

FEATURED

## For Traci Wilson-Kleekamp, local activism is part of the bigger picture

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Traci Wilson-Kleekamp, a doctoral student at MU and president of Race Matters, Friends, talks about her roots in activism and her genealogy work on Oct. 31 at her home in Columbia. Wilson-Kleekamp says she was born into a life of activism.

PHOTOS BY HUONG TRUONG/MISSOURIAN

When Traci Wilson-Kleekamp moved to Columbia from Long Beach in 2004, she thought she was leaving her life of activism behind.

Then a developer tried to build a housing complex.

The proposed site was a plot in southern Columbia, empty but for its slender meadow grasses and a small pond. The meadow was around the corner from Wilson-Kleekamp's new family home on Greenbriar Drive, which they had chosen for the view of lush, green foliage that could be seen through large windows at the back of the house. The Kleekamps were happy to get away from the concrete and bustle of Southern California.

So when Wilson-Kleekamp caught wind of the plan to take a small slice out of her new haven, there was no way she was going down without a fight.

Wilson-Kleekamp had experience battling developers over land use in California, so she joined the group of organized neighbors to fight the developer's effort to have the meadow rezoned for the complex.

They won.

## Inherited activism

Wilson-Kleekamp, president of Race Matters, Friends, never really became an activist; she was born into the life of one. One of her earliest memories, she said, was watching her dad campaign for Shirley Chisholm, who in 1972 Wilson-Kleekamp got to see be the first black woman to run for president of the United States.

“(My dad and stepmom) took their roles as citizens very seriously,” she said.

Wilson-Kleekamp's stepmom was a teacher and active feminist. It was she who introduced Wilson-Kleekamp to the children's record “Free to Be ... You and Me” by Marlo Thomas. That early lesson in empathy and expelling racial and gender stereotypes has stuck with Wilson-Kleekamp all the way through today.

In fact, a lot of Wilson-Kleekamp's worldview came from her stepmom, she said, including the way she learned to internalize and interact with all the information around her.

Binders filled with reports and research adorn tables, boxes, counters and shelves throughout Wilson-Kleekamp's home. Slipped into plastic sleeves and resting inside one of those binders are many colorful, intricate maps that chart some of Wilson-Kleekamp's thoughts, plans or information she's processing. All exist because Wilson-Kleekamp's stepmom taught her as a child to solve math problems by drawing pictures.

“Words exhaust me,” she said.

Wilson-Kleekamp's childhood technique of drawing to help her think began to bleed into other areas of her life. She started mapping out her thoughts, her ideas, things she had learned — basically everything — on paper, rather than thinking strictly using words.

By the time she got to college, Wilson-Kleekamp was a master at mapping. And by the time one of her instructors brought that concept up when she was in graduate school, Wilson-Kleekamp thought: “Hey, I do that!”

## Doing the work

Wilson-Kleekamp is a firm believer in trying to effect change on a local level. The mantra “Think globally. Act locally,” resonates deeply with her philosophy on citizenship and activism. You can make the most difference at a local level, she said.

And that is what Wilson-Kleekamp is trying to do in Columbia. She often attends meetings of the City Council and the Citizens Police Review Board, and she has sparred with the Columbia Police Department and Police Chief Ken Burton over racial profiling within the department on behalf of Race Matters, Friends, more than once.

In fact, Wilson-Kleekamp is the one who coached Lynn Maloney, treasurer of Race Matters, Friends, in 2015 on how to approach the police about racial profiling in the first place. Maloney said Wilson-Kleekamp has been a mentor to her ever since.

Wilson-Kleekamp is always trying to make connections, Maloney said.

“She’s always on the edge of her seat, taking in new information and creating new relationships,” she said. Wilson-Kleekamp doesn’t see disagreements as reasons to sever connections; rather, she works to find any possible commonality with people.

And Wilson-Kleekamp has had her fair share of disagreements. Her battles with the Columbia Police Department have been well-publicized, and her criticisms of things she sees as unjust are anything but gentle.

To Maloney, though, that’s a good thing.

“Racism is made of people being nice, of not making waves,” Maloney said. Wilson-Kleekamp is role modeling for others how to be direct and not allow things to fly under the radar just for the sake of peace... “which is often considered not diplomatic,” she said.

## Peering into the past

An old wooden dresser sits in the basement of Wilson-Kleekamp's home. A few years ago, Wilson-Kleekamp's husband, Stephen Kleekamp, was preparing to get rid of it to free up a bit of space. As anyone who is about to move a large dresser would do, Kleekamp opened the drawers to double check that they were empty.

They weren't. Not by a long shot. Instead, stacks upon stacks of papers rested inside, waiting to be revisited.

Wilson-Kleekamp is a genealogist. Those piles of papers were documents, Wilson-Kleekamp's way of reaching back into history to find the untold stories of our ancestors.

More specifically, the documents lining the drawers and walls of what Wilson-Kleekamp calls her "genealogy cave" help her find the ancestors of people who hire her when they reach an inexplicably broken branch in their family tree, Wilson-Kleekamp said.

"I like to investigate," she said. "I'm a puzzler."

Wilson-Kleekamp began her excursions into the past when her son Ian was in second grade and brought home a family tree project, she said. She thought it would be easy — just ask her family who was who, and put it on a tree. She was wrong.

Wilson-Kleekamp quickly found there were questions no one in her family had the answers to, depths to which none had ever delved, and she took it upon herself to get to the bottom of it, to find the characters at the top of her family tree.

It's been years since that first foray into genealogy, but the lost voices of the past still intrigue Wilson-Kleekamp. She says there are certain perspectives in history that are largely invisible, particularly those of people of color.

So, in addition to doing genealogical work for clients, Wilson-Kleekamp looks into whatever other invisible stories intrigue her. A lot of these stories are about black people, although she's done a bit of work with Native American history, too.

Wilson-Kleekamp also puts on workshops to teach people how to do their own genealogical digging. One is called "Critical family history," in which Wilson-Kleekamp teaches participants how to place their own family histories within a social and historical context, "instead of just worrying about how you're related to this person or that person," she said.

Things like race, gender and identity are what shape a life, she said, and it's important for people to understand that.

# Sharing her world

Wilson-Kleekamp wants her knowledge and passion to extend further than just those she can reach by herself, and one way she's doing that is by working toward a doctorate in education with a social studies emphasis.

Upon completing her degree, Wilson-Kleekamp plans to educate pre-service teachers about how to integrate citizenship, democracy and social justice in higher education. She says these concepts all need to be spoken "in the same breath," rather than talked about as distinct philosophies. Additionally, Wilson-Kleekamp hopes to teach teachers how to weave multiple points of view into the narrative of our nation's history.

"If we don't understand our past, how can we make sense of our present?" Wilson-Kleekamp said.

Wilson-Kleekamp is no stranger to teaching others the finer points of being able to understand worlds and lives they might have thought they had no access to. When her two older children, Evan and Ian, were 10 and 11, Wilson-Kleekamp and her husband sent them to stay with a family friend in Japan for two months. When their daughter Erin was the same age a few years later, she went, too.

"If you only know one world, it's really hard to navigate," Wilson-Kleekamp said. "You get really defensive. You get really scared."

Wilson-Kleekamp wanted her kids to have this experience early on so they could begin assembling the tools they needed to navigate their own lives with respect for the lives of all others.

"It definitely played a part in (my) being able to understand ... where people come from," Ian Kleekamp said.

Evan and Erin Kleekamp felt the same way. Evan, now 25, recalled being confused after seeing what appeared to be swastikas etched into marble columns at several of the Japanese temples they visited during their stay. However, after Evan asked their hosts about them, they learned that the symbols they were seeing were there before Nazi Germany ever existed. They weren't symbols of fascism; the Nazis just appropriated them and used them that way.

"I think our trip clarified to me at a young age exactly how much could be lost in translation if we only accepted the worlds and stories closest to us as true," Evan said.

As Wilson-Kleekamp likes to say, her kids learned "to be able to walk in worlds other than (their) own with grace and listen."

And she didn’t just send her children out to learn about other people’s worlds. She also invited them into her own.

When Erin Kleekamp, now 21, was young and they still lived in California, Erin used to go with her mom to city council meetings. It wasn’t how most kids spent their free time, but it seemed normal, Erin said. It’s one thing Erin said she admires about her mom, how willing she was to involve Erin in her life outside the home.

Ian, now 26, didn’t often go with his mom to meetings, but he said she was always doing so much that “there was no chance not to learn anything.”

Of course, Wilson-Kleekamp’s kids don’t just learn from their mom’s compassion; they receive it as well.

Evan, who identifies as both a male and a female and goes by the pronoun “they,” said their mom has never once questioned their identity as a transgender person. Their mom’s acceptance of them and everyone else is part of why they try to be as empathetic and kind as possible.

“I am my mother’s son,” Evan said. “But I’m also her daughter. How many parents do you know that can juggle a paradox like that? My mother is a rare example of raw human power. It’s exactly why so many people cherish her.”

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