contract and retire as a Buffalo Bill.’ And ever since that day, my whole life has been nothing but Buffalo Bills and being here in the city of Buffalo,” Thomas said.







“HE HAD A GREAT SENSE OF HUMOR, HE CARED ABOUT THE PLAYERS. HE WAS DEMANDING OF HIGH PERFORMANCE, BUT HE WAS ALSO VERY AWARE OF WHAT WAS HAPPENING. HE WAS A WONDERFUL MAN.”  
- MARV LEVY

## WHEN LOU SABAN QUIT ON RALPH

Lou Saban (Bills head coach from 1962-65 and 1972-76) quit on Ralph twice. “And Ralph, being the kind of guy he was, didn’t like people walking out on him,” recalled Bill Munson, who witnessed Saban’s second exit.

He continued, remembering “Lou quit right before one of our games in 1976. When Ralph asked, ‘Are we getting ready to play, Lou?’ Lou said, ‘Ralph, I quit.’

“When Ralph asked why, Lou said, ‘I’ve lost the team.’

“Ralph walked over to his window, looked out in the parking lot and said, ‘I don’t see them, where did they go, Lou?’ And he turns to me and says, ‘Muns, go get Jim Ringo.’ I went down to the locker room and Jim Ringo [a Bills coach and former Green Bay Packers star] said, ‘What’s the old man want?’ And that’s when Jim Ringo was appointed head coach.”



*(Left) Ralph and Lou Saban*

## HIRING THE KID WHO CALMED DOWN ANGRY FANS

In December 1972, Bill Munson, a grad student at U-Mass in sports management, landed a three-month internship in Buffalo, where the Bills were building a new stadium to replace the archaic War Memorial Stadium, dubbed “The Rockpile.” Munson’s job was to contact season ticket holders who wrote nasty letters to team owner Ralph Wilson, griping that their seats in the new stadium would be further away from 50-yard line than those in the old Rockpile. Munson made appointments to show them the construction site and where their seats would be.

“It was a slam dunk for me,” he recalled, “because when they came out and saw there were no vertical beams that they had to look around like at the old Rockpile, it was easy to please them. And they wrote letters back to Mr. Wilson, saying this young guy Bill Munson took them around and they were happy now.”

Ralph, upon receiving the nice letters, asked about the intern and said he wanted to meet him. “So, I flew to Detroit, scared as all get-out, met with Mr. Wilson and he said, ‘Young man, I just got some nice letters from very unhappy people that you took care of. They wrote me back, thanking you and that they’re happy now. So, what are your plans?’”

Munson said he was going to work on his PhD, but Ralph said: “I’ll tell you what. I like you, I want to offer you a job. I’ll pay you 10 grand a year. What are you driving?” Munson said a ’57 Ford.

“Well, not anymore,” Ralph replied. “I haul Pontiacs. You’re driving a Pontiac. I’ll give you 10 grand a year and a car and you can be the assistant general manager. You can run my ticket office, sponsorships and oversee what’s left of the construction of the stadium. Would you like a job?”

Munson jumped at it, saying, “Sir, I give you my word, I will stay with you and I will work hard for you and I will be with you unless I die, or unless you fire me.” At the time of his retirement in the fall of 2017, 44 years later, Munson, then Bills vice president of government relations and external affairs, was the longest-tenured NFL employee with a single team.

“HE WAS A GUY WHO ALWAYS CAME TO PRACTICES, NEVER WANTED TO BE IN THE LIMELIGHT, BUT AFTER GAMES, CAME AROUND TALKING TO EVERYBODY. I LOVED HIM. HE WAS A GUY WHO TOLD IT LIKE IT WAS AND HE NEVER SUGAR-COATED.”

- MARV LEVY



Ralph and Thurman Thomas



*Ralph and Tim Russert*

## LUKE RUSSERT, ON THE BOND BETWEEN HIS DAD AND RALPH

Tim Russert, the NBC News journalist and “Meet the Press” moderator until his death in 2008 at age 58, was perhaps the nation’s best-known unabashed Buffalo Bills fan. Even on Meet the Press, he would wear Bills jerseys and hats, and close the Sunday broadcasts with the exhortation “Go Bills!”

Ralph Wilson loved him because Tim, a Buffalo native, loved the Bills and would never get down on the Bills even after a couple of tough decades on the field.

“Dad and Ralph were very close,” said Luke Russert, Tim’s son and also an NBC correspondent from 2008-16. “Dad had grown up a diehard Buffalo Bills fan. In 1993, when we lived in Washington, D.C., we were one of the first families to get a direct satellite package so we could see all the Bills games. Mom thought he was crazy.”

“Ralph was really respected, never an egotist. Loyalty was paramount,” Luke said. “He could have done an Art Modell [who tried to secretly cut a deal to move his Cleveland Browns to Baltimore in 1996] anytime. He could have moved to Houston.”

“The Buffalo community was going through unparalleled hardship. Had they lost the team, it would have ripped the city apart,” Luke said, adding, “If you look at the NFL today, one of the word associations is ‘greed.’ Ralph was never greedy.”

When Tim Russert died, the Bills sent a beautiful floral display and created Tim Russert Plaza in tribute to him, located outside the press box at what was then called Ralph Wilson Stadium (since changed to New Era Field when the new team owners sold naming rights).

“IF YOU LOOK AT THE NFL TODAY, ONE OF THE WORD  
ASSOCIATIONS IS ‘GREED.’ RALPH WAS NEVER GREEDY.”

- LUKE RUSSERT

## A PROMISE TO NEVER BE BORING

Jeff Littmann was working for accounting firm Arthur Andersen when he first met Ralph in 1982. He worked on the sale of the Wilsons' trucking business and later helped Ralph save money with the tax treatment of racehorses he was breeding. In 1986, Ralph hired Littmann, who would become his CFO and right-hand man in a plethora of businesses.

"He used to say, 'Hey J.L., you've got to be in a number of different businesses because something is going to be going wrong somewhere, and you need something else to be pulling you up.' But he always made sure he had good operating people, and he listened to them, and let them make most of the decisions on the ground," Littmann said. "Because you could never know everything you needed to know about all these different things. How could you be on top of trucking, tool and die, plastics and football, TV broadcasting and construction at the same time? You can't – and he wanted to do new things all the time."

Littmann asked Ralph to make him one promise before accepting the job in 1986: "You've got to promise me you won't let this thing get boring."

Ralph agreed, and even when he was 95, when the two would sit down occasionally and reflect on the business, Ralph would look at Littmann and smile and say, "J.L., I kept my promise to you, didn't I?"



LITTMANN ASKED  
RALPH TO MAKE HIM  
ONE PROMISE BEFORE  
ACCEPTING THE JOB  
IN 1986: "YOU'VE GOT  
TO PROMISE ME YOU  
WON'T LET THIS  
THING GET BORING."



*(Top) Ralph and Jeff Littmann*

## WHY WOULD YOU LEAVE MIAMI FOR BUFFALO?

When Russ Brandon first met Ralph in late 1997, Brandon was leaving a job with the Florida Marlins baseball team – which had just won the World Series – to join the Bills.

Ralph, who had a winter home in Florida and had first tried to start an AFL franchise in Miami, kept asking Brandon why the young man would want to leave a World Series champ in sunny Miami for Buffalo?

Brandon had grown up in Syracuse, so the winters in western New York weren't a worry. "And I told him a big part of my reason for coming here was when you looked at the Bills media guide at the time, you saw a lot of people with longevity," Brandon said. "You could see the loyalty that he imparted from himself down to his employees. He gave me a lot of latitude, a lot of exposure, bringing me to the NFL owners meeting in my first year."

Ralph would challenge Brandon by alluding to the difficulty of selling tickets in a small market.

"You'll never see 40,000 season tickets here. I'll buy you a steak dinner if we ever do that," Ralph told him. A few years later, the Bills did it, and Brandon told Ralph that Buffalo could be a 50,000-seat market.

"He told me that would absolutely, positively never happen," Brandon recalled, but it did. And a couple years ago, the Bills sold more than 60,000 season tickets.

"He wasn't here, unfortunately, when we accomplished that," Brandon said wistfully. "So it was sort of fun, the way we'd joke about it."



## A JUBILEE TO REMEMBER

Reflecting on Ralph's longtime support of the Alzheimer Association's Greater Michigan Chapter, Director of Major Gifts Gayle Burstein shared, "He never got involved in anything he didn't care deeply about. And he cared deeply about caregivers.

"There was never a time that I didn't send him a note to update him on our work, that I didn't hear back from him. That's rare to encounter this day and age."

In 1999, Ralph was asked to serve as honorary co-chair of the association's annual Chocolate Jubilee fundraiser. Not content with just lending his name to the cause, Burstein explained, "he single-handedly wrote personal notes with invitations, helping us raise more money that year than we ever had before. He was unbelievable."

"IT WASN'T 'WHERE'S THE LIMO, WHEN DO WE GET OUT OF HERE?' IT WAS THE OPPOSITE OF THAT... I REMEMBER THINKING, I WISH EVERYBODY HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO KNOW THIS GUY ON THIS LEVEL."

- STEVE CICHON



## “BEST BOSS EVER”

The first words out of Skip Simms, when asked about Ralph Wilson, were “best boss ever.”

After running Ralph’s Evansville, Ind., TV station for 10 years, Simms urged Ralph in 1999 to sell it. The Telecommunications Act of 1996 had allowed for cross-ownership of media outlets, driving up the price of stations to levels far beyond what they could return in profits during the next five or 10 years. “Let’s take the bird in the hand,” Simms said.

This ran counter to Ralph’s instincts; he loved buying things and hated selling. Simms convinced him to sell, but then Ralph quickly asked, “Well, how is this going to affect YOU?”

“He had a sincere interest in my personal well-being,” said Simms, who replied, “Don’t worry about me. Ralph, you’ve taken care of me.” He’d been in the TV business for 29 years and was ready for a change.

Next thing Simms knew, Ralph and Jeff Littmann had him work on a new venture capital fund.

When they wound down that fund six years later and Simms left Ralph’s employment for good, he and his wife, Ann, called and asked to meet with him personally. He noted, “We had a delightful lunch, just to say thanks, because we personally had such a great run with the guy. We wanted to make it as personal for him as it was for us.”



"I ALWAYS GOT THE SENSE THAT RALPH WAS LOYAL TO BUFFALO. THESE DAYS, THE NFL IS SO CUTTHROAT. I MISS RALPH AND MARY, WE OWE THEM A HUGE DEBT OF GRATITUDE."

- KYLE WILLIAMS



## TALKING ABOUT RALPH AS IF HE'S STILL IN THE ROOM

In a (late 2016) joint interview, Ralph's widow, Mary McLean Wilson, and her niece, Mary Owen, both used the present tense frequently when talking about Ralph.

"He's direct, he's smart, he's full of integrity," said Mary Owen, who worked for the Bills in Buffalo and then on philanthropic and other business matters from Detroit.

"He's honest about what he's doing, and he's very iron-willed," she added. "He belongs to the country club, but he's friends with the people who work there."



## HANGIN' WITH RALPH AS A LONE MEDIA GUY

Steve Cichon, a former WBEN radio reporter and news director in Buffalo, had seen and covered Ralph Wilson as the Bills owner for years, from the halcyon Super Bowl days to darker times when the community fretted that he might move the team to Houston or Toronto.

But about 10 years back, Cichon gained a different perspective when he went to cover a women's health event where Mary Wilson was doing a ribbon cutting, and Ralph was there with her.

"I was the only reporter there and I spent 90 minutes with Ralph and Mary, walking around and watching him interact and seeing a different side of him. I wish every Buffalonian could have spent 90 minutes with Ralph.

"I come from a blue-collar background, so I have a healthy skepticism of anybody with money, particularly people born to money," Cichon said, "but Ralph, in that setting, I was really surprised at the humanity. He was honestly concerned with me – some young radio reporter from a radio station that's given him a hard time for decades.

"It wasn't 'where's the limo, when do we get out of here?' It was the opposite of that. He was just a kindly old man, talking to folks. I remember thinking, I wish everybody had the opportunity to know this guy on this level."

## ZINGING ONE-LINERS AT 300-LB LINEMEN

Not many of today's Buffalo Bills players knew Ralph Wilson, the first and only owner of the team from its first game in 1960 until his death in 2014. But Kyle Williams, 12-year Bills defensive tackle from LSU, is an exception.

"In my early years," he said, "Ralph was still around, at all the home games, showing up at practices. He was funny with the one-liners.

"One year, the Bills redid the locker rooms. Ralph came through and Aaron Schobel, one of the linemen, thanked him, saying they were very nice. And Ralph said, 'Well, Moneybags, we'd have done it three years ago if I hadn't had to pay you so much.'

"I still got to see a very vibrant owner, in a very personal way," Williams said. "He knew my wife and would ask about my kids. He didn't have to do it.

"I always got the sense that Ralph was loyal to Buffalo. These days, the NFL is so cutthroat. I miss Ralph and Mary, we owe them a huge debt of gratitude," Williams concluded.

P.S. On Dec. 31, 2017, the 302-pound Williams carried the football for a 1-yard touchdown, the only TD of his 12-year pro career, helping the Bills beat the Miami Dolphins to end a 17-year drought since Buffalo's last NFL playoff appearance.



## PART FOUR

# A FITTING FINALE

UPON RALPH'S PASSING IN 2014 AT THE AGE OF 95, THE LIFE TRUSTEES SET IN MOTION WHAT WOULD BE HIS FINAL GAME PLAN.

The Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Foundation is now reinvesting in the people and communities that Ralph cared deeply about, and who he gathered much joy, success and fulfillment from in life. The personal stories and reflections shared by Ralph's closest friends and family now serve as testament to his character and values, which help to guide the Foundation's staff in their work.

Ralph's hope was that his Foundation's work would be completed within the lifetimes of those who knew him best, and that its impact will be immediate, substantial and measurable.

RALPH C. WILSON'S HOPE WAS THAT HIS FOUNDATION'S  
WORK WOULD BE COMPLETED WITHIN THE LIFETIMES  
OF THOSE WHO KNEW HIM BEST AND THAT ITS IMPACT  
WILL BE IMMEDIATE, SUBSTANTIAL AND MEASURABLE.

