

Transcript From Interview with Lincoln Wilmore by Morgan Thompson

Conducted October 22, 2023

Lincoln Wilmore is an African-American youth activist from Seattle, Washington. Most of his activism surrounds uplifting the voices of and providing resources for the Black community. Wilmore focuses most of his time working on his brand We Are Amazing 365, which intends to remind other African Americans and people of color that they are amazing despite institutions put in place working to undermine their success. Wilmore is also involved in Fathers and Sons Together, which works to decrease fatherless households and the Seattle Youth Commission, in which he primarily focused on providing access to COVID-19 information and vaccinations during the pandemic.

MORGAN THOMPSON:

Okay, so thank you so much for taking time today just to share some of your experiences with me and the greater Duke community or whoever is going to be watching this. Before we get started, I'm just going to review some of the ways that we will handle what you present today. Stop me if you have any questions and whatnot, I just want to make sure things are clear, and I want to make sure this is the most comfortable atmosphere possible. So if at any point you need to get up and walk around, need a glass of water, feel free to. Any questions I can't answer I can forward to my teacher, which I've provided you with her email, but I can also ask her if you want to just forward them to me. Simply put, your interview is yours, so at the end of today, I will be uploading this video and audio recording to Duke Dropbox, which is safely encrypted and then I will transcribe what you've said today. Once you get the transcript, I will ask you to edit it for two things. One being accuracy in case I misspelled a name or date or something, and number two is you decide if there are parts that you'd like to edit out of the interview. Then once I have your permission, I'll send it along to the Duke Library. I think that's basically it.

LINCOLN WILMORE:

Sounds good.

THOMPSON:

Awesome. Okay, so to start, can you just give a little overview of the activism and work you've done in your community or greater community?

WILMORE:

Okay, definitely. So there's a couple of things that I do within my community. First and foremost, I run a brand called We Are Amazing 365.¹ I can definitely go into that more, but it's

¹ We Are Amazing 365 is Wilmore's clothing brand which initiated as a result of the creation of his poem "Being Black in America"

essentially a brand meant to inspire, empower and elevate our youth particularly in my community, and also other youth around me, and I also do other things. I do a lot of poetry around my community and try to speak on certain issues that I see. I also did Boy Scouts, and within that, I also was a Senior Patrol Leader and helped my troop do a lot of service for the community, and also just make sure that we had our name known, and well known and were able to help support our community in any way. I think that wherever I go, I try to make sure that I can do anything in my power to feel the need of what the community wants. Also, I work alongside my parents with an organization called Fathers and Sons Together,² which helps my community, because there's the issue of fatherless homes. So within that, if there is a father and a son we'll try to engage them within the community, within certain activities to kind of build that relationship. And also, if a son does not have a father present in their home, give that sense of community, and also help erase that school to prison pipeline by creating a sense of community. So I think that I'm involved in quite a few things in my community, but at the end of the day, just trying to help in any way I can.

THOMPSON:

If you see me looking down at any point, I'm just taking notes or jotting down questions, I just wanted to give you a little heads up. That's awesome. I'm gonna ask you some questions about We Are Amazing 365. So I know you've kind of given a little bit of an explanation about what you do, but could you talk a little bit about how you came up with creating this brand and whatnot?

WILMORE:

Yeah, so this was actually back in my middle school class. I had no anticipation of actually doing this brand, but I was in seventh grade, 13 years old I believe, and there was a personal development class where we were asked to talk about our identity in any way that we wanted, any form. Me who was a fan of poetry, I decided to try out poetry and so I ended up writing a poem called "Being Black in America,"³ and in that poem, I really just expressed kind of the hardships that it is like, especially in the country in the circumstances that we are in, but also to remind other African Americans who were present in my class, but also just like every culture, that at the end of the day they are amazing. So at the end of my poem, I wrapped it up by saying that being Black in America means that we are amazing, and then also added, we are all amazing. It just received a lot of positive feedback from my class, especially from a lot of the Black students, and also just people of color and, and even non-Black students as well. It just received positive affirmation, and people said that they resonated with it, and so I was inspired to present this poem to my school assembly. In my school assembly, I received the same feedback

² Fathers and Sons Together is an organization focused on preventing fatherless households, providing support and guidance for families through discussions and community engagement activities, focusing specifically on families of color.

³ "Being Black in America" is a poem Wilmore wrote focusing on his own identity and reminding African American students, and other students that they are amazing.

and received advice that I should create this into a brand and should inspire this message to other people outside of the school as well. So ever since then, I've gone with it and just tried to reach as many people as I could.

THOMPSON:

That's awesome. So you were talking about how your class had a really great response to the poem, and then even at a school assembly, everybody was very excited about it, and felt uplifted by it. What was the larger community of Seattle's response?

WILMORE:

I began presenting it to my community where I live in Rainier Beach, Seattle, which is one of the most diverse neighborhoods in our city. I received a lot of positive advice as well, I think that for each individual, it spoke to them in various ways, because I believe that many members of my community were dealing with many different issues, whether that was for example, gun violence, or whether it's just losing someone, or whether it's trying to maybe inspire their kid, that they can do much more than what they believe they can do. So I believe that everybody kind of took it a different way and in a different message, so I guess, being able to present it to the larger group, it was more impactful in many different ways.

THOMPSON

That's awesome. How do you use poetry in your activism? Why poetry?

WILMORE:

I really love poetry, because I believe that it's a pretty free form of art. What I started doing, when I would see a lot of issues on the news or a lot of negative things that are going on in my environment, I often wouldn't know how to put it into words. I find that in conversations, I could shy away from it, or it will take me a long time to process it, and I think that, what I started doing, by myself was just free flowing and doing poetry. I like music as well, I think that poetry is music as well. Not only did poetry help me kind of write out my ideas, but then I think that over time, I kind of added this sort of musical rhythm to it, also with rhyming schemes or trying different stylistic approaches. And so, I think that poetry was honestly just a good cope for me, and I believe that I wanted to continue my passion in writing about these issues and writing about, whether it's inspiring or talking about things going on in my community that I chose poetry. So that's kind of why I personally chose it.

THOMPSON:

That's awesome. I also like how you're kind of talking about the intersectionality between poetry and then music and how you started adding rhythmic patterns into your poetry. Could you talk about the importance of music in your life?

WILMORE:

Yeah. Music in my family has been very, very big. My dad, he was born in Jeffersonville, Georgia, which is a small rural town, and he's faced a lot of issues growing up. He's had to deal with a lot of racism as well, like his family had a history of sharecropping. So after slavery was abolished, those families weren't able to necessarily move out of those lands that they were working on, so as a result, they were free, but they still had to work on the land for economic gain. And so as a result, after the lineage of history, I guess, then here's my dad, and he was also still dealing with the hard economic issues, but something that he's always told me that has grounded him, especially when dealing with certain problems and before he started his journey to eventually leaving Jeffersonville and traveling to Seattle for a hope, a gain, something that kept him grounded was music. So he and his brothers often would sing together if they were working, and yeah, he really liked gospel sounds like a huge part of his life. My mom was born in Seattle, and she also was a really good singer and often was grounded within her church. She played the piano, the organ, and did a bunch of singing. She was in her own group. I think that I've always been surrounded by a musical family, so I've always tried to pick that up, and while I guess, I do sing a little bit, I think that I've more been introduced into the form of art, more, so poetry and speaking.

THOMPSON:

Yeah, that's awesome. It's also really cool how you can take your two parents' experiences, and kind of make it your own by adding poetry in a musical manner into it. What do you think the future plans are for We Are Amazing 365?

WILMORE:

I'm very excited for where it's going right now. I think that right now, I'm in the experimental phase where I know that it's receiving positive affirmation, and I think that right now, it's doing really well in my school environment and locally, but I do think that it has a great potential for reaching out to other communities in different parts of the world as well. For example, when I first started presenting my poetry, I made a YouTube⁴ video, presenting my "Being Black in America" poem and eventually, it got picked up by a school in Pittsburgh. They wanted me to, basically it was a virtual assembly during the time of COVID, to present that poem at the assembly on Zoom,⁵ and also speak about it, especially during the time of, for example, the George Floyd situation and many other issues that were happening. So, I think that that was really impactful, and it was nice to be able to spread it also outside of Seattle. Also, I think that as I explained before, that it's very interpretive, so people can interpret it in different ways. So I believe that with many of the issues that are not just happening in this country, but also elsewhere that hopefully brings positive light, so I'm really excited about where it can go. I no doubt will definitely instill it in college, and try to push it as much as I can.

⁴ Youtube is a social media platform which allows for free video sharing.

⁵ Zoom is a communications platform used to connect individuals through video, audio, phone, and chat.

THOMPSON:

Yeah, that's awesome. You were talking about how the YouTube video reached a school on Zoom in Pittsburgh? Could you talk about what you think the role of social media or technology plays in activism?

WILMORE:

I think that social media is extremely powerful. I think that especially with the youth, we honestly, the youth are on social media a lot, whether that's just spending your normal day just trying to stay updated news wise, or whether it's you're trying to just escape and, and laugh and joke around. But, I think that social media just surrounds us so much and that's a lot of what we're consuming. So, I do believe that it's really important that we're consuming positive information as well, because in a world that's very stressful on us, for example, dealing with college and college apps or dealing with huge homework loads, I think that it's important that when we go on social media that we're also being filled with uplifting information as well. So yes, I think that social media does hugely impact our youth, and it's something that's very prevalent for me, and I'm sure others as well.

THOMPSON:

I also really like your point about consuming positive information, especially since I feel sometimes we can live in a negative world or stressful world, so it's being intentional about what you're bringing into your life through social media.

WILMORE:

Definitely.

THOMPSON:

With your clothing brand, are you the one designing it? Do you have another partner?

WILMORE:

So I'm working with my family along with it, and it's kind of a branch from their organization, Fathers and Sons Together. So they have some designers of their own within their organization, so they're helping me to build mine as well. Huge shout out to those designers. I think that they're helping me kind of, as I tried to grow, they're reaching out to their email database, and also their resources. There's been friends also that have offered to help me as well. Some are photographers, so they're willing to, with any sort of models that I can get, to wear the clothing that still takes pictures of them and allow me to upload that. Or, there's people who have a lot of design experience, who are helping me come out with new designs as well, so I definitely think that the community and alongside my friends, are really helping me to kind of create new ideas for what they want to see.

THOMPSON:

Who is your role model?

WILMORE:

That is a good question. I think that I have a lot of role models, but I think it would have to be my immediate family. I would say, my mom is a big role model, because with this mission of uplifting our youth and uplifting my community, at times, I think that I myself need a lot of uplifting as well. Being stressed with so much, like school, but also sports as well, I think that it's really easy to second guess myself and doubt myself and wonder if I'm really making an impact, or whether something like this can really grow. Even with my poem at the time, I wasn't too confident with presenting this poem, and I wasn't sure that I would receive a positive response to it. So especially with the kind of nature of my school, I think that writing about a poem such as "Being Black in America," I wanted to not only make it to Black students in the class, but I kind of wanted to make it positive for everybody, but also be centered along my identity. There was just a lot of second guessed questions about that, and second questions about even starting the brand, but I think that the whole time, my mom has stood by my side, and my dad, but my mom was really good at giving speeches to me and letting me know that I am amazing, honestly, and allowing me to see that this has impacted me and impacted my immediate family and that they believe that I can impact others too. So I would say that she's my main role model, because she really helps me.

THOMPSON:

You were talking about how your mom has kind of been helpful with helping you stay true to your own identity, specifically with the poem, while also being able to branch out and allow others to interpret it in a way that hits home for them as well. You used the phrase nature of your school, could you build a little bit upon that?

WILMORE:

I go to Lakeside⁶ High School in Seattle, and I really love the school. It's a very rigorous and just a fast paced school full of many other geniuses. It's definitely a highly ranked private school within the city, and I guess when I said other nature, it's a predominantly white institution. And so, I guess there's not a lot of people of color, particularly Black students, I would say. By nature, I guess it's been a huge journey for me dealing with, because even in my elementary school, there was also not a huge Black population, I was actually one of the only Black males in my class. So I think that it's been a huge journey as well, also shout out to my parents for it, but it's been a huge journey, also trying to accept my own identity, especially if I'm in the school, or spending the majority of my time where I am by myself in it, and I often would feel different.

⁶ Lakeside School is an independent, coeducational day school for students in grades 5-12 located in Seattle, Washington.

My parents also would include me in various other community events in Rainier Beach, which was also more diverse. So I guess I was able to stay true to my identity while also branching out and being in an environment where I was kind of by myself in it. So yeah, it's been a journey.

THOMPSON:

You were talking about how the school you attend is a rigorous school, and then I know before you were talking about college applications, your activism work, playing sports, being part of what seems like two communities or multiple communities. How do you deal with burnout?

WILMORE:

Burnout, it's tough, I would say. It's really tough being a student athlete, especially at a school where they do value the student aspect first, so it is anticipated that you will have lots of work, you'll have lots of homework. In addition to that now, you would have to deal with college applications as well. It expects a lot out of you. And then in addition, sports as well, are something that I highly value, and that I want to pursue at the next level as well. It's something that you also have to put lots of hours in, in addition to running a brand and an organization and trying to stay involved within your community, it all takes away a lot of time, and you can often feel rushed. I do think that there are times where I have burned out, but I think that in dealing with it, my mom also reminds me of the motto of taking one step at a time. If you have a large list on your plate to do, maybe it's just taking one assignment at a time, or focusing on this certain aspect for one hour, and then it's really emphasized to take a break as well. For example, just simply stepping away from your phone or from your computer and solely just doing something that relaxes me or something that I like to do. I think that that's really helped me. Also, just talking to others has helped. Being able to talk to my family or my friends, whether it's about what I'm going through or just about something separate. I think that those things really do help, and I would say music, music, again, also really helps me as well.

THOMPSON:

That makes sense, and I think especially what you were saying in a rigorous environment, especially as a youth trying to take on many roles and do a lot of things, it can be hard, so it makes so much sense that you would need a break once in a while. I want to kind of segue back to a point you made earlier, you were bringing up Fathers and Sons Together. Can you just talk a little bit more about what Fathers and Sons Together is and what your role is in it?

WILMORE:

Yeah, so Fathers and Sons Together is a nonprofit organization that helps bridge the gap between our fathers and sons, but also really just focuses on having a strong family within our community, and also being an organization that provides different activities throughout the community, that allow families to be able to go to build relationships and to bond and also feel supported by the community around them. Fathers and Sons Together holds different events,

whether it's, for example, sporting, so maybe a basketball camp or a golf camp. But they also do, for example, it's called Barbershop Chat, where it'll be a free haircut in the community where communities can go, and also supplies like free food, and also, there are discussions. So while people are getting their haircuts and eating food, it's kind of in a circle, and there will also be a panel discussion. So it'll be the chance for the community to come out and speak on any sort of issue that they see. So for example, if it's gun violence on the topic, they might bring the SPD, Seattle Police Department, to attend that panel discussion alongside community leaders, and just the community as a whole. It just kind of creates that circle and allows those conversations to happen while having a haircut or engaging in the community, and it's the same thing with the sports events, or just certain conversations and topics that we have around the community. So I serve on the Youth Advisory Board. With my parents running it, they realized that a huge part of keeping this organization alive is listening to the youth and what the youth value, so they tasked me with engaging with those youth, engaging with my friends and others to see the kind of conversations that we'd like to engage in. Also, providing variety for sons, and just, and it's not solely just sons, it's just focusing on fathers and sons, but it's daughters and anyone else as well. But it's focusing on figuring out the need. For example, if someone wants to work and to kind of just gain more money to like, help support them for their future for college, etc., then, I'll be able to express those needs, and then we'll see what the organization can do whether it's getting them a job, or putting them in front of the right people as well. My goal is to be able to bridge the gap between the city and our youth's needs and wants, so that is something that I'm involved in.

THOMPSON:

Why do you think fatherless homes are a prevailing issue specifically in your community?

WILMORE:

I would say that there's a huge history behind that within. It seems like a loaded topic that can go various ways, but I would say that maybe economic struggles is one that our community faces. That can go back to things such as systemic racism as well, but I think that alongside those economic issues, there involves a culture behind it. It seems almost like a culture, but also an economic struggle. I'm not sure if I know how to paint that right now, but I guess what is known is that it is a huge issue that our community faces and as a result of that, we've seen many trends such as, for example, a fatherless home increases the rate of potentially a son being involved within the prison system, or if the child doesn't feel a sense of community at home there will often be, for example, gangs in the neighborhood that will engage with that child and then the child will feel a sense of community within a group of the wrong people. As a result, we've seen a huge increase in young children being locked up at this time, so it's definitely a large issue and I think that not only does our community see it, but when we talk and engage with our police as well, the police see it as well, and it seems like the crimes are getting younger and younger. There's not really many father figures that are able to step up and also help guide the children as well, so they're finding a false sense of community within a group of the wrong people, who also

those people might have been led wrong as well, so it's kind of just a repeat action. There's many intervention organizations that help with if a child happens to be in huge legal troubles, or happens to have terrible guidance, there will be intervention groups that will help try to help the child in as many ways as possible. But I guess the issue with that is that as they get older, their mind is more set to what they want to do and aspire to do, and it's often harder to change the mindset of that. So what Fathers and Sons tries to do is work with children and families younger, and it's more so of prevention versus intervention. So making sure that before they get to that point needed of intervention, that we can prevent it from happening at all, and sustain that strong relationship.

THOMPSON:

So you were talking about how Fathers and Sons isn't just for fathers and sons, and that they usually work with younger people who are allowed to join Fathers and Sons, and how long do they usually participate for?

WILMORE:

Fathers and Sons Together believes that anybody can join. We often go for a younger audience, so it might be from around entering those teen years, 11 and 12, to around 21, so within that range, but it's not limited to. As said before, it's not excluded from daughters as well, so there's many events. So there was a dad and daughter dance that Fathers and Sons Together has recently done. It's really catered towards the youth right now, and it's catered towards helping the youth, but people of all ages are invited, and also all families as well. So again, since we do know, if the issue of fatherless homes, any sort of parent or guardian that is involved within that child's life is invited to come out. Even if it's just a child and no parent or guardian, then we invite other fathers or any other older fingers to help and to engage with that child.

THOMPSON:

That's really awesome, kind of having a multigenerational community, and even having a community where you can come as just a child, you can come as just an older role model figure and whatnot. I'm going to shift gears a little bit. You're involved in the Seattle Youth Commission,⁷ right? What is the Seattle Youth Commission and what is your role in it?

WILMORE:

In the Seattle Youth Commission, as a youth, you would ideally get appointed by the mayor. Once that happens, first they interview and try to figure out what is your goal with changing the community and try to find out your involvement within the community to see if you'd be a good fit. Once you make it past that process, then you would be appointed by the mayor, and then you would discuss the issues that you see in the community from a youth perspective. So I was

⁷ Seattle Youth Commission is a position in which about 10 youth are appointed from the mayor and address prevailing issues from the youth perspective.

appointed during the time of COVID,⁸ because the interview was virtual. So the Youth Commission was really focused on how COVID was impacting our youth, particularly our youth in our communities. Also, the Youth Commission, it was, I would say around 10 of us, but we were also dispersed within all different parts of the city, so we all found different sorts of issues catered towards our community. So our goal was to be able to represent our community and be able to say the needs and the wants of what we need, and work alongside our city government alongside the mayor and see what changes we can make while also voicing our opinions.

THOMPSON:

You said you were voicing opinions and then coming together, not just with the nine other youth but also with the city. Could you give an example of one of those projects?

WILMORE:

Yeah, so one project was what I was tasked with. Rainier Beach was one of the neighborhoods with the highest rates of COVID and COVID infected people, within the whole city. When analyzing this more, I was going out and talking to different members in our community about what is the issue, why is this happening. And what I quickly found, and what my family has also found is that at the time, there was not a lot of access to vaccinations, or vaccination clinics in our community, and often, people in our community would have to travel to a whole other neighborhood just to be able to be vaccinated, which was a huge issue. Also, we felt that a lot of members in our community were kind of fearful of the vaccination at the time, which is completely understandable. Something that was voiced was that there's not enough information on it, which also created that fear. I was thinking and kind of talking with the Commission about it, because at the time, it wasn't forced to get the vaccination, but I do think that my community deserved proper information, and people in the community were able to give that information. So something that the Commission and I worked on was we worked with the city and was able to actually open up a vaccination clinic right in the heart of our community. So instead of having to drive 30 or 20 minutes to another vaccination clinic, it was like a two minute walk able to go there, and also just people on site that were able to give additional, proper information on the vaccination process itself. And then after that, I guess this is where the benefit of being involved in other leadership organizations and things was that I got my Boy Scout⁹ troop on it. I'm an Eagle Scout, and one of the Eagle Scout projects that I did was basically a mask up project. I would go into the community and also set up a table and give free masks and it ended up with the production being almost 1000 free masks being given out along with free food as well to support our community. So yeah, I guess working with the Commission allowed me to basically work with the city to create those vaccination clinics, distributing free masks, and still being able to be there at a time of need.

⁸ COVID is an infectious disease which caused a global pandemic in 2019.

⁹ Boy Scouts is an organization focused on preparing young people to make ethical and moral decisions over their lifetimes.

THOMPSON:

That's awesome. Okay. I think you've kind of already touched on the answer to the next question, but I just want to ask it in case, because I feel a lot of times youth can be put in positions such as this one or in other types of positions, more as a performative act instead of actually the higher individuals or older individuals wanting the youth perspective. Did you feel that this program was actually effective at amplifying youth voices or not?

WILMORE:

The Commission? Could you repeat it? Are you asking if my voice felt heard, or sorry, could you repeat it?

THOMPSON:

Yeah. Did you feel this program, the Seattle Youth Commission, was actually effective at amplifying youth needs, or did it seem like it was more for show for the community?

WILMORE:

Honestly, I think that there was a huge care within the commission, and that they did honestly want to see change, and hear from youth voices, but I do think that, quite honestly, there was a lot of issues that came up within the city, such as, as a youth, I didn't feel as heard, especially with these issues. I feel like I would honestly need a lot of adult supervision to kind of help back me up and to give me more credibility with the words that I was kind of trying to say to the city. So I do believe that while I was respected and my voice was heard, I do think that it took a lot of effort for that to happen. So I guess it would seem a little bit like performative action at times that I have witnessed. So I guess, yes, from the city, I would like to see more of an improvement from that, and quite honestly, the Commission as well. So yeah, I would say that.

THOMPSON:

How do we amplify youth voices and create platforms for youth to succeed in raising awareness on issues?

WILMORE:

I think I would say with more people in power that happen to be older, to be able to have more of a dialogue and conversation alongside the youth. For example, I really like the idea of the panel discussions that Fathers and Sons Together has, where, if you have like the police come out to like speak on issues, such as gun violence, or you have the mayor come out and like listen to the youth perspectives on what they see in their schools as well, I think that, that allows for more open conversation and allows youth to feel heard, because I think that we'll often see these officials on the news make the decisions for us, or for our schools without actually feeling like they have engaged with us or talked to us about how we personally feel. I think that just feeling

of communication goes a long way. I think that also, those people in power, also being in a same environment as youth as well, because I think it's one thing for youth to go to one official and express these issues, but it's another for someone to actually go into that environment or go to that school or go to that community where they're talking about and be able to also have a conversation in that environment. So I think that more communication goes a long way.

THOMPSON:

In the program, you said you were appointed by the mayor, do you think the mayor had an active or a passive role in the program?

WILMORE:

I would say specifically, and this could be with just how it was designed, but I would say a passive role, because it would never be the mayor actually attending one of those meetings online. It would more so be the assigned adults who were leading it under the mayor, so I would say it was passive. But again, that could be with how the whole commission was designed for, but yeah, it would be good to see a change within that. I know my encounters with the mayor has often been through my parents and when they're attending an event being able to talk to them about certain things going on, but I think even then, I don't feel truly heard, because it might be a brief conversation where they might have to leave or a brief conversation where it's not solely just youth, but it's other powerful officials in that room as well who are dominating the conversation. Well, the current mayor is separate, but we had a previous mayor, Mayor Durkan, who I believe I was able to gain a powerful relationship with her, and I was able to have a lot of those one on one conversations about my needs and wants for the community. Something that I also want to see improvement on is that often in that environment, I was the only youth there alongside other officials, so it would be great if instead, it was a whole room of youth instead of me being the only representative, because that's not necessarily what I want. Stuff like that, little things, like being able to invite more people and for it to be less of a private meeting and more public and open would be, it'd be amazing, definitely.

THOMPSON:

So you said you had a pretty good connection with Mayor Durkan. Was that the mayor, at the time when you were working on this program?

WILMORE:

Yes.

THOMPSON:

Okay, that makes sense. What does justice look like for you?

WILMORE:

That's a loaded question. Justice looks like, I guess my initial answer is, the feeling of being heard and being responded to. Demanding or having a want in being heard and properly having that demand or question, or certain want, having that answered. Yeah, that's kind of my initial answer.

THOMPSON:

What do you think are the most effective methods for creating social change?

WILMORE:

I would say it's kind of maybe what I was previously talking about, but that idea of proper dialogue, I believe is important. In a social media aspect, I would say, make sure that we dismantle misinformation, as well, because I think that that's something that our community often faces is a lot of misinformation. I believe that being truthful, having open and honest dialogue, making sure that we're dismantling any sort of negative stereotypes or misinformation, and also, just, I think that you need a strong community behind you as well. So I think that in creating any sort of social change, it starts with those around you and making sure that you have a strong foundation and a group that you can fall back on that will also help you to propel the mission as well.

THOMPSON:

That makes a lot of sense. It's always nice to have a community or like a support system, therefore you. How do you maintain enthusiasm for a cause when faced with setbacks?

WILMORE:

That's a good question. I think that for me, when there's something that needs to be fixed, I think that that just creates enthusiasm for me because it just creates my drive and my want from why I initially started doing a lot of the roles in the first place was because like I saw a need and wanted to help out as much as possible. But also, I think that having a good support system around us is very important because I think that at times you can get down. Also just for me, the opportunities that have led from this I guess, so it's being able to, you know, when going into different environments, you're also able to find like-minded people, or people that are working on even more interesting things as well. So the different people that you're able to meet when doing this work, and also the different places that it takes you. I know We Are Amazing 365, my scouting experience, and everything like that has been able to take me to lots of places that I never imagined that I could go to. I know that recently, coming back from SEGL¹⁰ in South Africa was some place that I've never envisioned myself going or engaging in. Again, I think that in the application process, speaking about different organizations such as We Are Amazing 365 and Fathers and Sons Together and also my scouting experience and more like that, I think that

¹⁰ SEGL is an abbreviation for the School for Ethics and Global Leadership, a semester school for intellectually motivated high school juniors (predominantly).

they also put me in an environment where I could travel and go to those places, and challenge myself to engage in a different community, learn about myself and others, and concrete that change.

THOMPSON:

You brought up SEGL. How did attending SEGL at ALA¹¹ influence your activism when you returned to the United States?

WILMORE:

I would say that SEGL really did change my perspective, and I think that it was so much that it has done for me. I think that one personal reason why I was really enthusiastic about SEGL was being able to go to South Africa. Within my nationality and identity, I carry the name African American yet, I've never been to any place alongside, in the African continent. And so, I've always just struggled with holding that title and being able to understand who I am, because it's only been that American aspect that I've only been introduced to. So I think that even just going to South Africa, and also engaging with people all over the continent, it really allowed me to have those conversations about race and culture, and also be able to learn about the different sort of issues that they struggle with, as well, and be able to see parallels or differences between what I might go through and what others there might go through. Just being able to have that dialogue and being able to, I guess, see someone who looks like you as well, but from a whole different part of the world, it was just like a really just like, life changing experience for me. But also to be able to engage with a whole variety of people that are also very different from me as well. Being able to go there, and also just being in an educational environment, it really just shifted my whole perspective. Also, when I came back, when I talked about culture, I think it just gave me a whole new definition and a whole new broadened perspective from a global standpoint.

THOMPSON:

How has your perception of culture shifted from before you went to SEGL and after you came back from SEGL?

WILMORE:

Got it, I think that it's hard for me to define culture as a whole, still, I think that's still something that I'm dealing with. I can kind of speak to my culture and how it shifted for me. For example, in the "Being Black in America" poem that I wrote, I even put in one lyric that "I'm African American yet I've never been to Africa, my history and culture here define me." It was kind of alongside something like that. I was kind of grappling with the fact that I had never been anywhere on that continent, so I can't really understand. And also I don't really know my family history past American history. I don't really know where my ancestors came from or what origin

¹¹ SEGL at ALA is one of the School for Ethics and Global Leadership's campuses, located at the African Leadership Academy in Johannesburg, South Africa.

of the African continent they were from. I've constantly had questions about that and constantly tried to do little ancestry tests, etc. So I just think that overall, there was a huge disconnect in my identity and trying to discover myself. And even going to South Africa, I just wondered even if I would belong, or even if I would be able to resonate or kind of just wondering if I could connect at all. But since going there, I guess I was just able to find myself more. I realized that going there, it was really amazing for me to see, again, people that looked like me and shared a part of my identity, but also to see people that didn't as well and see similarities and differences. I guess, being able to go and see so many different cultures at once, which is something that I appreciate from SEGL at ALA, I was also able to understand my culture more and have an appreciation and be able to see those differences and embrace those differences. Also, to see myself more, such as being okay with knowing that I don't know my exact ancestry history, but also accepting the fact that, yes, being African American, is a wonderful experience, and we have our different sense of culture as well. So now, when I speak on being Black, I realize that that's universal, and I'm often thinking about not just African Americans anymore, but I guess just all sorts of different cultures around the world. It has me thinking more about culture, and it just kind of broadens my perspective, but there's definitely so much I think that I have to learn. I think that that's also applied to not just South Africa, but after then I was able to go to French Polynesia. With my host family, they spoke zero English, only French, so I guess just as I was just speaking to them in French, and also trying to work on the language barrier, but also just understanding parts of French Polynesian culture as well. Recently, there has been such a different perspective on cultures, and I've been able to travel more. It all leads down to the different things I've been involved in which have led me to have opportunities.

THOMPSON:

I feel like also, it can go back to your point about communication, especially when you were in French Polynesia, and you were speaking a foreign language, but still, you could find connections in different cultures and whatnot. Powerful. I have another question. What strategies do you use to mobilize and engage others in causes you're passionate about?

WILMORE:

Can you say that one more time?

THOMPSON:

Yeah, so what strategies do you use to mobilize and engage others in causes you are passionate about?

WILMORE:

When getting others to engage in things I am passionate about, I'll try to start a conversation first, often talking about, maybe explaining why I'm passionate about it as well. But I also want to, leave space to be able to listen to them too, for example, like what they might think about it, and

also what they're dealing with or something that they're interested in, and trying to find parallels between what they're interested in, and also what I'm passionate about and try to connect them. Maybe originally, one might think that they don't relate to it at all or that they don't connect with it, but I think after having conversation and being able to find parallels, then you can create that sense of connection and realize that oh, I guess we do relate to this passion. I think that it's required to be a good speaker, but an even better listener. I think that the power of listening is really, really impactful for understanding and impactful for bridging the gap between someone else and potentially getting them to be interested in your passions.

THOMPSON:

What would you tell your younger self right now?

WILMORE:

That's a good question. There is a quote in my brand in We Are in Amazing 365, because for example, on the shirt it might say, "We are amazing" in the back, but then it'll have little sub lines of inspirational messages that you can put. One that really speaks to me is, "don't be afraid to be great." So honestly, I would tell my younger self don't be afraid to be great, and I would probably expand on that by saying to honestly try out everything that you can, right now, even if it seems like something that you are not interested in, or something that you won't do. Honestly, there are no limits, and don't be afraid to go for it and to try something new, because I think that's something that will unlock all the doors for you in the future. Don't be afraid to step into your greatness and to realize that, you know, you are amazing and that you should try everything and kind of just embrace the world. So yeah, don't be afraid to be great.

THOMPSON:

I love that so much. I don't know, it's just such a good phrase, it's promoting your success in an affirmation type manner and whatnot. I also love that you've incorporated that into your brand, too. I guess we're kind of approaching the end of the interview. Is there anything else you'd like to talk about that I haven't already asked you about?

WILMORE:

Not exactly, but just something about myself is that it may seem like I have a clear, direct path, or it seems I've been involved within these organizations, so it seems like I feel like I'm set, but I would say that it's the complete opposite. I'd still say that I'm really trying to figure things out and figure out where I'm going. It constantly changes as I see different issues and different things to approach, but I guess I like to encourage other youth on this is that you really don't have to have it figured out and to really just keep engaging in many different new things. Also, just speaking and having conversations with as many people as possible. I guess the last thing is that I think that this work can be a little discouraging, whether it's on social media, if you receive such as a bad comment, or whether it's someone who is not able to see your vision for change, or

maybe not able to relate to you. But again, I would like to encourage others to continue to find your small support base and small groups that you trust, and to just build just with them. Don't think too large yet, but slowly find a group of people who you can resonate with and just continue to build off there. Don't be discouraged, but also continue to try new things because that's something that I'm dealing with, especially with school, with sports, and with activism as well, so, I think that it's a really interesting journey, and I love, but I guess that's my advice to not only others, but myself as well.

THOMPSON:

I don't know, I think it's also impactful to kind of self-reflect too, which is what you were just saying. Take that advice for yourself, but also give it to other people. I think that kind of wraps up the interview. So I'm going to stop there, and I'll just tell you a little bit more about the consent form and whatnot.

WILMORE:

Okay, sounds good.