

THE DECREE

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NORTH CAROLINA WESLEYAN COLLEGE, ROCKY MOUNT, NORTH CAROLINA 27804

Brys-Wilson Has Provided ‘Steady Leadership’ during Covid

The last two years have been challenging for many in the Wesleyan community. That’s certainly been the case for Jessica Brys-Wilson, now in her 10th year as Wesleyan’s Health Services Director.

Brys-Wilson, 41, has played a leading role in guiding the college through the pandemic.

“She’s provided steady leadership throughout the pandemic,” Dean of Students Jason Modlin said in an email, adding that Brys-Wilson followed Centers of Disease Control and local health department guidelines in making recommendations to the college’s VIRT (Virus Intervention Response Team). “Student and employee Covid patients received compassionate care and instruction.”

The dean noted that Brys-Wilson, a licensed physician’s assistant and the lone health care provider on campus, worked nearly every weekend during the height of the pandemic to respond to new cases and monitor campus and local Covid case data. He said “her reasoned approach” has allowed the college to continue with face-to-face instruction during the past two years, a key to student success.

Brys-Wilson arrived at Wesleyan in 2012 as the college sought to upgrade the health care that it provided to students.

“The students’ well-being is at the forefront of all her decisions,” Modlin said. “She understands the positive correlation between wellness and academic success. She always seeks to treat the whole person, not just the illness.”

A New York native, Brys-Wilson graduated from Daemen College in Buffalo, earning a B.S. in health science and an M.S. in physician assistant studies.

She and her husband, Eric, are the parents of three daughters: Gabriella, Genevieve and Aliza Grace.

The Decree interviewed Brys-Wilson in February for a profile.

Q. Describe the neighborhood where you grew up.

A. I was born in Stratford, a tiny town in the Adirondack Mountains in Upstate New York. It’s very rural—no traffic lights, no police. There are a lot of hiking trails and snowmobile/four-wheeler trails.

Q. Tell us about your family.

A. My dad is a second-generation Polish immigrant. When I was in middle school, he started a sawmill and worked there until he retired a few years ago. My mom’s family was Native American. She worked at a school for developmentally disabled adults and she was amazing at it. I have

one sister. She’s a nurse, who built a house on my parents’ property. She’s married and has two children. There were several very scenic lakes in the Adirondacks where we would camp. My family still enjoys visiting them.

Q. Describe a lasting memory from childhood.

A. I remember playing in the woods with my sister and our cousins.

Q. What most interested you in high school?

A. Medicine, science.

Q. When did you know you wanted to work in health care? Was there a particular individual who influenced you? Was there a particular incident that affected your decision?

A. I pretty much always knew that I would go into healthcare. There was no event that drove me into medicine. In my young mind, it was the hardest subject, and I wanted to prove to myself that I could learn it. When I was 14, I started volunteering at a nursing home, and that’s when I really fell in love with taking care of people. That opportunity further solidified my view that medicine was the right choice for me.

Q. Why did you elect to become a physician’s assistant and not a doctor or nurse?

A. That’s a great question. Originally I had planned to be a pediatric oncologist. I didn’t have much familiarity with health careers other than doctor or nurse. When I went to college, I was introduced to the PA profession and I liked that I could graduate, begin practicing, and start a family sooner. There was also the flexibility to change medical specialties that appealed to me.

Q. Discuss the training required for the job.

A. In general, you complete a four-year degree, take the GREs, and then go to a PA program. PA education is based on the medical school model. It’s generally about 12-15 months of rigorous didactic education—classes to learn the actual medicine. That’s followed by 12-15 months of on-site clinical rotations to practice the different medical fields. At my school, we also had to complete a research component.

Q. Discuss the jobs you held before coming to Wesleyan.

A. Prior to Wesleyan, I worked at Eastern NC Medical Group for seven years and an urgent care center for an additional year. ENCMG was the best first job I can imagine because we truly did everything—outpatient medicine, inpatient medicine, geriatrics, pediatrics, critical care, sub-acute hospital, hospital consults, rehab center rounds, psychiatric hospital rounds, and nursing home. It gave

me an opportunity to learn so much and significantly improve my skills as a clinician.

Q. What brought you to Wesleyan?

A. I saw an ad. As much as I loved my job at ENCMG, I was struggling with work-life balance after my first two kids were born, and I saw the Wesleyan job as an opportunity to have more time with my girls and still practice medicine.

Q. What was Wesleyan’s health center like before your arrival?

A. The college had a nurse as the director of the health center, and a PA would come for two hours a day, three days per week. It wasn’t an ideal setup for students because they had to schedule appointments during the two-hour time slots. They also were charged a co-pay and their insurance was billed. Healthcare is definitely more accessible here now. We still have limitations as to what can be done on campus, but students can access a provider for free, five days per week. I like that we’ve been able to remove the financial barrier.

Q. What have you found most challenging about your current job in non-pandemic times?

A. I’m limited at what I can do in this setting and that can sometimes be frustrating. For instance, we don’t have an x-ray machine or a full lab on campus. I can order imaging and labs at the hospital, but there tends to be a delay in students getting to the offsite lab.

Q. What’s been most difficult about the last two years?

A. It’s been a rough two years for many reasons. I don’t want to dwell on the negative. On the positive, the situation is starting to improve, and we’ve had the opportunity to watch science unfold right



Health Services Director Jessica Brys-Wilson with her three daughters: (l-r) Gabriella, Genevieve and Aliza Grace.

Photo courtesy of J. Brys-Wilson

before our eyes. Despite how awful it’s been, it has been fascinating.

Q. What do you enjoy most about your job?

A. I love our students! I love helping people feel better! I love walking with patients through hard and scary times, and I love being the one to solve the problem for them. I also love watching the development in our students over their four years with us. Also, medicine is constantly changing and improving and it’s just so interesting.

Q. Can you think of a moment, a medical case or particular patient interaction, where you said, “Yes, this is why I do what I do?”

A. There are so many, I can’t limit it to a single one. Every time I make a diagnosis that improves a patient’s quality of life or prevents a long-term problem, I feel this way. In my prior job there was a lot more life-or-death examples. Here my impact is more about setting up students for lifelong health and in treating mental health disorders. This still has a pretty important impact on quality of life, but, unlike in the past, I don’t see the immediate dramatic effects.

Q. Now that the college has two staff members in the counseling center, do you still see students with mental health issues?

A. The counselors do the counseling, but I treat a lot of mental health on

campus. If I had to guess, I would say about 25 percent of what I do here is mental health related.

The counselors cannot prescribe medicine. So, I see patients who need any type of pharmacologic management.

Q. What’s one recommendation you would give Wesleyan students to promote better health and well-being?

A. It’s very difficult to limit it to one recommendation. Every student is different and has a different set of challenges. In general, I

would really like our students to eat better and get more sleep.

Q. Let’s turn to your life outside of work. Tell us about your family.

A. I have a wonderful husband. We’ve been married for almost 17 years. We have three daughters. Gabriella just turned 11. Genevieve is 9, and Aliza Grace is 8. When my husband and I were in our late 20s, he developed acute promyelocytic leukemia. It was very sudden and unexpected. Before they started his chemo, we were told that, if we accepted the medicine, biological children wouldn’t be an option for us. We both just said we would adopt. We didn’t give it a second thought.

Two and a half years later, he was cured, and we adopted Gabriella. When she was 15 months old, the adoption agency called and asked us to adopt her sister. Genevieve was born three weeks later. When Genevieve was 11 months old, we found out—miraculously—that I was pregnant. It was a very chaotic but wonderful three years.

Even before we were married, we had always planned to have one parent stay home with the kids. When the girls were born, I was practicing medicine, and my husband was working as a massage therapist with hospice. He liked it, but it just made sense for him to be the one to stay home.

Q. What do you like to do as far as hobbies?

A. I love to travel; watch my girls play their sports; swim; bike ride; and read.

Q. Identify your favorites from the following list:

- Cuisine: Italian.
- Movie: I’m not sure if this is a favorite, but I really liked “The Art of Racing in the Rain.” The book is better, but the movie is good.
- TV Shows: “The Office” and “Homicide Hunter.”

• Pro Sports Teams: I went to school in Buffalo, so I’m partial to the Bills and the Sabres.

• A Recent Favorite Book: I read quite a bit, especially historical fiction. I just finished a four-book series called “Sallis House Plantation” that I liked.

• Social Media: Facebook. A lot of faculty and staff use Facebook Messenger to contact me, and I’m FB friends with the biological family of my two oldest girls. I like to post little updates about them for their birth mom and aunts to see.

Q. What are habits you’ve formed for your own self-care?

A. I get up an hour before the rest of my house (when it’s quiet) to ride my exercise bike and drink a big bottle of water. It helps me feel grounded and sets the stage for healthy habits the rest of the day.

NCWC Students Reflect On Black History Month

By Daniel Cooper
Decree Staff Writer

Black History Month holds different meanings for members of the Wesleyan student body.

Junior Jamonie Williams, a member of Black Men Winning (BMW), considers Black History Month as “a time to commemorate our history and be proud of the progress we’ve made as a race in terms of the fight for equality.”

Fellow BMW member Samuel Snead offered a similar opinion. “To me, Black History Month means that we recognize all the great African-Americans who have paved the way for us to be able to do what we do today, like going to a college,” Snead said. “We also recognized them for standing up for equal rights.”

Senior Gary Daeis said Black History Month shows the progress that African-Americans have made throughout history. “It allows us to celebrate the people before us that fought for our rights and freedom,” he exclaimed. “This month is

a remembrance of what used to be and what could have been.”

Giavonne Minns provided a similar view on the subject. “Black History Month is great to me because as Black people, we go through a lot of oppression just due to the color of our skin, so it’s good to have a month that celebrates us,” he said.

Minns’ roommate Timothy Carmichael agreed with him, further elaborating the importance of their history to African-Americans. “Black history is about celebrating Black excellence and celebrating future Black excellence,” he said.

Black History Month is not limited to Blacks, but is important for people of other races and ethnicities. Sophomore John Colby Branham expressed his appreciation for Black history, saying “I support the promotion and spread of a Black culture in the hopes of learning more about its history.”

Sarah Waters, a sophomore, likes that Black History Month

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The Bishops will play in their new stadium beginning with next fall’s football season. Turn to pages 4-5 for coverage of NCWC sports. Photo courtesy of Sports Information