



## J. BRADLEY WILSON

FORMER PRESIDENT AND CEO,  
BLUE CROSS AND BLUE SHIELD  
OF NORTH CAROLINA

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Brad Wilson’s love of all things North Carolina immediately comes through as he describes his ancestry in the Northwest corner of the state. “I spent a lot of time with my grandparents on their rural farms in Watauga and Ashe Counties,” he reflects. He credits his father’s career journey in law enforcement, which began with the N.C. Highway Patrol to the Department of Motor Vehicles, as instilling early lessons of the importance of community service and leadership in one’s work. His father’s career was also the reason for frequent moves growing up. “I lived in Boone, Conover, Salisbury, Edenton, Rockingham, Lexington, and Raleigh by the time I was in high school,” Wilson swiftly recounts.

Wilson credits his fondness of history and the reading of biographies for his early drive to pursue the study of law, observing that the law can be a tool to effectuate positive change. A first-generation college student, Wilson was admitted to Duke but chose to attend Appalachian State University with a plan to transfer to help manage costs. What he didn’t anticipate when he returned to his birthplace of Boone was falling in love with ASU, the mountains, and particularly “a young lady by the name of Carole Parham, who is still with me after 46 years come July 31. There was a lot to fall in love with again. It was familiar territory. I quickly recognized the value of the ASU experience, so I stayed and have no regrets in doing so.”

Wilson went on to Wake Forest University School of Law, earned his JD, and then embarked on his legal career by joining a small firm in Lenoir. “I wanted to join a firm in a town where there were immediate opportunities to do more than practice law, to engage in the broader community in a multidimensional way.” Wilson points to his service on the NC Board of Transportation representing eight northwest counties (Division 11) and his and Carole’s engagement with their alma mater, ASU, as two highlights of that period.

In November of 1992, Wilson recalls receiving a life-changing call from then Governor-elect Jim Hunt and a subsequent conversation in which he received an invitation to join the Hunt Administration. Wilson credits one of his law partners for offering this generous advice: “We don’t want you to leave, but you must. For a lawyer who loves public service, this is the perfect job. If you do not accept it, you may forever question your decision.”

Wilson describes his time in the Hunt administration as “the most exciting and rewarding experience of my life.” However, it soon led to another opportunity, one which he says was “definitely not on my career plan.”

In late 1995, Wilson joined BlueCross BlueShield of NC as General Counsel and began what would be a 22-year career at the company. During that time, he held four different executive positions with the final position being that of President and CEO from 2010-2018.

When asked what he would identify as a highlight of his time as CEO of BCBSNC, he quickly identifies a decision made in the fall of 2016 for BCBSNC to continue to participate in the Affordable Care Act (ACA). He vividly describes a different morning commute route headed for yet another meeting with his team on the ACA issue. “I was following a school bus frequently stopping to pick up school children. I watched as families waited for the bus to open the doors, children excitedly hurrying on board, parents waving as the bus pulled away and then turning to walk up the driveway. House after house. I wondered if they were covered by the ACA. I knew what would happen if the ACA did not survive.”

It was an unwavering commitment to serve these people, the people of NC—whether BCBSNC customers or not—that spoke to him at that moment. He recounts that when he arrived at his office he knew for certain “that we had no choice. We had to figure out how to remain in the ACA and continue to provide coverage in all 100 counties.” Humbly he adds, “with the extraordinary effort of a great team and a supportive Board... we did.” Today the ACA provides coverage for well over a half million North Carolinians in all 100 counties.

Wilson’s loyalty and devotion to the state and pursuit of the greater good for all North Carolinians is palpable, exceeded only by his commitment to family. One can feel it in the way he speaks of his lifelong partner, Carole, and her support in their lifetime endeavors. Carole is the mother of their two children, a retired special education public school teacher, and remains active as a volunteer with many organizations. Their two children and spouses live in Raleigh, which means their four grandsons frequently “bring excitement, energy, and joy whenever they are around.”

“The career opportunities we have had and the servant-leadership philosophy we deploy in our endeavors are strongly aligned,” he says. This is evident by their numerous shared philanthropic efforts, including the establishment of academic and need-based scholarships at both Appalachian and Wake Forest School of Law.

Wilson currently has his own consulting firm and serves as Chair of the Governor’s Commission on Access to a Sound Basic Education (Leandro Commission). He has held academic appointments, formerly serving as Executive in Residence at Wake Forest University and now holds the same position at N.C. A&T State University.

“The health, education, and environmental infrastructure of the state” is a phrase Wilson used to describe in broad terms what he believes the focus of current and future NC leaders should be. He breaks it down into three pivotal areas: high quality, affordable, accessible healthcare for all NC citizens to ensure a healthy population; access to a sound basic education to produce a highly educated citizenry and workforce; and a clean, safe environment. “I recognize these are complex issues, but they are of paramount importance. As business leaders, it is our responsibility to engage, lead, and advocate for the wellbeing of all North Carolinians and I believe these issues are foundational to our continued progress as a state.”

On a couple of topics that are of critical importance to many North Carolinians, Wilson responds as follows: Barbecue? “Western, specifically Lexington.” Athletic allegiances? “Appalachian State, Wake Forest, and Duke, in that order.” Mountains or the Coast? “Both. You can be at the highest peak east of the Mississippi or knee-deep in the Atlantic. It’s one of the great things about North Carolina—you can have it all! That is why Ralph Lane, a leader of one of Sir Walter Raleigh’s voyages, wrote in 1585 that our state was the ‘Goodliest Soile under the Cope of Heaven.’”

“He was right!”

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