

Willson found calling as volunteer

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'I've just had a wonderful life'

Willson, who turns 89 today, said a lifetime of volunteering to try new things has led him to where he is today.

While a sophomore at Parsons College (now known as Maharishi International University) in his hometown of Fairfield, Willson volunteered to join the U.S. Army.

Before joining the Army, Willson said he had seldom left the confines of Fairfield. He had traveled to Des Moines once, but that was as far as he had wandered. When he signed up for the service, he began to see another side of the world, first traveling to Madison, Wis., for engineering training, and then to Brooklyn, N.Y., to await transport across the Atlantic Ocean.

In Brooklyn, Willson said he had his first opportunity to see the New York Philharmonic Symphony. It was the beginning of a lifelong devotion to the arts.

In the Army, he volunteered to be a member of the Office of Strategic Services, or OSS, which was the country's intelligence agency during World War II and the predecessor to the CIA.

Willson's OSS unit would follow behind the 12th U.S. Army Group through France and into Berlin. A major part of the unit's mission was encoding and decoding information from the front lines, which included telling commanders if a bridge they had bombed was completely destroyed, or reporting German troop movements and "watching bumpers" to identify the German units.

"We were also always watching the level of the Rhine River because there was a fear the Ger-

mans would blow up dams in the north," he said. "And when (German Field Marshal Erwin) Rommel was on the loose in France, we were trying to find him to kill him."

Willson said the OSS usually was two to three weeks behind the 12th Army Group, but would parachute men with suitcase transmitters wherever they were needed. Once on the ground, the men would send encoded messages back to their OSS counterparts.

"I couldn't speak German or French, so instead of dropping in, I did the decoding and encoding," Willson said.

On his way overseas, somewhere along the line, Willson said he fell in love with classical music. To this day, he can't pinpoint why he enjoys it, he just knows that he does.

"I also like contemporary art, even if I don't always understand it," he said. "My idea of fun is spending a whole day in a museum, and somehow I have had the ability to do it."

His time in the war allowed him to expand his love of music and gave him opportunities he would have never had in the states.

In London and Paris he saw the opera houses. He was able to watch, in wonder, the world famous pianist Walter Gieseking in France. He roomed with a classically-trained Russian violinist in Berlin. All the while a passion was growing for the arts.

But art wasn't his only love. He also had an affinity for the

pigskin. In fact, he was part of the first-ever football game to take place in Berlin when his headquarters team took on another Army faction, and at Yale University Law School he tried his hand at coaching an intramural team.

He used his time in the war to advance his education. Through the G.I. Bill, which he called "one of the greatest things this country ever did to boost the world economy," he finished his degree at Parsons and went on to Yale.

After graduation, law degree in hand, he set off around Iowa looking for work. He found a part-time gig in Council Bluffs.

"With everyone returning from the service, there was a slim job market," he said. "On March 1, 1949, I started at Smith & Peterson."

He would work his way up, before eventually leaving to form Willson & Pechacek.

Willson has spent a majority of his career doing defense work for insurance companies, although in the 1950s, there was no Legal Aid or Public Defender's Office, so local attorneys were assigned criminal cases when a defendant couldn't afford counsel. It was through these assignments that he landed his only two murder trials, one of which he won. Now, Willson still works part-time at the office, lending his expertise where it is needed, but he spends a majority of his time devoted to the arts and the community. He was a member of the Council Bluffs Library Board for more than 40 years until he

moved to Omaha a few years back to live with his companion, Sara Foxley, who also shares his love of the arts.

"Our relationship is so wonderful," he said of Foxley, who sits on the board of the Bluebarn Theatre. "We both share so many interests."

Willson has been involved with Joslyn Museum, Opera Omaha and the Omaha Symphony, none of which he could have imagined being a part of when he was growing up.

"During the Depression, we had no newspapers, telephone or magazines," he said. "We only had one book in the house, and it was Mother's Bible."

His mother, Hattie, was a single parent after falling victim to a "Depression divorce." Willson said his father traveled looking for work during the 1930s and started coming home less and less. Eventually, he disappeared for good, and Hattie was forced to raise six children.

Hattie worked at the brush and broom factory in Fairfield, and Willson said they "somehow got enough to eat."

There was no car or radio and in the summer, the children went barefoot, but there were also no negative influences. In fact, Willson said his mother never once objected to her circumstances.

"In all her years, she never once complained about misfortune or being deserted by her husband," he said. "All of the kids inherited that attitude."

Willson has also seen his share of tragedy. He has lost two

wives and two children, as well as four of five siblings, but he continues to soldier on. His extended family – the law profession – has always been there to comfort him. It is the camaraderie of attorneys that keeps him active in his practice.

"When you have been through cases that are important to people both financially and emotionally, a real friendship develops," he said, whether you are fighting together or for opposite sides. "There are good friends that you just have to go against sometimes."

Law has changed quite a bit since 1949, when Willson first hung out his shingle. He said in the earlier days of his career the law seemed to favor defendants more; cases were harder to prove. But that pendulum swung the other way during the latter half of his days in court, favoring the plaintiff.

There is more advertising, making it more of a business now than a profession, he said. And the economy has dropped the demand for lawyers similar to what it was when Willson was looking for work post-World War II. Loyalty has also disappeared, from both employers and employees, and the law libraries have disappeared at practices – replaced by a computer on every desk with case law available by a few keystrokes. Even with the changes, Willson still finds the practice rewarding.

"I like practicing law. I like lawyers," he said. "I've been so fortunate; I happened to get a job in Council Bluffs at a good firm and develop so many relationships."

"I've just had a wonderful life."