

Refuse Labels

"If you want to know your past - look into your present conditions. If you want to know your future - look into your present actions."

-Chinese Proverb

Beginning life as the 17th child in a family of 19 children isn't easy. Add to this the fact that you are born in the middle of racial turmoil in St. Bethlehem, Tennessee in 1940...that should be enough for one's life. But that was just the start for Wilma Rudolph. By the time she was a toddler, she had survived polio, scarlet fever, chicken pox, mumps and double pneumonia. While these illnesses spared Wilma her young life, it didn't come without a price. She couldn't move her left leg. Local doctors said she would never walk again; she was crippled.

Wilma's mother didn't give up however; she sought treatment at the Meharry Hospital, the black medical college of Fisk University, in Nashville, Tennessee. Doctors at that facility thought they could help, but it would take intense treatment. Wilma's mother, made the 50-mile one-way trip to Fisk twice a week, for two years. After two years of intense treatment and therapy, Wilma could walk, with the help of a special shoe and metal leg brace.

Doctors taught Wilma's mother how to administer therapy and her family members took turns messaging her 'bad' leg. It was during these therapy sessions that her brothers and sisters encouraged her to, "be strong and work hard." Finally, at the age of twelve, she was walking 'normally.' If that wasn't enough, she decided to be an athlete.

She started with basketball because her sister Yolanda was already on the team. As a seventh-grader Wilma made the squad but never played. She didn't play the next year or the next. But, as a sophomore, Wilma earned a starting spot. The late night games played with her brothers in the back yard paid off at Burt High School in Clarksville as Wilma lead the team to a state championship. It was while she was on the court that Ed Temple noticed her. He was the track coach for the legendary track team at Tennessee State University. Wilma's segregated High School didn't have a track nor a track team but Ed saw her potential and asked her to attend a summer sports camp.

Two years later, in 1957, Wilma enrolled at Tennessee State University. She had a track scholarship and a new dream, the Olympics. Her work paid off as she earned a spot on the track team for the 1960 Summer Games in Rome. There, Wilma Rudolph, once labeled a 'cripple' by medical professionals, won not one metal but three medals. Pure Gold! She was labeled the 'fastest women on earth' after winning the 100-meter dash, 200-meter dash and anchoring the 400-meter relay.

Refuse labels, for they only serve to place limits. Think of the labels heaped on Wilma. Crippled. Sickly. Black. Poor. Benchwarmer. But, she didn't accept any of these. They didn't define her. They didn't limit her. In fact, Wilma Rudolph, three-time gold medallist at the Olympic games calls her "most special" accomplishment her home

coming parade after the Olympics. Upon returning home, Clarksville, Tennessee officials wanted to hold a parade in her honor. Wilma insisted that it not be 'segregated' as was the usual custom. Her homecoming parade was the first integrated event in Clarksville history.

Don't live up to your labels...tags that others have given you. Instead, be who you know you are. Be that light within. Each of us is a great spirit, on this earth to do wonderful things. Inspire others and be a light to this world! Can you do it? Yes, just ask Wilma.

Matthew A. Forck, CSP and JLW, travels the country sharing life, light and laughter centered safety and inspirational messages. In addition, Matt writes a weekly column called S.M.I.L.E. (See More In Life Everyday). He is the current Director of K-Crof Industries, LLC, an organization dedicated to building people through writing, speaking and giving. Read more stories like this through Matt's latest book, *GUTSY, Go Until Time Stops You* or to learn more about Matt's keynote speaking services, log onto www.thesafetysoul.org

Copyright 2008-K-Crof Industries, LLC