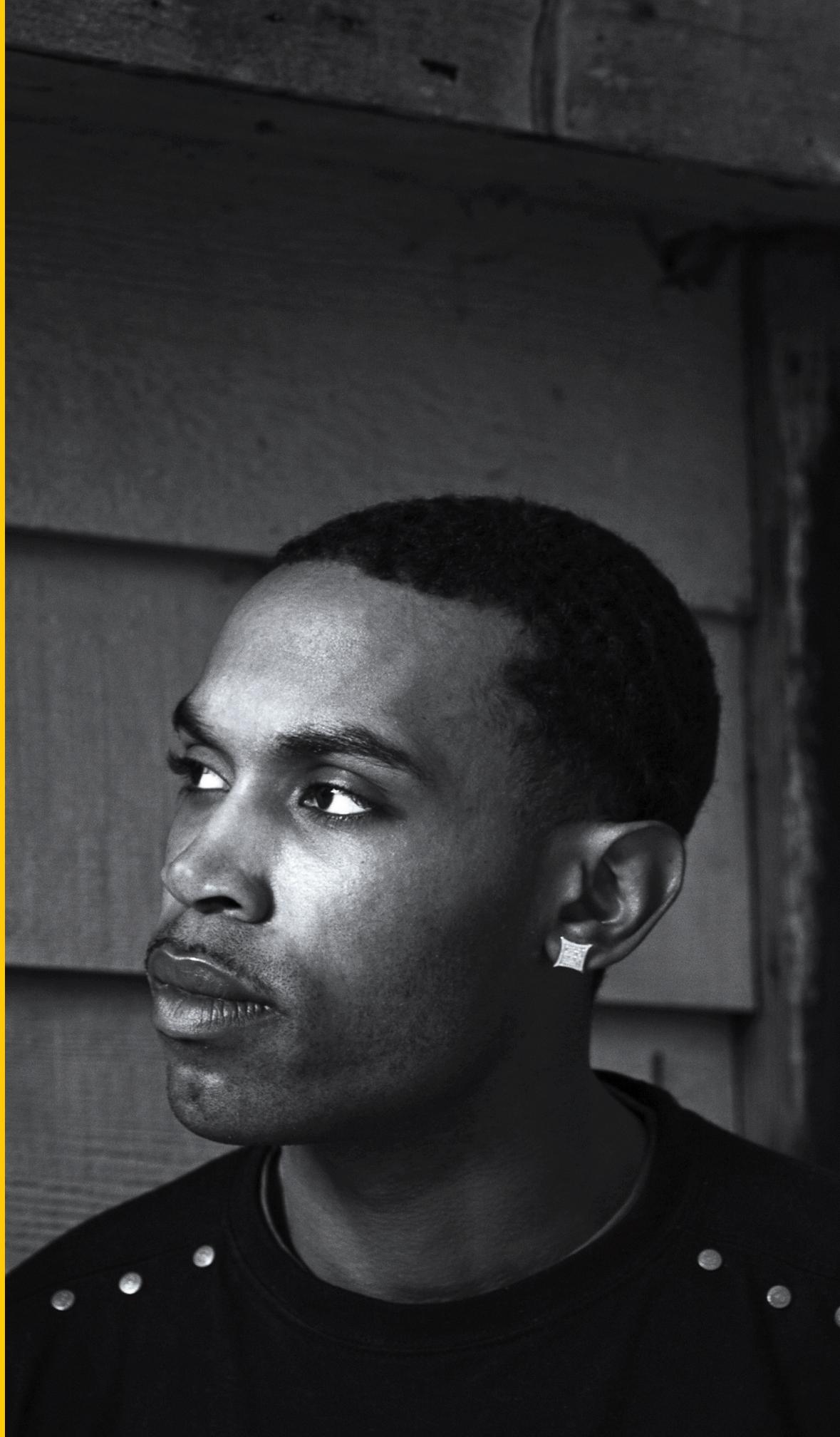




[Genarlow Wilson]

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Last summer, the story of Genarlow Wilson's ten-year sentence for child molestation thanks to a technicality in Georgia's archaic legal code (he had consensual oral sex with a fifteen-year-old peer when he was seventeen) was the subject of international media coverage, featured by outlets from CNN and the *Washington Post* to the BBC and the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*. *Atlanta* magazine ran the first major story on Wilson's case in January 2006. His legal fight ultimately contributed to a change in Georgia law. The nearly four-year battle, spearheaded by his mother, Juannessa Bennett—and executed mostly by attorney B.J. Bernstein—ended last October when the Georgia Supreme Court ordered Wilson's immediate release, proclaiming his sentence “cruel and unusual punishment.” Since his tearful reunion with his mother and nine-year-old sister, Jiaya, outside of the Al Burruss Correctional Training Center in Forsyth County, Wilson, who was a high school honors student at the time of his arrest, has been adjusting to life as a freshman at Morehouse College. Staff writer **Chandra R. Thomas** talked to Wilson about school, life after prison, and his life plan.

How's school? It's been a huge transition in my life because I had not been in classes since 2004. I'm happy to be in school, but it's hard. I have a lot of papers to do. And nobody's there to make you go to class. It's fun though. I'm enjoying school.

Do you get recognized a lot? Yeah, when I go places I'll hear people say, “That's Genarlow.” People come up and shake my hand. People do that constantly on campus. Some people will just stand and point; that's so rude.

What's your major? What do you want to do with your life? I'm just taking my core classes now, but I'm leaning toward majoring in sociology. I would like to counsel and help kids dealing with situations that they've landed themselves in.

Is it challenging being Genarlow Wilson? A lot of people support me, but I know a lot of people are watching me. I know that there are just as many people who want to see me fail as ones who want to see me succeed. I'd be a fool if I didn't know that. There are also a lot of people pulling me in a lot of different directions. They want me to speak to this organization or that organization all the time. It's tough because I want to help, but I also want to put that situation behind me and move on with my life. Before I can do anything for anybody else I've got to settle myself first.

How's your social life? When I get out of school, I don't do much. I just chill. All that partying and stuff, that's not for me. I already did all of that. I really don't approach women; I don't have to. I feel like I'm a great catch. No, but seriously, my mind is focused on my studies right now.

What's your relationship with your mother been like since you've been back home? We're real close. I feel an obligation to her that comes natural. My mom, she pretty much lets me have my own space; she lets me be my own person. I know she'll always be there for me because she was there for me when no one else was.

How has your relationship with her changed since before your prison sentence? When I was a teenager I was rebellious like a lot of teens are; now I'm more careful in my thinking. It's important to develop a relationship with a parent. I'm always going to be protective of them [my mom and sister]—sometimes I tend to be overprotective. If I don't do anything else, I'm going to always make sure that my mom and sister are straight.

Is it hard to trust again? The only person I trust is my mama. That's why I'm so overprotective of her. I left her once; that wasn't by choice, that was by force. I don't ever want to have to do that again. That's why I chose a school close to home. If they need me, I'm just a phone call away and I'm there. I visit them about two or three times a week.

What was it like the day you were released? I was overjoyed, but I was still in a state of disbelief because it was so unexpected. I hoped for the best but expected the worst, because we had had so many disappointments before. I just wanted to go home.

What was it like in prison? Just being in that environment with people telling you what to do and having no choices—it was horrible. I never got comfortable there. Prison is the lowest point in life, besides death. I'm just happy now to live on my own accord.

What do you make of your experience? I'm a normal guy. I always felt like I deserved this second chance. I was just a teenager who did not make the best choices. I'm not perfect. I thank all of those who supported me and my family.

Do you think your experience is tied to your purpose in life? I don't know what I'm supposed to do as I move forward with my life. It's up to God. I just hope that it's revealed to me in time. Now all I want to do is move on with my life and make my mother proud. ■

