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DUKE UNIVERSITY MARSHAL CITED FOR 50 YEARS OF SERVICE

DURHAM, N.C. – When campus officials recognized longtime employees this week at “The Night of 2,042 Duke Stars,” none shone brighter than University Marshal Pelham Wilder Jr. as he marked a half-century of service.

“Pelham is one of those rare people who make Duke the extraordinary place it is,” President Nannerl O. Keohane said after the Aug. 17 reception. “Duke would not be Duke as we know it had Pelham not chosen to join the chemistry faculty 50 years ago. His knowledge of Duke’s traditions and the principles and history which undergird them is legendary. So is his work in shaping the lives of generations of Duke students. Pelham loves Duke beyond measure, and four Duke presidents have benefitted from his wise counsel.”

Come next summer, somebody else will have to step into that role, because Wilder intends to step down as university marshal.

Wilder, 79, is perhaps best known to casual campus observers for leading faculty and students into Wallace Wade Stadium for the past 22 graduation ceremonies. But long before being named university marshal and chief of protocol in 1977, he had built a reputation as a researcher and teacher.

Born in Americus, Ga., and raised in Savannah, Wilder received A.B. and M.A. degrees from Emory University and M.A. and Ph.D. degrees from Harvard University. In 1949, after two years of active duty in the U.S. Navy Reserve and three years as a teaching fellow at Harvard, Wilder accepted a position as an instructor with Duke’s chemistry department.

Wilder and his wife, the former Alma Sterly Lebey, didn’t know it at the time, but that move from Cambridge, Mass., to Durham would be the last job-related move they would make.

“I was very young at the time. It was my first appointment and I was very excited,” Wilder said on a recent afternoon in his cluttered Gross Chemical Laboratory office. “Once I saw the quality of the faculty and the administration, I decided to stay. Sure, I’ve had a half-dozen opportunities to leave ... but I never saw anything to entice me.”

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Next May, after marching into Wallace Wade one last time as university marshal, he will hand over his ceremonial mace.

“Nobody could have had a happier life,” Wilder said. “The university’s really been good to me and my family. If I could do it all over again, I don’t think I’d change a thing. I don’t think many people can say that.”

Finding a replacement won’t be easy, according to those who’ve known and worked with Wilder.

“He personifies Duke University. Not just for us, but for generations at Duke,” said Mary Duke Biddle Trent Semans, the great-granddaughter of Washington Duke, who was instrumental in moving Trinity College (Duke’s forerunner) to Durham. “Pelham knows the history and, from there, he carries it wherever he goes. He has the dignity and the devotion. You can’t help but fall under his spell.”

President Emeritus H. Keith H. Brodie was one of those who fell under Wilder’s spell.

“He’s basically a godsend to anyone who is a Duke president,” Brodie said. “Pelham has wonderful tact. He knows how to use the university resources – the pomp, the circumstance, the academic regalia. He’s aware of the proper protocol. He has a wonderful sense of the history of the university. And he’s quick on his feet.”

Wilder, through his service and dedication, has become a link to the university’s past, said University Archivist Bill King.

“The things I appreciate are his standards and his attention to detail and quality,” he said. “I like to think the Duke name stands for quality, that we strive for the very best. I think he’s contributed to that.”

One of the first scientists to conduct research on the nature of cigarette smoke, Wilder was made a professor of chemistry at Duke in 1962. He added the title professor of pharmacology in 1967 and was named a distinguished professor in 1987.

Wilder served 18 years as director of undergraduate studies in chemistry. Although he retired from the faculty in 1990, Wilder has continued to teach in the chemistry department and medical school.

A former chairman of the North Carolina section of the American Chemical Society, Wilder has served as a consultant to the National Science Foundation, the College Entrance Examination Board and the Research Triangle Institute. A ruling elder in the Presbyterian Church and Durham Academy trustee, he was also a member of the first governor’s science advisory committee.

Wilder’s career at Duke has been marked by numerous awards and achievements.

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In 1971, he was one of the first faculty members to receive the alumni award for distinguished undergraduate teaching, and in 1972, he was named an Outstanding Educator of America. He was designated the first teaching consultant in Trinity College in 1983.

Wilder was awarded the University Medal for Distinguished Meritorious Service in 1993 for his academic contributions and work as university marshal organizing commencements, Founders' Day convocations and other formal campus functions.

A longtime Duke representative to and former president of a national ROTC association, Wilder in 1989 received the Navy Distinguished Public Service Award, the second-highest award the Secretary of the Navy can bestow upon a civilian. Wilder served aboard a destroyer escort in the central Pacific during World War II.

Wilder and his wife, who died in 1998, raised three children in Durham. Their youngest child, Sterly, is director of annual giving/major gifts for Duke University Development.

"We've never had anyone recognized for 50 years of continuous, active service," said Starr Loftis, an employee service representative with Human Resources. "I'm just amazed anyone would still be working at the same place for 50 years."

According to King, a handful of employees have worked at Duke for more than a half-century, but Wilder is the first to be specifically honored during the annual employee recognition ceremony. One notable example is Duke's second president, Robert Lee Flowers, whose career spanned nearly six decades, from his 1891 start as a Trinity College math instructor to his 1948 retirement from the presidency.

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