

RED RIVER VALLEY

# WOMEN



*Today*

January 2007



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*Kim Wilson creates artwork at her home in Grand Forks.*

# Artistic Beauty Arising

## A Journey From Trauma to Triumph

By Sandy Grissom

In the blink of an eye, the tick of the clock, the turn of a head, everything you know and everything you are vanishes...

Imagine being a healthy, active woman living on the island of Maui. Kim Forness Wilson

*A work entitled "Peace".*

worked as a social worker with children and families, did outreach with gang members, helped build a \$6 million youth center, participated in local music and theater, was a wife, foster care provider and mother. She exuded strength, energy and vitality.

On March 19, 2003, life would be changed forever.

"I was working with a mom. I was laughing about something. I turned my head to the right and quickly turned it back to the left. It snapped back to center and there was a loud crack," says Wilson clapping her hands together harshly. "People in the office heard it. I literally felt like someone shoved my head onto a pitchfork."

Citing her tough North Dakota roots, Wilson says in spite of everyone's concern, she just asked for a minute to "shake it off" and return to her busy caseload. What should have resulted in a trip to the emergency room was delayed by three days of "powering through."

After three days of pain and not being able to eat solid food, Wilson began to worry about her symptoms and sought medical care. The first physician she saw told her she had the most severely

sprained neck he'd ever seen. The treatment required rest for 6 weeks.

"I burst into tears," she says with a self-deprecating laugh. "I'm like the dog that doesn't want to sit on the porch. I want to pull the sled. I could handle just about anything, but don't tell me I can't go to work."

*"Giving up is not really an option."*

A second opinion resulted in a torn muscle diagnosis. Wilson laughs at herself again, something she does quite often as she describes her ordeal. She responded to the news by auditioning for a rock show in town. The director, a friend of hers, couldn't believe it, Wilson



was howling, not singing. Her ability to sing was gone.

"This pain, you kind of get hijacked. The clearest memory I have is of the moment before I turned my head. It really took me awhile to even get that I was in big trouble."

Frozen muscles locked her head into place. Midwestern stoicism gave way to reality.

As a foreshadowing of the art that would one day serve as the salvation from her pain, Wilson drew a picture to describe what she felt. She wrote the following words along the side:

"Wake up feeling like worst hangover, tongue numb, back of throat sore, swallow a knitting needle, muscles jumping around, choke across front, turn head to left and 'SNAP'-hideous pain, pain up back of head, don't laugh or cry or sing or cough or sneeze. Don't yell or sing. Turn head ears fluttering. Cannot touch chin to chest."

### Dying in the Turn of a Head

Wilson's "alter-ego" to her social work role was that of a performer. Music was a huge part of her personality. Not only did she act and perform, but she wrote music as well. Everything she did creatively was tied to a "greater purpose." Everything she did was for the benefit of the children she loved and served. She even uses a performing analogy to describe a spiritual aspect of her crisis.

"In a way I feel like I did die," she says in a reflective voice. "The Kim Wilson who was living the 10 seconds before I turned my head, that person in so many ways doesn't exist anymore. If you compare the two of us, I don't even sound the same. I'm in a different body, a different experience."

It's such a remarkable shift, it's incomprehensible. In a way, I feel like I died in the turn of a head. Literally everything, my previous life, vanished. I used to do theater. It's like the curtain dropped literally on my head, no segue, no transition."

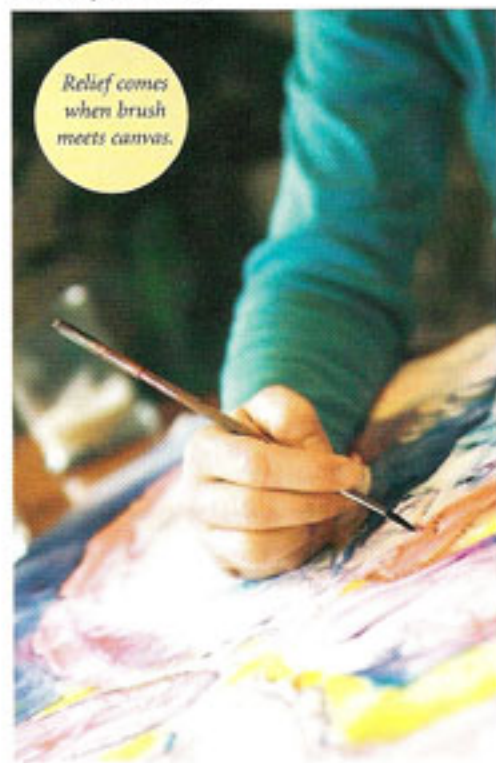
Months passed. Wilson's symptoms only progressed. Relief just wasn't coming from rest alone and medications were not an option.

"I'm allergic to pain killers, so that makes this adventure even more charming," says Wilson wryly.

### Knitting Together the Pieces

Finally able to see the workman's compensation doctor after a 6-month waiting period, light began to shine at the end of the tunnel. The doctor was a neurologist. He saw her and "he flipped." The diagnosis was severe nerve damage.

Wilson kept describing her pain to people as "like swallowing a knitting needle." The experts attributed this to the nerve damage, but something in Wilson didn't allow her to just sit with the diagnosis, to end the exploration of what her body was trying to tell her. A long battle with workman's compensation ensued, eventually leading to a "divorce" in the relationship. When Wilson's regular insurance kicked in, she hopped a plane to the Mayo Clinic.



Relief comes when brush meets canvas.

"I felt like I was in a tar pit, sinking, with only 2 inches left to go. I lucked out, though. The doctor at Mayo wanted to do exploratory surgery. I couldn't get undressed fast enough!" says Wilson with her infectious laugh.

Surgery exposed what Wilson had known all along. Surgeons found a "knitting needle-shaped" piece of her skull floating around. The crack heard on that March day was a piece of her skull breaking loose. It made its way downward, nestling beside her carotid artery. Wilson credits the wisdom of her body and brain for her survival.

"For 15 months I had been describing exactly what was happening. If my muscles hadn't gone into paralysis, it would have pierced my carotid artery. There is a miracle in the design of the body for self-preservation."

Wilson and her family relocated to Grand Forks, near Wilson's family. Trips to Mayo for therapies and follow-ups were to be frequent. The damage to Wilson's cranial nerves had been extensive.

Dark days, dogging Wilson from the first, began to overwhelm. Wilson's mother arrived, bringing with her a source of hope and recovery. She brought Wilson the means to her new life.

"I was quite suicidal. The unknown can be so cruel. My mom came and said, 'You've got to do something to keep your mind off this pain. It's inhumane. You're not going to make it if you don't do that,'" remembers Wilson.

"She walked in and said 'We're going to focus your attention on a new technique. You get up, we're going to accomplish something!'" Her mother put a paintbrush in her hand.

*"Engaging in appreciation of life is the thing, beauty is limitless."*

### Hope in the Stroke of a Brush

Wilson gained her first moments of relief when she began to put paint to canvas. Months had passed without a mental break from the pain. Wilson speaks of her pain needing motion for release. Painting provided her mind motion, gave her excitement, gave her peace.

Wilson creates colors with watercolor and organics.



"Being creative uses the same part of the brain that registers pain. The brain can only concentrate on one thing at a time. It's awesome. The pain goes way down."

A creative expression, it was also an emotional outlet.

"I'm very grateful. One of the other things I can't do is cry. This gave me a whole new way to express emotion, now I have a vehicle. I tell people I have a 'prosthetic brain,'" she says with a smile. "I have to do things in a new way."

Wilson's art is amazingly beautiful. Her pieces line the walls of her living room, and unframed work sits in stacks, filling nooks and crannies in the room. Some artwork that people do to express their pain can make viewers uncomfortable. This isn't so with Wilson's work.

"Life is beautiful. Period. It's just our ability to reframe and reframe until we get that snapshot. I believe that. I do that with my paintings. Even though they may express something painful, it's also beautiful, because life is beautiful."

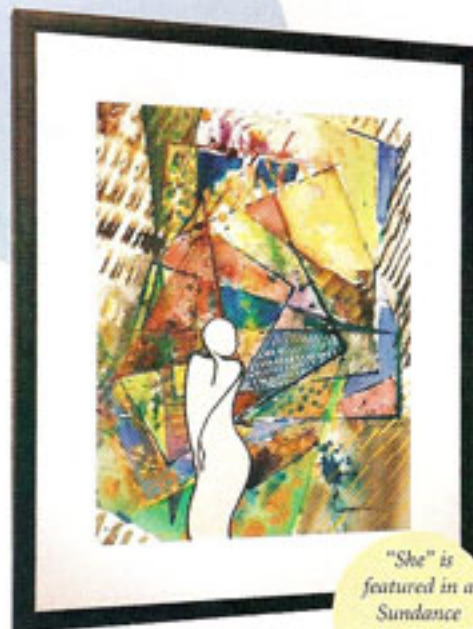
### Beads on a String

The journey is far from over. Wilson maintains hope that recovery can one day be complete. She credits having a multitude of "tools in the toolbox" for getting through every day.

"Giving up is really not an option. I wasn't raised that way. Coming out the other side is the deal. This pain

could win. Fifty percent of people with glossopharyngeal neuralgia commit suicide.

It's right here facing me every day. Some days are tough, but I tell myself 'the devil may get half the day, but he's gonna have to fight me for the rest,'" laughs Wilson.



"She" is featured in a Sundance Film Festival movie.

"I have goals each day. I will do something for my family every day. I will accomplish something for my health each day and I'm going to contemplate beauty in some way every day. Engaging in appreciation of life is the thing, beauty is limitless. It is spiritual. You have to make something new with the pieces left over."

Wilson makes the analogy of each part of her life readying her for the next, like beads on a string. This moment is just one bead. She looks forward. She gets through by telling herself that "you ain't beat me yet."

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She won't allow the "experts" to use words like "permanent" within her hearing distance and hopes for miracles and medicine to one day provide the answer.

"If you just say 'this is it,' then that is it. You're basically at the end game. Where do you go with it? And why would you? You have to keep exploring. You have to keep doing things to get you through and get to the end of each day saying I accomplished something."

Wilson has a statement on the Web site showcasing her work that speaks to this sense of exploration.

*"You have to keep exploring."*

"I have been on a mental and spiritual safari my whole life. I was one of those odd kids, always with rocks and feathers and critters in my pockets. I am thrilled with the shape of a shell, the movement of a feather, the sound of the wind, the curve of an eyelid.

Now, when I have needed my imagination the most, it is there in my pocket and with a little nudging spills onto the page."

Kim Wilson has done more than just accomplish something at the end of each day. Painting may have begun as pain management, but it grew into a greater blessing for us all. Her spirit shines in her less than perfect body, it shines forth from each work of art. Out of the pieces left over, she has created beauty.

Kim Forness Wilson has a Web site showcasing her work: [kimberlyfornesswilson.com](http://kimberlyfornesswilson.com)

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"Prehistoric Daydreams"

