

## News anchor finds her lost legacy

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Cheryl Wills

Photo by Julie Korhummel/PAO

High Resolution Image

Cheryl Wills had asked a burning question for much of her adult life: What is my family's origin? After 30 years, she finally received answers.

Wills shared her story of discovering her family ancestry, which she has recorded in the book, "Die Free -- A Heroic Family Tale," at Tuesday's Black History Month keynote presentation, "At the Crossroads of Freedom and Equality."

Wills, an award-winning television anchor at New York 1 News, was long troubled by the question of her origin. At age 13 she endured her father's tragic death after an accident. That's when she realized she had only his obituary, but none of the family's legacy.

Thirty years later, she logged onto a computer to surf a genealogy website. That's where the first step in her discovery began. Through the help of a professional genealogist, she was able to track down a name that would be the key to opening the door where answers could be found -- Sandy Wills, of Haywood County, Tenn., who she would learn was her great-great-great grandfather.

Wills discovered that Sandy Wills was just 10 when he became one of the many slaves purchased by wealthy trader and plantation owner Edmund Wills.

During her presentation, Wills conveyed her story -- one that she had been "longing for" with enthusiasm and excitement while she displayed several pieces of documentation that she secured from the National Archives in Washington, D.C. -- an expensive purchase but the "best investment I ever made," according to Wills.

Once the key figure of Sandy was identified, Wills then began to uncover more and more about her legacy. After the Emancipation Proclamation, Sandy fled the plantation with other slaves to join the Union Army during the Civil War.

One of the documents was Sandy's enlistment certificate where his occupation was recorded as 'farmer,' not 'slave' -- an unusual written entry for that time. Wills noted this evidence with pride -- that Sandy had the determination and strength to stand up for himself. "What I have learned in this is not to let anyone define me," she said strongly.

"The story does not end there," she went on to explain. After the war ended, Sandy married Emma, also a former slave and they had nine children. Although both partners were illiterate, with the help of friends, Emma kept a written record of each child's birth in a family Bible.

Emma went on to show similar strength and determination when after her husband's death she fought to obtain his army pension. After a long struggle with the U.S. government, the family Bible, and the documented birth dates of her children proved to be the answer to acquiring the funds. With a small "X" affixed to the document, she won her struggle.

"I have learned a new respect for my ancestors," she said. "I have been privileged to have an education. I am avenging the 'X'."

The presentation was held in honor of Black History Month 2013 and co-sponsored by the Association of African American Lab Employees, the Office of Strategic Diversity Programs and SHRM WorkLife Programs.