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Unspeakable

The Story of Junius Wilson

by Susan Burch and Hannah Joyner

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In *Unspeakable: The Story of Junius Wilson*, Susan Burch and Hannah Joyner present the biography of an African American man who was born deaf and spent most of his life wrongfully institutionalized as a result of his handicap. Their narrative, pieced together from legal and institutional records from Wilson's life (1908-2001), and many interviews (both oral and sign), provides a revealing window on some of twentieth-century America's most controversial public health policies and social structures.

For the first seven years of Wilson's life, he lived with his family near Wilmington, N.C., in the small community of Castle Hayne. His parents then sent him to the colored ward of the North Carolina School for the Blind and Deaf in Raleigh, where he learned Raleigh Sign Language (a form of sign taught to blacks and significantly different from American Sign Language, which was taught only to whites at the time). During a field trip to the Negro State Fair in 1924, Wilson wandered away from his classmates; he remained at large for two days and was subsequently dismissed from the school. He was sent back to Castle Hayne, where his adolescent frustrations at constant miscommunications set in motion a tragic chain of events. Falsely accused of rape by neighbors and then falsely judged insane because of his nonstandard signing, Wilson was sent to the State Hospital for the colored insane in Goldsboro (later renamed Cherry Hospital), where he was castrated, institutionalized, and largely

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isolated without communication for six decades. Staff routinely described Wilson as a gentle man who spent most of his days working jigsaw puzzles, watching television, or selling worms to fishermen going to a stream near the hospital.

In the 1990s, social worker John Wasson was appointed as Wilson's legal guardian, and his review of Wilson's records revealed the incorrect assumptions made earlier about Wilson by juries and state employees. J. Field Montgomery, then director of Cherry Hospital, confirmed that the institution had known since the early 1960s that Wilson was not insane and that the wrongful charges had long since been dropped because of indecision about how best to integrate Wilson into society. Public revelation of his story and a suit pursued against the state by disability rights lawyers eventually brought the opportunity for Wilson to live semi-independently under the care of Wasson and Everett Parker, a companion proficient in RSL, for a few years before his death in 2001.

Burch and Joyner's research reconstructs Wilson's life with extraordinary detail, and their careful handling of the material offers piercing insights into how one life was so dramatically affected by southern-inflected attitudes toward disability, racism, institutionalization policies, and eugenics. Through Wilson's story, Burch and Joyner demonstrate anew how racial prejudice affected the lives of African Americans while also drawing attention to the ways in which people who are deaf fall through the cracks of a system that continues to need reform.

Susan Burch has taught history at Gallaudet University; Charles University, Czech Republic; and the University of Aberdeen, Scotland. She is author of *Signs of Resistance: American Deaf Cultural History, 1900 to World War II*. Hannah Joyner is an independent scholar and author of *From Pity to Pride: Growing Up Deaf in the Old South*. Both authors live in the Washington, D.C. area.

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