

## *Thoughts of gratitude: the Willis family*



The Willis family “cousin camp” attendees before they board the bus to travel to the Waisman Center for a tour in 2003.

On August 13, 2003, a coach bus pulled up to the Waisman Center. The 21 passengers – all children and grandchildren of the visit’s organizers, Bill and Doris Willis – were coming from Milwaukee to the center for a tour. The Waisman Center was the second stop on a day full of enrichment activities for Bill and Doris’ large family as part of their annual “cousin camp.” Nancy Willis, one of the couple’s daughters, still has the itinerary from that day. The two-hour visit began with an introduction from then-Waisman Center director Marsha Mailick, PhD, whom Bill and Doris previously met at a UW alumni function in Florida. They kept in touch and eventually arranged for the family visit when they were all back in Wisconsin that summer.

They had no idea at that time how impactful the tour would be for their family and for the Waisman Center.

Nancy paints a picture of what Mailick’s presentation included. She says they learned about Harry Waisman, for whom the center is named, and his

ground-breaking work on phenylketonuria, how the Kennedy administration created a boon for research on developmental disorders, and got an overview of the work that was then going on in the center’s labs and clinics.

“All of the trips that we took were educational in some way,” says the couple’s daughter Sarah Snowden. Often the trips were also rooted in philanthropy. “My parents wanted to show us what they were doing with their money and the people and organizations who were being helped.”

The family’s experiences at the Waisman Center led Bill and Doris to donate \$460,000 to establish a fund in their name that supports new initiatives in autism, ADHD, and fragile X syndrome research.

“Mom and Dad both believed in the importance of advancing knowledge through scientific research about topics such as autism and ADHD,” says Nancy. “The Waisman Center is where they believed they would get the biggest return on their philanthropic investment.”



Bill passed away on May 11, 2019. He was 91 years old. Doris, who now lives in Whitewater, says she and her husband donated in part because of the need for transformative gifts to further research and in part because they liked the people they met at the Waisman Center. In learning about the work of the Waisman Center, she says many in her family “were given insight into themselves, their siblings, children, or parents.”

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“We were aware that some members of our family had attention deficit disorder, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, and were on the autism spectrum,” Doris says. She, as an adult, was the first one in the family to be diagnosed with attention deficit disorder.

“I remember Mom’s relief at having an explanation for her being her,” says Sarah. She says that Waisman staff encouraged acceptance and education. “You should not ignore yourself or the information that might help explain yourself,” she recalls them saying. “One should always accept individual differences in others and in yourself.”

“Since that time, I have worked with many children with attention deficit and autism spectrum disorders,” says Nancy, who is a school and home

nurse, a music teacher, and a grandparent to children with autism. “Now as I reread the notes from the tour, I see them from the point of view of a grandparent.” Much in the way that Bill and Doris did at the time.

The experience also inspired several of the Willis

grandchildren: one went on to work with children with severe developmental delays and is a therapist in Illinois; another studied art therapy in college; and another now works in education.

#### Cousin camp

The family’s trip to the Waisman Center was part of an annual week-long summer camp that Bill and Doris set up for their very large family.

“My parents came to the idea of a ‘cousin camp’ as an outgrowth of trying to figure out how to be grandparents to so many grandchildren,” Nancy says. Several of the family members lived across the country, so for one week every year for 20 years, Bill and Doris invited the grandchildren to their property in Wautoma and hosted a themed summer camp.



Bill and Doris Willis at a 2007 visit to the Waisman Center (left), and in Wautoma, Wisconsin in 2016





Each year the camp grew as grandchildren reached the eligible age of four,” says Sarah. “Parents who were available to come worked as counselors, cooks, and activity leaders of archery, art, singing, music, or anything they wanted.” Bill and Doris organized the camp to form close bonds among their five children and 18 grandchildren.

Each year’s camp had a different theme ranging from bears, the circus, and holidays to sustainability, world culture, and, in the case of the Waisman Center, disabilities.

Nancy says that at least seven of the grandchildren in the family are not neurotypical and watching them all grow, develop, and interact with one another during these camps gave Bill and Doris keen insights into the children’s communication or behavioral issues and their parents’ concerns.

“I strongly believe that my parents’ experiences with their grandchildren and the cousin camp are what piqued their interest in the work of the Waisman

Center and sustained their commitment to it,” Nancy says.

### **A legacy of service**

According to Doris, her late husband “had no big ego” and “was respected for his high level of integrity.” He embodied these traits both professionally, as a tax and corporate lawyer, and personally as reflected in Bill and Doris’ generosity.

“My siblings and I have had the opportunity to observe how our parents thoughtfully chose to use their wealth in ways which were consistent with their values and beliefs,” says Nancy. Her parents deliberately chose to invest in scientific research at places like the Waisman Center, hoping that their support would lead to new ideas and solutions to improve the lives of individuals with disabilities. “I have grandchildren and grand nieces and nephews who may be benefiting from advances in knowledge made by the Waisman Center,” she says. “I am proud that my parents contributed in their own way to the ongoing work being done there.”



*A Person Making Frames* by Phil Gazzolo