

NFL Legend Marcellus Wiley on His Philanthropy and Giving Back Across the Next Generation

Ade Adeniji | October 23, 2023



MARCELLUS WILEY, FORMER NFL DEFENSIVE END

Born in Compton, California, NFL legend Marcellus Wiley beat the odds in many ways. Attending what is now known as Saint Monica Preparatory, Wiley showed a knack for football, track and field, and academics – making the National Honor Society and being named 1988 National Typewriting Champion. He went on to attend Columbia University, where he continued to play football, graduating in 1997.

Wiley played 10 seasons in the NFL, including with the Buffalo Bills, San Diego Chargers and Dallas Cowboys. In 2001, the defensive end was selected to the AFC Pro Bowl team and made NFL’s top 50 players list twice. And Wiley hasn’t disappeared from the spotlight, either, spending over a decade with ESPN, where he is the cohost of hit TV show “SportsNation” and “Max & Marcellus” on ESPNLA radio.

But while Wiley was charting a path for himself through football, he also built a philanthropic track record. He has supported a range of charities including After-School All-Stars Los Angeles, Limitless Initiative, which works in STEM, and YellowBrick, a career preparedness organization. In 2009, he received the Advocate Award from the Brady Center to Prevent Gun Violence. And a few years ago, he launched [Project Transition](#) to empower youth from disadvantaged backgrounds.

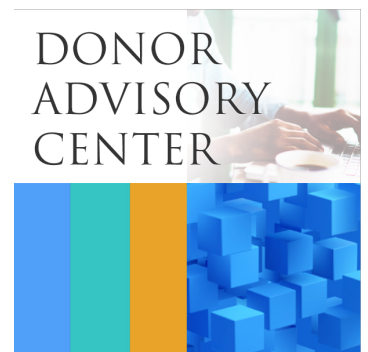
For all these efforts, Wiley was honored recently at the Children’s Resilience in Film Awards ceremony in Los Angeles, hosted by Shine Global. I caught up with him just before the event, and we talked about how his early story plays into the giving he’s engaged in, what he’s most proud of in his work with Project Transition, how next-generation NFL players are using their platforms, and what he plans on doing next with his philanthropy.

Below are some excerpts from that conversation, which has been edited for length and clarity.

I’m a big fan and appreciate the time. I was wondering if you could first start by telling me about some of your early philanthropic experiences. Things that you learned growing up, and things that you experienced as you started to play in the NFL.



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Appreciate you, man. That's love. So I'm from Los Angeles, born and raised Compton, California, off Slauson. A lot of adversity. I guess I was on the receiving end of a lot of philanthropy growing up: on welfare, grew up around a lot of people who were underprivileged and underserved. Felt like I grew up in an environment full of love, but underlying all that was some of the despair from the gangs, to the drugs, to the poverty. I was seeing a lot of people who had jobs but not careers — and not living out their dreams. And that just really sparked a flame in me and a fire to always just make this world as best-designed as I want it to be. So I went on a mission.

My first organized efforts in philanthropy were working at my friend's place, Homeless Resource Center in Hollywood. It was amazing. I'm a college student-athlete and I'm counseling kids and counseling adults older than me who were homeless about how they got off the beaten path and found themselves in situations they wanted to overcome. And just talking to them, I gained more insight, more perspective, more empathy, and frankly, more respect for anyone who's tried to make their dreams a reality — and how these kids, despite what they were going through, still had that ambition deep down inside of them. So that was my first effort into it. And that really sparked interest into always putting philanthropy first.

I played in the NFL. Three of those years, I was recognized as NFL Man of the Year for my community involvement on my teams. And I was always just in that same mindset that I was that "fork-in-the-road" kid who grew up in those bad neighborhoods, who needed someone else to help me discover my inner power. And to help me amplify that. So I've always been on a mission to do that. So that's been me in a nutshell, man, just a fork-in-the-road kid who feels so blessed and fortunate that [I'll] make sure I help another kid, and as many as possible, get to their goals and get to their dreams.

Why did you decide to start Project Transition and focus on youth? And where do your pillars, like education, youth agency and economic power, come from?

So we started Project Transition in 2018. Our mission is to help develop that inner power within and to amplify that for the world to see so you're greater than your greatest excuse. And I'm on a mission to help these kids understand that everything they want on the outside is already in them. We just got to help navigate, to help discover what that is, and then help display it for the world to see.

I will say that our pillars of family, intelligence, value, experiences, sportsmanship, and the ones you said, I really kind of reverse-engineered what I thought helped me navigate around all those conditions I was a part of. Frankly, I'm bilingual in [a manner of] speaking, between the haves and the have-nots. And I've been able to live those experiences, not just theorize on them. And I think it all starts with a structure and a foundation of a family. You need fertile soil, and you got to make sure that those seeds aren't stepped on, but allowed to blossom.

Value is important as well. I think a lot of kids are told that once they become something, they're valuable. But I want kids to know that they are alive, walking, breathing mammals and that they are valuable in their own experience, no matter what they've accomplished.

Experiences. These kids need to get out of their restricted borders. I'll give you an example. I grew up off Rosecrans [Avenue] and I only went to the beach one time in my entire life growing up until I was of age. And only crossed Wilshire once, one time. I thought I saw all of L.A. Fast-forward, and now, I live north of Wilshire, and more than that, I owned a home right off Rosecrans on the Strand on Manhattan Beach. I never knew Rosecrans went all the way to Manhattan Beach until I was an adult. That's me going to Columbia and having that experience. So you can imagine some of these other kids. So they gotta get out of those borders.

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And another one is sportsmanship. I think that sports gives us the greatest community that we have, in terms of all different types of backgrounds. So I picked these because that's just the ingredients to my success and the navigation out of my experiences.

You've spoken about how you've used your platform. But looking at this next generation of NFL players, what are they into in terms of their philanthropy and giving back?

Yeah, well they have greater tools than I ever had. I think every generation is going to be able to say that looking back. But at the same time, how will you use that messaging and amplify it? I'm really excited about issuing a challenge. And it's a worldwide challenge to everybody to make a living off of giving. We got to have a common understanding that our living is giving. I always use my platform. It's not just talking sports, it's not just talking life and entertainment. But highlighting how all of us are in this together.

This next generation, with their great resources and tools and how their voice and their images are magnified, they have a tremendous opportunity to do these things. There was a time when you had to travel the world to touch everybody. Now, you can do it from your phone. And so it's a whole different animal in terms of spreading that inspiration and spreading that encouragement. So they have a greater challenge because they have a greater opportunity, and I hope they take advantage of it.

Looking forward, what's your biggest hope for your philanthropy in the coming years?

I'm excited [about] the stepping stones that are occurring every single day in every single way, whether it's tonight, being honored at the Shine Global Awards — which is huge, because they do so much great work in media and film, where they highlight kids who have gone through poverty, discrimination and challenges, and been able to show how resilient they are. So that award I really take to heart. But I'm a football player, man, I'm a competitor. I want to have the greatest impact. And what does that mean to me? Frankly, I want everyone to be part of our team, whether that's just in time, talent or treasure. I want everyone just to volunteer to be part of my army and be part of the team of Project Transition.

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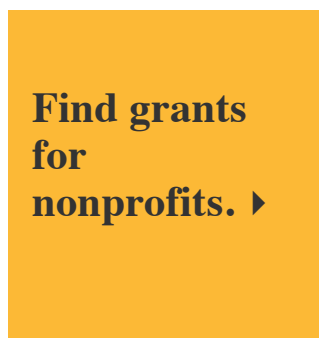
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