Morehouse’s new president has high ambitions

By Maria Saporta
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

J

ohn S. Wilson grew up in Philadelphia going to a church where the pastor was a “Morehouse Man” — meaning someone who had graduated from Atlanta’s Morehouse College.

“I think he preached about Morehouse as much as he preached about Jesus,” Wilson said. “I followed that path.”

On Jan. 28, Wilson became the 11th president of Morehouse College, one of the most influential historically black colleges in the nation. As the new president of Morehouse, Wilson is intense in his focus to strengthen his alma mater for generations to come and have it fulfill its legacy as the college that nurtured Martin Luther King Jr., Maynard H. Jackson and so many others.

Upon graduating from high school, Wilson actually thought he was going to go to college in Pennsylvania. He already had enrolled and even had a key to his dorm room. But at the last minute (in July 1978), he changed his mind and decided he really “needed” to go to Morehouse. Calls were made, and he was told to come down to Atlanta sight unseen.

“From the start, it felt right,” Wilson said. “When my classmates started coming — Martin Luther King III, Spike Lee — we all became friends.”

Today it’s hard to imagine anyone who could be better prepared to lead Morehouse at this point in its history — the 100th anniversary of being called Morehouse College.

Wilson graduated from Morehouse in 1979 and went on to Harvard University for advanced degrees. He spent 16 years at MIT in various administrative roles, leading up to serving as director of foundation relations and assistant provost.

He then went to George Washington University, where he was an associate professor of higher education and did extensive research in defining and advancing the interests of black colleges. He also served on Atlanta’s Spelman College Board of Trustees.

Then in 2009, President Barack Obama tapped Wilson to serve as executive director of the White House Initiative on Historically Black Colleges and Universities, an effort aimed at strengthening the 105 institutions and improving the educational offerings for the nation’s youth.

“I have a cathedral vision for the future of black colleges,” Wilson said.

So it may not come as a surprise that Obama is coming to Morehouse on May 19 to give the commencement address as part of the college’s 100th anniversary milestone.

Wilson downplayed any role he may have had in getting Obama to come.

“I didn’t really pull it off,” Wilson said. “I took a phone call from the White House. I didn’t plant that seed. That was grace. But it’s safe to say that the president of the United States and his staff have a lot of respect for me and the job that I did there. But his visit here is not about me. It’s about Morehouse College.”

Wilson’s tenure at Morehouse already has been a bit of a roller-coaster.

During Wilson’s first week as president, a Morehouse student was shot over an argument at a Friday night pick-up basketball game. The next day, Wilson convened a campus-wide town hall meeting to discuss crime on campus and invited members of the Atlanta City Council (four came) and Atlanta police officers.

For the new president, the incident was a stark reminder of how Morehouse has changed since when he was a student.

“There’s been an impressive expansion of the campus, and there has been growth in terms of the student body and faculty. In many ways that was an affirmation,” Wilson said. “At the time, we were the biggest class to graduate in 1979 with 200 students. Now there are no less than 500 a year to graduate.”

Wilson, 55, said he did not have a “well-developed sense of Atlanta” when he was a Morehouse student because he spent most of his time on campus. But almost every Saturday, he and Spike Lee would take the bus downtown and up Peachtree to go to a
legendary record store — Peaches.

"That was a big adventure. We didn’t have cars,” Wilson said. "We felt pretty safe at all hours of the day. That’s one thing that’s changed — the issue of danger right around the campus. The campus is more urban than it used to be with the proximity of the urban ills. I’d like to move to a place where people around Morehouse see this as a sacred place — a place where you don’t prey on the students of Morehouse."

In that context, Wilson said he has “every intention” to build relationships with the community as well as business and civic leaders to help rejuvenate the Atlanta University Center area. The development of a new Atlanta Falcons football stadium is bringing targeted attention to the neighborhoods that encompass the cluster of colleges.

But mostly Wilson will focus on strengthening Morehouse College. Currently there is a significant gap between the financial strength of historically black colleges and universities and comparable mainstream institutions.

The measuring stick Wilson uses is the endowment-expense ratio. Ideally, an institution’s endowment-expense ratio should be 10-1, meaning its endowment is 10 times its annual expenses.

Among historically black colleges, Spelman College has the highest ratio — 4-1; Morehouse is second with 1.3-1. Morehouse’s endowment is only $130 million when it should be closer to $1 billion.

“If we want to be best in class, we need a better foundation for this institution in order to better educate these young men in a competitive way,” Wilson said. “The financial footing is just a platform to reach the goal. This is an institution that helped to fundamentally shape Martin Luther King Jr. in 1948. I have a dream for Morehouse that we will be strengthened enough under my presidency to create a Martin Luther King Jr. of biology, chemistry and in every field — students who will go into their respective fields and change the world.”

To reach that goal, Wilson said he is willing to serve on a few select corporate boards, but “everything I do has to benefit Morehouse College,” he said.

Yet when asked if being president of Morehouse is his “dream job,” Wilson pushed back.

“I do have high ambitions for Morehouse. What I was dreaming of when I was a student here was a great Morehouse,” said Wilson, who envisions being president for seven to 10 years. “But I will not refer to this as my dream job until I’m finished.”

Reach Saporta at mafia@saporta.biz.
John S. Wilson: “If we want to be best in class, we need a better foundation for this institution in order to better educate these young men in a competitive way.”

“This is an institution that helped to fundamentally shape Martin Luther King Jr. in 1948. I have a dream for Morehouse that we will be strengthened enough under my presidency to create a Martin Luther King Jr. of biology, chemistry and in every field — students who will go into their respective fields and change the world.”

— John S. Wilson, Morehouse College