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Deborah Wilkins, former WKU general counsel, dies at 63

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Jul 18, 2023



Deborah Wilkins

Former General Counsel and Title IX Coordinator for Western Kentucky University Deborah Wilkins passed away Monday.

Wilkins died of cancer at 63 while in hospice in Bowling Green.

Gary Ransdell, WKU's president from 1997 to 2017, said he was "fortunate to inherit her" when he took office.

"She certainly left an indelible mark on our university, and across the legal community as well," Ransdell said. "She was one of a kind and lived her professional and personal life with absolute honesty and integrity."

Wilkins was hired to WKU in 1994 as general counsel. She previously represented the university as a

partner of the Campbell, Kerrick and Grice law firm.

She remained general counsel until 2020, serving under three different presidents. She then worked as Title IX coordinator until her termination in 2021.

Wilkins was involved in university decisions at “almost any turn, whether legal in nature or not,” Ransdell said.

What kept her going for over two decades, Ransdell said, was her love of WKU passed down from her late father, James Tomes II. Tomes was WKU’s director of personnel until 1986 and the university's first Affirmative Action Officer.

“It was a bit of a legacy when she started working for the university,” Ransdell said. “She took great pride in her work and in sustaining the good name of the institution.”

Ransdell said he and Wilkins shared a vision for what the university could achieve.

“The university had a bold future, and we were going to distinguish the institution from other universities in the state and beyond,” Ransdell said. “Her decisions not only helped achieve that vision but did it the right way to avoid any compromises.”

Gordon McKerral, WKU journalism professor and coordinator, said Wilkins “embodied the Spirit of Western.”



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“She was a valued employee of WKU and a good friend, who was always available to me before and after she left WKU,” McKerral said. “This is truly a sad day.”

Students knew Wilkins through her work teaching paralegal studies, education leadership and political

science classes, to name a few.

Wilkins held a Juris Doctor degree from the University of Kentucky College of Law and received her undergraduate degree in history from WKU.

WKU expressed condolences in a statement following the news.

“The WKU Family is saddened to learn of the passing of Deborah Wilkins,” the statement read. “We extend our thoughts and condolences to her family and loved ones.”

In April 2022, following her departure from WKU, Wilkins filed a lawsuit against the university claiming wrongful termination and defamation by President Timothy Caboni.

Wilkins dropped the lawsuit in April. Her attorney, Matt Baker, said Wilkins was “ready to move on” from the case.

Wilkins is survived by her brother, James Butler Tomas II; her sister, Jay Tomes Davis; her daughter, Jessica

Wilkins Mercer; her grandsons,
Hatton Wilkins Mercer and Camden
Ross Mercer; and several nieces and
nephews.

Funeral services will be held
Wednesday at J.C. Kirby Funeral
Home, 820 Lovers Lane. Visitation
will be from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m.

In lieu of flowers, donations are
requested for Hospice of Southern
Kentucky and the Bowling Green-
Warren County Humane Society.

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