Recording opens with a shot of the upper exterior of Historic DeKalb Courthouse, followed by several still images, including a stacks of books on African-American history, gardening, quilting, civil rights, and other books on subjects of interest to Elizabeth Wilson. The caption “The DeKalb History Center presents the 2006 DeKalb History Maker Award” (white letters on a black background) appears, followed by a photograph of Elizabeth Wilson with the caption “The Honorable Elizabeth Wilson” beneath. The photograph disappears, and the camera pans around the reception room upstairs in the Historic DeKalb Courthouse, first as the room has been prepared to welcome guests who have not yet arrived and later after people have gathered to honor Ms. Wilson. Decatur Mayor Bill Floyd takes the podium and addresses the audience.

MR. FLOYD: It’s a very special day. Most of you know I don’t have children. But I have a nephew who’s in business with me, and today at 12:18 his wife gave birth to their first child. So I was at Piedmont Hospital from 9:00 last night till about an hour and a half ago. So this is a special day. It’s Adeline Callahan Hefner. So thank you. [Audience applause] We are very proud. But it’s a special day; and it is my pleasure, on behalf of the people of Decatur and also on behalf of my fellow commissioners, of whom are here today, and I’d be remiss if I didn’t mention them—Jim Baskett, who is our mayor pro tem—Jim and I actually have served together with Elizabeth [Wilson] on the commission together. But Keisha Cunningham, Fred Boykin, and Mary Alice Kemp are all here today representing the city, so it’s— [Audience applause]

And as Sue Ellen [Owens Williams] said, it is appropriate, I think, today for us to welcome all of us here; but it’s appropriate for us to be in this historic building on this site, where a courthouse has stood since 1823 through slavery and the Civil War and Reconstruction and also in the ’50s and ’60s, where Elizabeth spent much of her time wandering around these streets and in this place and where much of the history that she made was made here. And it is appropriate that we do it in this building. Well, I want to welcome you here today. I am honored to be a part of this. It is a—we are honoring a history-maker, but it is a historic day. And I want to ask Judge Michael Hancock, who is one of the greatest singers I know, but also one of the greatest Superior Court judges I know, to come up and give the invocation and sing. [Judge Hancock comes up.] [To Judge Hancock] I think you’re going to sing for us. [Screen goes
When audio and video return, Judge Hancock is seated with a guitar next to the podium.]

JUDGE HANCOCK: Sue Ellen [Owens Williams] asked me a few minutes ago what was I going to sing, and I told her I'd given much thought to it and thought that maybe I would do an opening number by this group called Three Six Mafia [audience laughter]. But given the nature of the occasion, and given the person who is receiving this honor, Elizabeth Wilson, who is a hero, I thought that I would do this number. [Plays guitar and sings “The Wind Beneath My Wings.”] [Audience applause] Thank you. [Plays and sings “A Wonderful World.”] [Audience applause] [Judge Hancock leaves podium; Sue Ellen Owens Williams, Director of the DeKalb History Center, comes up to podium and addresses the audience.]

MS. WILLIAMS: I'm glad it wasn't that “Mafia” thing. [Audience laughter] Thank you, Michael. That was beautiful. Right before we get into the program, I want to ask you to check those cell phones because we're videoing; and we don't want the sound of cell phones in the background. So please check those. And also, just for Juanchella [Grooms, then community liaison for Decatur Police Department; now Juanchella Grooms Francis], who has all of the books that are on our tables as decoration on her library card [audience laughter], please don't think that they are available for you to take home and read.

I want you to just take a minute and look around the room. Just take a minute and look around the room at the people who are here. Not up front--look way back there. Look here, look over here. Like, really turn your necks, you know, to look around the room. If you look around the room, you really can't keep it straight ahead. I just want you to look around the room. It is a wonderful world. [Reads lyrics of gospel hymn as an invocation of blessing.]

There's a sweet, sweet spirit in this place. And I know that it's the spirit of the Lord. There are sweet expressions on each face. And I know that it's the presence of the Lord. Sweet Holy Spirit, sweet Heavenly dove, stay right here with us, filling us with your love. And for each blessing we lift our hearts in praise. Without a doubt we'll know, When leave this place, that we have been revived.

Thank you for the food, thank you for the people, thank you for the sweet, sweet spirit. Amen.

The DeKalb History Center, in 2000, devised, came up with the idea of the History Maker Award. We were very specific in what we wanted it to be. We wanted it to be a recognition for someone whose courageous actions had forever changed the face of a community and its people. We were very clear that we did not want an award given to someone that was an elected official—[To the audience] no offense to elected officials [Audience laughter]. We didn't want it to be for someone necessarily that the whole world knew, and it was
not necessarily to be for someone whose actions at the time everybody thought were wonderful. In fact, in most of the cases, as we've looked at the people, the actions at the time were not necessarily received by all with great favor, with applause, with praise. In fact, they were challenged openly. In 2000 we gave our History Maker Award to Jamie Mackay, a name that some of you will know well and others of you will say, “Who is Jamie Mackay?” Jamie Mackay had actions of courageous—much courage to change the face of the way DeKalb County government operated and was very instrumental in the busing of DeKalb County schools [students] and many other things where he met a lot of challenges. I'm very pleased to let you know that tonight Jamie's wife—Jamie left us; we don't have his sweet spirit with us anymore, except as we feel his presence—Sara Mackay is here tonight, along with Betty Asbury, Jamie Mackay’s sister. And Jamie received the first-ever History Maker Award. So Sara and Betty, if you'll stand so we can give you recognition. [Camera pans audience; the ladies stand to audience applause.]

We also determined that we wouldn’t give this thing every year. We don’t want it to become something that is rote and that you have to sit around wondering who you’re going to give it to this year. We will decide at the proper time when the Spirit moves us to give an award. So in 2004 the Spirit moved us again, and we gave our award to Sally Harbaugh, again a name that some of you will know and others of you will wonder, “Who is Sally Harbaugh?” Sally Harbaugh was instrumental in saving the Olmstead Parks that line Ponce de Leon, again forever changing the face of the community of Druid Hills, the City of Atlanta, and DeKalb County. Again, not a popular decision going against the DOT, a former President [Jimmy Carter], Andrew Young—I mean all sorts of folks; but she took the courage of her actions.

Again in 2006 we came up with our desire—Spirit came again, and it was to honor Elizabeth Wilson, again whose actions changed the face of the community forever. Judy Turner and Mayor Floyd were the cochairs—honorary cochairs of this event, and Judy will take us through the rest of the program. [Audience applauds as Sue Ellen Williams steps away from the podium and Judy Turner takes her place.]

JUDY TURNER: Good afternoon. It’s wonderful to see all of you here. We were kind of afraid we were going to have to stack people on top of each other. So, if you’re a little crowded, we apologize; but it’s because of the love and the thanks that we all feel for Elizabeth that so many of you are here.

I have the privilege tonight of introducing our speakers. We’ve asked just a very small group of people to talk about the impact that Elizabeth’s actions have had on them. And the first
person that we’re going to ask to come up is Coach Carter Wilson. [Audience applause as Ms. Turner leaves the podium and Coach Wilson takes his place there.]

COACH CARTER WILSON: Thank you, Judy. It is indeed a pleasure to have so many people who’ve had a hand in our raising to be here tonight to share in this wonderful occasion with us. I guess you’re wondering why I’m here talking on behalf of the Wilson children and not my older brother. Well, I guess you all know he’s long-winded, and this occasion would turn into an HBO special [audience laughter] if indeed he had the opportunity to speak. So I guess, being the next in line, this fell on my shoulders; and I’m glad to be able to do it.

Now, one of the things that I do as a basketball coach, I have the opportunity to speak all over the country to different groups about offense, defense, many aspects of the game of basketball. And one question that comes up invariably from young coaches is, “What does it take to be successful?” And invariably we always get down to what do you believe in. [Judge Hancock’s guitar falls over behind the podium. As Ms. Turner and Judge Hancock come up to move it, Coach Wilson holds up both hands and addresses Judge Hancock.] Excuse me, Judge! [Audience laughter] What do you believe in as a coach?

Tonight I wanted to have the opportunity to talk about Elizabeth Wilson and some of the things that she stands for. Well, as I started preparing for this, I came to the realization that I would be here all night if I talked about all of the things that she stood for as a person and all of the great things she’s done for us, for people in the community, and for the city of Decatur at large. So I won’t do that. But I do think it’s important that we do talk about a few of the things that are special to us as her children, things that we really believe that makes her even more special than she really, really is.

And the first thing I came up with is her ability to lead. Her leadership ability is something that stands head and shoulders above anything that I’ve ever experienced. See, as a basketball coach, one of the things that I’m charged to do is to motivate young people. So I study leaders all of the time. I study social leaders: Martin Luther King, I study Gandhi. I study leaders in business: John H. Johnson, Lee Iacocca, the Turners—Ted and Judy [audience laughter]. Even I study basketball coaches—John Wooten. And the one thing that she [Elizabeth Wilson] shares with all of them is the ability to get people to do things that they may not know that they’re going to do. [Audience laughter] I would venture a guess that everybody in this room has done at least one thing that they weren’t sure that they would do; but she called and say, “You know, Carter, I need you.” And you got to come. You got to come running. And her leadership ability is something that stands out no matter what.
You know, I remember a few years ago, we were on vacation, and we were having a
great time. At the time, you know, we were normal people. Valerie and I, we were on vacation;
and she [Elizabeth Wilson] happened to be on vacation with us. Well, the conversation started
that morning. Valerie and I were getting up, and she said, “You know, Ms. Wilson is talking
about this school board thing.” I said, “Look, if you don’t want to run for the school board, don’t
run for the school board.” Well, later that night, after a walk on the beach, she [Valerie Wilson]
came back and said, “I’m putting my name in the hat.” [Audience laughter] And that’s the kind
of leader that she’s [Elizabeth Wilson] always been—not one that’s in your face, but the kind of
leader that leads quietly from behind, sort of like Nelson Mandela, getting people to lead and do
the things that you want them to do, but never in their faces and always with a smile. And we’re
certainly appreciative of that leadership ability.

Now, the second thing that stands out is the ability to fight. If you know her at all, you
know that there’s going to be a fight. As a matter of fact, the Wilson family motto is, “If you see
a good fight, get in it.” [Audience laughter] She’s taught us that from, you know, from library
days, school board days, city—all of those things. If you see a good fight, then you must get in
it. You know, one of the things in dealing with my team, you know, invariably we’re always
asking kids to do something that they may not really believe that they can do. And I always tell
them the story about fighting. Well, a few years ago, when I was the head basketball coach at
Georgia State, she asked me, “You know, I’m going to have a little procedure done at the
hospital. Why don’t you just pick me up and take me down, and you can pick me up later.”
Fine, no problem at all. Well, as I picked her up, we’re sitting there in a room waiting on the
doctor. The doctor comes in, and I’m thinking everything is OK. And the doctor looks around.
She [Elizabeth] says, “Look, that’s my son. Anything you need to say, you can say it in front of
him. It’s no big deal.” Well, at that moment, the doctor gave her the news that she had breast
cancer. Now, it was the most amazing thing that I’d ever seen in my life. The next words out of
her mouth were, “That just gives me one more thing to fight.” No emotions, no crying, no any of
that. One more thing to fight. And ever since that moment I knew in my DNA there was
something that says that you have to fight. You must be a fighter. Every time we have a
basketball game now, in the corner of my game report, we ask the kids, “Who you going to
represent for?” Now, I know that’s not correct English, but that’s what the kids understand.
“Who you going to represent for?” And every one of them will put the initials of somebody that’s
important to them on their sneakers. Just initials, no big deal. But that’s the person that’s going
to motivate you and get you to do the things that you can’t do. On my game report, every game,
I write the initials “E.W.” That lets me know that, hey, if it’s going to be a fight, let me get in it. And I would certainly be glad to do that.

And one final thing that stands out to us, as her children and grandchildren, is the ability to share. You know, and I know that sounds like a very simple thing. You know, I’m not talking about the sharing where you’re in the sandbox and play nice and doing all of that kind of stuff. I’m talking about real sharing, where you’ve got to give of your time and give of your talents. That’s one of the things she’s always done. You know, growing up she was always the one that’s got to go to the meeting, “I got to go see about this,” “I got to do all of these things.” And our question was—and, you know, at the time we were children, and we were selfish—“Why? Why do you have to be the one to go every single time?”

And her answer fifty years ago is the same answer that she gives right now as she’s dealing with issues in the city, “You know, I need to help Ms. So-and-so with her taxes” or “Ms. So-and-so’s house is not where it needs to be, and we need to give her some help.”

“Mom, why do you have to do that?”

And the answer simply is, “It needs to be done.”

It needs to be done. And I urge all of you—and the challenge for all of us—children, people in the community, everybody—is let’s make sure that the things that need to be done, that we will continue to do. Let that be her legacy. Thank you. [Audience applauds as Coach Wilson leaves the podium. He and his mother hug before he returns to his seat. Ms. Turner goes to the podium and speaks.]

MS. TURNER: Thank you, Carter. Richard [presumably Coach Wilson’s older brother] couldn’t have said it better. [She and audience laugh.] We appreciate that. Our next speaker is Ms. Sadie Sims, who was with Elizabeth as she decided that she wanted her children to go to the same school and have the same privileges that the other children in Decatur had. Ms. Sims? [Ms. Turner leaves the podium, and Ms. Sims is escorted up by her daughter Doris, last name unknown.]

DORIS: Like Carter just said, I got a phone call about a month ago from Ms. Wilson: “Doris, I need you.” [She and audience laugh.] So we’re here. And this is my mom, Sadie Sims.

MS. SIMS: I’ve been knowing Sis [Ms. Wilson] since she come to Decatur. I’m a much older person than she is. But we just—she was always a person willing to do or work with the schools and the kindergarten. Her children—and I had children in kindergarten together But she was always there. And when at school they was always there, because I had children along with her, which—then I have children—[inaudible—could be “some” or “son”] the oldest
But she took to me as a mother. And we always, when--anything to be done, she did it. With me being an older person that I know the way. We would go to the schools or the PTA, I'd always be there. And so she was always, you know, be there. She was the president of the PTA and organized everything. You know, she was interested in her children. And I was, too. I had older children. But she was always there. And she always looked to me as a mother. And I just come to--When our schools, well, they built the schools, but we had only one school [for children of color], and they had five white schools. But we didn't have anything in our school. They never did complete this school. And our children didn't have books, didn't have desks, didn't have typewriters or anything in the school. And so children would always tell us what they didn't have. We didn't have books. But we would— But when they built the new school, we decided to— We don't have anything over here to worry about. We all go to the new school.

And some of my friends—I have worked in the schools over—I have worked in the schools, but I just know what was in the schools. But they was really-- But there wasn't nothing we could do about it. But had plenty friends told me what we should have in the school. And I know because I have worked in the other school. But Sis was a person that—when they told them that our children could—they were building the school, and they couldn't build it unless they integrated. But when they told us-- Then we had to go over there and sign up. And we got four or five--six or seven mothers to say that they will sign up for their children to go to the new school. Nobody showed up but Sis and me. [She and audience laugh.] And me being an older person. And [inaudible] scared of, and I said, “That school was built because we don't have anything.” And really, I feel if they know what we have over here, they don't—they really don't know. Hadn't been anybody over there to see. And me and Sis went over there, and we—they called on me to tell. “Now I want to send my children to the school—to Decatur High School.” I told them what we didn't have at Trinity High School, and they didn't believe it. And I told them to go over there to see. And they come over there surprised to see that we didn't have anything. Didn't have--in the Home Ec room a old stove, one stove. Didn't have gas and electric stove. Need to have a refrigerator. When they had food, they get one-- In the Home Ec class they did a roast—one roast, and cooked and have it there to show [inaudible]. Put it back in the refrigerator and show, you know. Like in another school I know, in the other school when they have cooked the roast, they would eat it, you know, the children would eat it. [Audience laughter] We just had one to show. [Audience laughter] And they couldn't believe it. And they come over there and checked and seen that we didn't have anything over there, and they
decided that—to complete the school—that our children had—they had to integrate the school.

When they get it finished, our children could go.

But when the time come, time to go, nobody showed up but me and Sis, Carter, and my three children—my three daughters. But my son didn't want to go. Didn't want to go to Decatur High. But he was on the football team, and they stayed, and then we integrated. And integration went on real nice. The children—of course, they are—we went to a Presbyterian church, and we would have Bible school in summertime. Agnes Scott and the [Columbia] seminary and Decatur churches would come out and have Bible school, and our children—the white children would come over and teach our children. And we had a good relationship with the children. But if it wasn't for Sis, I guess I wouldn't have went by myself. [Ms. Sims and audience laugh.]

And so she—we integrated the library, everything else. And just all of it—she was ready. And I mean, she didn't—she just did it in the nicest way. She didn't—wasn't demanding, no. But we—I mean—so I know—you—let them know you was for betterment of the children. Not just something just to hurt somebody. Just because you want the children to go to school. But [inaudible] she did, too. And I did, too. We just wanted better for our children and let them— She was always—anything we could do to better the community, the children, the churches, and everything else. Anything to better the children, our children. Her children—mine—her children were real small. My children was teenagers. She was right there with me. And she was all we had, just—just a worker for the community. And I see the reason her children did so good, because she helped everybody else. [Audience applause. Ms. Sims’s daughter Doris takes the microphone.]

DORIS [last name unknown]: I'll just tell you, my mom is ninety years old; so we're very proud of that. But the one thing, being one of that first group who voluntarily went to Decatur after this gallant effort, that I know that in this room tonight—and I've just been smiling all this evening, because anybody that's in here that was at Decatur High when it was first integrated and graduated after those years and thereafter, regardless of race, ethnicity, anything else, just stand up, because these are the products of that effort that happened when the schools in the city of Decatur integrated. [Several people stand, to audience applause. As Ms. Sims and her daughter rejoin the audience, Ms. Turner takes the podium.]

MS. TURNER: Thank you, Ms. Sims, for being with us tonight and for being with Elizabeth and helping change history. We have another very special lady who was involved in one of the significant community changes, and that's Ms. Sally Daniels [sic], who is going to talk about the library. Ms. Daniels [sic]?
[Recording pauses while Ms. Daniel makes her way to the podium, then resumes as Ms. Daniels begins to speak.]

MS. DANIEL: I'm deaf as a post and blind as a bat. Can you hear me all right?

[Audience responds with laughter; Ms. Daniel also laughs.] All right. There was something called the Georgia Council on Human Relations. I don't know exactly when it started—sometime in the late '50s—but there was—we started a DeKalb branch of it. [Ms. Daniel is erroneously identified with name superimposed onscreen in white letters as “Sallie Daniels.”] And I was asked to be the chair of the DeKalb Council on Human Relations. We had three things that we wanted to do. One of them was to desegregate the library. Can you imagine that African-American citizens could not go to the library in the '60s and before? There was something called a “bookmobile” that went into the black neighborhoods. And if you wanted a book, you had to be sure and get the date the bookmobile came to your neighborhood. There was something that we were also going to put in—streets, paved streets and sewers in the Lynwood Park area, which is near Oglethorpe University. And I don't even remember what the third thing was.

But the important thing was the library. Well, Elizabeth and I were the ones who were going to do it. Translation: Elizabeth did it. I was scared stiff [audience laughter]. I stayed out in my car, ostensibly to be the runaway [getaway] if she came running out [audience laughter]. But, as it happened, about ten, fifteen minutes went by, and Elizabeth came out with books. There wasn't a fight. It was as simple as that. But it was Elizabeth and her guts—she went to the Decatur library [Maud Burrus branch] and signed on and got a library card. That was how the Decatur library system was desegregated. Elizabeth did it. [Audience applause] [Recording pauses while Ms. Daniel is escorted back to her seat, then resumes as Ms. Turner takes the podium.]

MS. TURNER: Thank you, Ms. Daniels [sic]. I've heard of getaway cars in banking [audience laughter], but this is the first time I've heard of getaway cars associated with the library, so we're glad you were there to help out. Our next speaker is Candler Broom, who is going to talk about the impact on the community that Elizabeth's actions and being here had. Candler?

[Audience applauds as Ms. Turner turns the podium over to Candler Broom.]

MR. BROOM: I've got my written speech up. I asked my wife, I said, “You know, I've written the speech, because Sue Ellen said I only had five minutes.” I said, “So I wrote it,” and I said, “but I can wing it. I can talk about Elizabeth all day long.”
And she said, “How you going to do that? You can’t even remember my name most of the time. You better read it.” [Audience laughter]. So I think I will read most of it.

It’s a great honor to be here. I wouldn’t do this for anybody—at least here—except for Elizabeth Wilson. This community has always been blessed with good leaders, even though maybe in the recent history that’s slid a little bit. [Looks around pointedly as audience laughs.] I can talk about my brother-in-law like that [laughs]. People who had the foresight and the determination to make decisions and stick with them. I think back to those leaders who decided years ago that this wasn’t the best place for a train terminal and had to make a decision and sent it down the road to Marthasville [Atlanta] a little ways. I think that was a great decision. I would love to have been in on some of those meetings to hear the conversations that went on.

People like Scott Candler, county commission chairman that created a state-of-the-art infrastructure that set DeKalb County years ahead of the rest of the state. [Gestures toward Scotty Candler in the audience.] His grandson is here today, Scotty. City leaders like Roy Blount, Sr., who fought and scrapped to bring MARTA to the city of Decatur. Some people may not agree with that now, but I think it a very important happening. City leaders like Eloise Leverett, Bill Breen, Jack Hamilton, Bob Carpenter, who stayed the course in the ’60s and ’70s as people and businesses were flying to the suburbs.

Decatur in the early ’60s was typical of most small towns in the South. We had the town square, we had the courthouse in the middle, we had the local hangouts—for most of us, across the street Tatum’s Pharmacy. Everybody went—all the guys went to Tatum’s Pharmacy. The girls would drive by to see who was there, and then they would duck as they got by Tatum’s so they wouldn’t be seen. Also most cities in the South at that time had the local school system. In fact, they had two local school systems. One school system was white; one school system was black. I think the catch-phrase used was “separate but equal.” Reasonable, intelligent people understood the inaccuracy of that statement. But to preserve the status quo, heads were firmly implanted in the sand. Time again for leadership to step forward in our community; and as it had in the past, it did.

A little lady who had migrated from Greensboro, Georgia, to Decatur in 1949 rose to the challenge. Her name, of course, Elizabeth Wilson. You’ve heard the term, “Walk softly but carry a big stick.” Who said that? [Several people respond inaudibly from audience.] I don’t know anyone who exemplifies that description more than Elizabeth. A devotee of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who profoundly influenced her, Elizabeth took up the cause to integrate the Decatur city schools. The year was 1962. Elizabeth did walk softly, and she did use her big stick. She used it very politely, however. While rocks, sticks, and hate were hurled in cities all over this
country, it never happened in Decatur. In our city Elizabeth went about her job with quiet
determination. That period covered a period of about two years.

There were many significant events during that time, too many to mention in my five
minutes. One most significant event was her first meeting with then-school superintendent, Dr.
Carl Renfroe. It lasted all day. Dr. Renfroe presented the reasons integration could not
happen. A lot of that had to do—and I was surprised—with state law at the time. As we know,
and as those of us who know Dr. Renfroe, I would have loved to be in the meeting. Because I
can assure you that Dr. Renfroe did most of the talking, [audience laughter] and Elizabeth did
most of the listening. But I can also assure you that, knowing Elizabeth, that when she left that
room that afternoon, it had no effect on her or her cause whatsoever.

Over the next two years Elizabeth kept up a steady course. She was promised several
concessions over the next few years, none of which were actually granted. She stepped on a
lot of toes during that period, but she did it very softly. Two years after that initial meeting
Elizabeth went to an open house in the new high school that had just been constructed. She
went to an open house in a school that her children probably would not have the opportunity to
attend. It was at this open house that Dr. Renfroe finally approached Elizabeth and basically
said, “OK, Elizabeth, it’s time.” That was 1964; and in the fall of 1964 twenty-four African-
American students enrolled in the Decatur city schools. I asked Elizabeth what finally happened
to initiate the integration. Her response was, “The city leaders like Robin Harris, Davison
Phillips, Carl Renfroe, and many, many others stepped forward to do what was right.” She did
what most great leaders do. She gave the credit to somebody else. No rocks, no sticks, no
blood—a peaceful, orderly integration of the Decatur city schools, led by the little lady who
walked softly but carried a big stick.

One aside to show you what respect Elizabeth gained through that process happened a
few years later. I was serving on the Decatur City Commission. And I got a call from Mr. Robin
Harris. And when Mr. Harris called, I went to see him. Robin was one of those leaders I
mentioned earlier, a rock of this community, and certainly one that we lost much too early. He
said, “Candler, this commission needs black representation, and that black representation
needs to be Elizabeth Wilson.” He said, “You and the city commission need to get behind
Elizabeth and help her in her election bid.” This was not a token action; this was what was right.
And this is what the leaders at that time in our city knew was the right thing to do. I served on
the city commission with Elizabeth for six or seven years, and I can certainly tell you that Mr.
Robin Harris was right on. Elizabeth was the right person.
Real leaders don’t sit on their laurels. Elizabeth continues to be active and involved, and I know that she will as long as she’s able. She certainly fits into that category of those leaders that I have discussed tonight. Elizabeth, we love you, and we thank you. [Audience applauds as Mr. Broom leaves the podium and pauses to hug Ms. Wilson. Both return to their seats, and Sue Ellen Williams takes the podium. “Sue Ellen O. Williams reading comments from Michael Mears” appears superimposed over the screen.]

MS. WILLIAMS: Mike [Mears, her former husband] actually asked me to make these remarks. And, Elizabeth, for you, I’m going to make them. [Audience laughter] [Ms. Williams reads Mr. Mears’s prepared speech]:

I first met Elizabeth Wilson when she was organizing a healthcare clinic for the Decatur housing project. I was teaching at Decatur High School, and Dr. Carl Renfroe sent me to a public meeting where issues about the Decatur school system were being discussed. Elizabeth was one of the participants in that discussion. [Camera moves its focus on Elizabeth Wilson in the audience.] This was in the very early 1970s, and I was so impressed with her obvious dedication and concern not only for the city of Decatur but also for the people of Decatur. She was a calming influence during a rather troubling and turbulent time in Decatur. The Decatur school system had only recently gone through the process of integrating Decatur High School, and there was much concern in the community about where Decatur was heading at that time. Elizabeth was one of those individuals who maintained her dignity and poise through many public meetings.

Over the years since that first meeting Elizabeth and I got to know each other better; and I got to know one of her sons, Carter, and her daughters. Elizabeth as a single mother has done a remarkable job in instilling her values in her children. This is perhaps the greatest gift she could have given. I have always respected Elizabeth the mother even more than Elizabeth the community organizer, more than Elizabeth the commissioner, and Elizabeth the mayor. After I became mayor of Decatur, I received a call from Elizabeth, asking me to go to lunch with her. And I would add, as an aside, Mike also got that phone call from Robin Harris. We went to the Decatur Executive Club in the Decatur Federal Building. I remember that lunch so very well. We sat at the table next to the windows, looking out over Decatur’s skyline. Elizabeth told me she was thinking of running for the Decatur City Commission, and what did I think about that. I was overjoyed that she would consider running for the Decatur City Commission, and I promised her my support. As we all know, Elizabeth won that election and many reelectios afterward.
While I was mayor, and Elizabeth was serving as mayor pro tem, she and I went to Africa to visit with Decatur’s sister cities in Burkina Faso. I was so glad to be a part of Elizabeth’s first trip to Africa [Camera moves back to wider shot of Ms. Williams at the podium and the first few tables, including Ms. Wilson’s, in the audience.] and so appreciative of the opportunity to see her touch the soil of her ancestors’ continent. It was so evident that Elizabeth was returning to a place where her soul had once touched the land and the people. Watching Elizabeth visit with our friends in Burkina Faso was another of the many gifts she has given me over the years.

When I decided that I was no longer going to remain on the Decatur City Commission, Elizabeth and I discussed my exit from the role of mayor. I assumed that if I stayed on the commission until the end of my term, there would be some question as to who would be elected as mayor after the first of the year. I felt that Elizabeth deserved to be the mayor; and as the mayor pro tem, she would automatically be named mayor for the remainder of my term in office. So I resigned my position on the commission in November, and Elizabeth was named the first African-American mayor of the city of Decatur, Georgia.

Elizabeth Wilson exemplifies the very best that any community can offer to itself. She is the light which every community needs illuminating its pathways and the star which every community needs to have as its guide. She is also the friend everyone should have at least once in their lifetime. Congratulations to my friend, Elizabeth Wilson. Mike Mears. [Audience applauds as Ms. Williams briefly leaves the podium to give Ms. Wilson a hug, then returns to address the audience.]

Judy [Turner] got to throw me a curve, so I’m going to throw her one. Nibs [Gibson Stroupe] is here. Nibs is the pastor at Oakhurst Presbyterian Church, and I just told him I have got to give the invocation; but I’m going to let him come up and say a few remarks, because he was going to have an opportunity. As many of you know, Elizabeth Andrews’s husband was killed; and the service for him was at Oakhurst Presbyterian this afternoon. So Nibs has been doing double duty, but I know he’s got something wonderful to say. [Audience applauds as Ms. Williams leaves the podium and Reverend Stroupe takes his place there.]

REV. STROUPE: Thank you, Elizabeth [sic]. Sue Ellen asked me if I wanted to speak. And I said I was a preacher, so obviously I want to speak. [Scattered audience laughter] She told me to be very brief; so that’s tough for a preacher, but I’ll try. I know you’ve said a lot of wonderful things about Elizabeth. I want to add a couple. She and Ethel Steverson were among five people who were on the Pulpit Nominating Committee who called me to be pastor of Oakhurst Presbyterian Church twenty-three years ago. Elizabeth and Ethel were the black folk
on the committee, and there were three white folk on the committee. Within two years all the
white folk had left the church, and Elizabeth and Ethel are still there. So I give thanks for that,
and thanks for your support.

I first got to know Elizabeth as a part of the board of the Community Health Center—of
Oakhurst Community Health Center, which was one of her loves and I assume people have
talked about tonight. And we give thanks for her leadership of that. And as I ended up chairing
that board for a couple of years—and Elizabeth was a street warrior with the federal
government. We often had to wrestle for funds from the federal government, trying to convince
them that this [sic] was a lot cheaper to give healthcare this way and trying to convince them to
expand that model, that if we used the model of the community health centers for everybody, it
would still be a lot cheaper. We’re still trying to figure that out in our society. I don’t know where
we’re going to end up, but I can go on—I’ll stop there.

But Elizabeth was a powerful enabler of those of us who would come together. She
would get people who were from all walks of life, and we’ve heard that said. She could talk to
powerful people; she could talk to people on the street. And so we give thanks for that ability. I
often wondered how Elizabeth would—could do it, as she had to switch from being a street
warrior to being a politician. Often, if you’re a street warrior, it doesn’t go well when you get into
politics. But she demonstrated a remarkable capacity to shift her understanding and her
approach to people and, as we’ve heard, the sense that she walked softly and carried a big
stick. And she has had great influence on people and a great ability to say to everybody,
whether you have a college degree or not, whether you have an education or not, “You’re
somebody. And you belong to the God that we claim as the center of our lives, no matter what
you call that God.” She had that ability to instill in people that you are important; you are
somebody. And so we give thanks for that.

Elizabeth is one of the leaders that we’ve had. Now, we need that leadership again in
Decatur. We’ve got black folk leaving Decatur as quickly as the white folk left Oakhurst when
black folk came in. So we’ve got a lot of work to do. Elizabeth’s still part of that work, and we
give thanks for her leadership on that. She’s been a great church member, a great leader in this
community. But most of all she’s had the ability, which we all need, and that is to say we need
all of us to be part of the community—not just a certain kind of folk, not just the kind of folk we
think will make good citizens, but all of us. If we’re going to survive, we’re going to have to be
welcomed in the doors of many places. Elizabeth has done that better than anyone, and I thank
her. [Applause for Rev. Stroupe as he leaves the podium and hugs Ms. Wilson on his way back
to his seat in the audience.]
Ms. Williams takes the podium, with Bill Floyd and Judy Turner standing to the side.

MS. WILLIAMS: Elizabeth, you want to come up here? Not really, but you will. [Ms. Wilson takes her place beside Ms. Williams.] OK. Wow. [To audience] I know that you’ve sensed the words that you’ve heard over and over: gentle and kind and open and understanding, but a warrior at the same time. And all these characteristics are what make Elizabeth who she was during that time and who she is today. There are a lot of people whose actions like this alienate folks. And one of the reasons we thought this History-Maker Award was so appropriate for Elizabeth was the ability to make those changes and still have everybody like her. [Scattered audience laughter] That’s pretty remarkable. OK, we have a few things we want to do. [Retrieves a plaque from a box nearby.] Everybody loves the “things.” First of all, we’re going to give you this little plaque to put on your wall. And it says, “The DeKalb History Center History-Maker Award presented to Elizabeth Wilson for courageous actions which brought equality, justice, and fairness to a community and its people and changed us for all time. March 12, 2006.” [Audience applauds as Ms. Williams presents the plaque to Ms. Wilson.] [Mr. Floyd joins Ms. Wilson and Ms. Williams at the podium.]

MS. WILSON: That is nice!

MR. FLOYD: We’re not through yet. [Audience continues applause and rises in standing ovation. After audience is seated, Mr. Floyd continues.] We do have another honor for Elizabeth. Most of you remember some years ago we dedicated a bronze on the Square to Elizabeth, which was a very eventful day, and I remember quite well. And one of the things Elizabeth said after we had made that bronze presentation in her honor—and we haven’t thrown it away, Elizabeth. It’s just being temporarily stored over there. [Audience laughter. Ms. Wilson laughs and says, “All right.”] One of the things she said that day, “You made an ordinary person feel very special.” Well, I can tell you Elizabeth Wilson is anything but ordinary.

And I grew up in south Alabama in the ’50s—segregated south Alabama. I can remember where the black people only came downtown on— [Pauses as eyes well up with tears. To Ms. Wilson:] I’m trying, Elizabeth. [Ms. Wilson puts her arm around Mr. Floyd’s waist]—downtown on Saturday afternoon. And I can remember in my college days driving over to Montgomery, Alabama, and watching the marchers from Selma in the street. We went up in the state office building and looked down on them. And I can tell you, Elizabeth has changed this world. She’s changed this country. She’s changed this state. She’s changed this city. But more importantly to me, she changed me. [Voice breaks as he chokes back tears.]

And I thank you for that, Elizabeth.

MS. WILSON: Thank you.
MR. FLOYD: The first vote I cast as Decatur city commissioner was for Elizabeth as mayor pro tem. [Ms. Wilson and audience laugh. Audience applauds.] The first meaningful vote I ever cast was for Elizabeth as mayor. [Ms. Wilson and audience laugh.] And I would argue with [former Decatur mayor] Mike [Mears], because I don’t remember their being any question about that at all as to who was going to take over when he left.

But we have one more honor that we tried to come up with, something that we thought might be appropriate for Elizabeth. And so, because—for Elizabeth tonight—because of the generosity of these people in this room, we’re proud to announce the Mary Elizabeth Wilson Scholarship, which will be administered by the Decatur Education Foundation, in the amount of $10,000. [Audience and a beaming Ms. Wilson applaud. Audience stands. Ms. Turner holds up a large poster-size check representing the scholarship.] The amount will be awarded to a graduating senior from Decatur High School. And Sherry Breunig, would you mind coming up and accepting this on behalf of the Decatur Education— [Voice trails off.] And Gayle Gellerstedt—is Gayle here? Yeah, Gayle. [Ms. Breunig and Ms. Gellerstedt go up to podium to accept award on behalf of the Decatur Education Foundation.] It will be presented to a graduating senior from Decatur High School who has been accepted to an accredited college, university, or technical school to pursue an undergraduate degree and who demonstrates the following characteristics: a history of involvement in meaningful community service that enhances the lives of others, academic attainment that reflects a commitment to education and a potential for success in a chosen field of study as demonstrated by a GPA of 2.5 or higher, and resilience in overcoming adversity to achieve educational goals and career objectives. Congratulations, Elizabeth. [Audience applauds as Ms. Gellerstedt and Ms. Breunig hold up facsimile of check.] [Ms. Turner takes the podium.]

MS. TURNER: There are a couple of things Bill didn’t tell you. First of all this was his idea to establish this scholarship for Elizabeth, and I think that’s very fitting. The other thing is that the $10,000 is only the beginning. We have already collected enough that we know we can do ten [thousand]. But once we get everything from tonight settled, we feel like there will be more. So we thank each of you who have contributed to this and each of you who are here tonight.

We have one other person who wants to make a special presentation to Elizabeth, and then we’ll let her talk just a little bit [laughs]. Eric Willis, would you please come up? To me the exciting thing about this is how many people have seen how much Elizabeth has done for other
people all through the years, and they're wanting to do something for her. And Eric is one who came forward and said, “Can I please do this?” So Eric? [Mr. Willis takes the podium.]

MR. WILLIS: Superimposed over Mr. Willis's image onscreen is, “Eric Willis, Owner, Sonz Fitness Center”] Good afternoon. I don’t know Elizabeth as well as a lot of people that are here. When I met her, I just thought she was an average person. Now I’m kind of like blown away. [Mr. Willis and audience laugh.] You know—you know, when she came in [to Sonz], she was telling me that she was having some problems out of her knees. She wanted to get her knees strong. And I was like, “I can help you with that.” It’s the same thing I tell everybody, because I believe I can help anybody with anything. And we started to working. Probably one of the things that I appreciate the most was she allowed me to help her. A lot of people are a little timid because they don’t trust the trainer. They think that the trainer’s going to hurt them because of so many bad experiences and things of that nature. But she allowed me to help her. And whatever I asked her to do, I mean, she did. And some of the stuff, I didn’t think she’d be able to do, but she blew me away. Her strength and her confidence is just unparalleled with anybody I think I’ve ever trained, so I enjoy training her. And then we got to a point where, you know, she used up all her training sessions. And I wanted her to continue to work out, so I said, well, I have to do something so she can come back and work out. So tonight I want to present her with enough training sessions to last her for a long, long, long, long time. [Audience laughter, followed by applause] [Ms. Wilson goes up to podium, hugs Mr. Willis, and accepts an envelope from him.]

MS. WILSON, laughing: Oh, my gosh. This is great. Thank you. [Audience applauds as Mr. Willis returns to his seat in audience, and Ms. Turner approaches Ms. Wilson to let her know that it’s her turn to speak. Ms. Wilson is still laughing and is visibly moved by the preceding presentations.] There are few times when I don’t know what to say. [Takes a deep breath and exhales audibly.] And I know that this group over here at this table [in front, where she has been sitting] that’s going to tell me in a minute that I should be brief. I do want to say thank you for coming. I am totally blown away with all of you. Thank you! [Audience gives standing ovation.]

I do want to take just a minute to recognize just a few people who are just—everybody in this room is special to me. Everybody. But there are a few people that I just want you to know that’s here this evening. The young lady [Sally Daniel] who was part of the visit to Decatur library system way back in the early ’60s—and she was quiet. I thought I was quiet, but I realize that she’s much quieter than I was. And I do have to tell you this, that back in those days I think everybody probably had a plan. And they knew that if something happened that, you know,
there would be somebody there, you know, like a big group or somebody. I don’t think I and Sally and the other person who was there that morning—was a lady named Emily [Hesitates over last name.] Brinkley?—we didn’t really have much of a plan. And Sally is probably right: if we had probably came out of the door with handcuffs on, Sally probably would have left us in the [inaudible—sounds like “steps,” could be “stacks”?]. [Audience and Ms. Wilson laugh.] But the other person who was with me when we went in to check the first books out of the library was Ms. Dorothy Scott. So Dorothy, please stand up and let everybody see you. [Ms. Scott stands to applause.]

And, of course, I just need to share one little joke about when Ms. Sims and I went to the high school. Dr. Renfroe, you know, did—he talked a lot. [Audience laughter] I mean, he did talk a lot. And we listened; but when he kept insisting that he could not do what we wanted him to do, we kept—Sadie and I kept—insisting that we were not going anywhere. And we stayed there all day. And it was amazing, [Ms. Wilson and audience laugh.] because it was—again, we didn’t have a plan. We just knew that it was time to do it. Right, Sadie? And so we did. And the results of that little effort that we also didn’t have cameras and, you know, demonstrations and none of that, it was just us. And thank you, Sadie, and thank you, Dorothy Bell; because I did not do this by myself. It was with the help of you.

And then I’d like for you to meet my family. And I’ll do this quickly, because they’re going to tell me to sit down and shut up. But all the kids are here with the grandkids. So Richard, Carter, Leslie, Nicholas, Devon [spelling?], Kristin [spelling?], Annette, Keith, Valerie—could y’all just stand up? [They stand to audience applause.]

Ms.—the Sims [sic] are certainly—I wanted to be part of their family, but I could never figure out how to become part of them. I tried to play matchmaker, and that didn’t work out, you know? [Audience laughter] And so Sadie is—I mean, she is just a wonderful person, and she’s always in my life. And the same thing with Dorothy Bell. And I know that I’m the only adult in the whole world that still call her son “Bunny.” [Audience laughter] The kids grew up together, and we were a family. And we are family. And so thank you.

And then my friend who comes from Columbus, Georgia, every time there’s something for me; she’s always here for me. And we’ve been friends since she taught Richard kindergarten way back in those early years. So Ruth Weldon is here. [Ms. Weldon stands to applause.] And Sally and Lynn, thank you so much for coming, OK? And Sally Daniels [sic] has been a part of my life for League of Women Voters, Georgia Council on Human Relations, and all of the other things that made a difference in this community. And Lynn and I, we’re
League [of Women Voters] members and have been for years. So thank you. This is very, very, very special for me today.

Now, I don’t have anything else to say, other than I have—I think it’s some high school students here. I would like for them to stand up. Where are the high school students? [Several students stand throughout the room as audience applauds.] Decatur High School. The reason I would like for them to stand up, a few weeks ago I was asked to come speak to that group of students, and I just said to them, right off the bat, “Do you know who I am?” Like I’ve got some kind of status or something, you know. [Audience laughter] And they didn’t. But, you know, everybody knows Coach Wilson. So I didn’t tell them at the time that I was Carter’s mother. So as I presented to them about the library and the school and themselves focusing on something and never giving up, you know, decide what it is you want to do and do that. And then I said something to the effect that, “And if you have any questions, you might ask Coach Wilson.” And one of the guys in the class said, “See that man? I told you that was Coach Wilson’s mother.” [Audience laughter] So I invited them to come this evening because, you know, we didn’t make the news, and we have not been in the media—none of that. We just wanted to do what we knew was the best thing to do, not for our children but for all kids. And so as we use all of the facilities in Decalb County and the library system, in the high school and the elementary school, it’s for all of the kids. And that’s what we wanted to see. And that’s what we enjoy doing now.

So thank you, high school students, for coming and being a part of this celebration this afternoon.

Thank you, committee—Sue Ellen, Judy, the rest of the committee. Thank you so much. You’ve done a wonderful job. And thanks to all of you for coming. You have made me very, very happy. [Ms. Wilson leaves the podium to standing ovation. Ms. Turner takes the podium.]

MS. TURNER: In closing tonight, again, I’d like to thank each of you for coming. And I would like to recognize the committee. You’ve seen three of us up here—Mayor [Bill] Floyd, Sue Ellen [Williams]—but also Juanchella Grooms has worked with us; Beth Johnson [spelling? Sounds like “Yonsson”?]—where is Beth? Beth’s in the back of the room—she works with the History Center; and Peggy Merriss. And we thank all of y’all for being part of this today.

The books on the table were furnished today by the DeKalb Library System, but these are all books which have—a special meaning to Elizabeth. They’re gardening, quilting, cooking, African-American history, and civil rights. So these books were chosen because of the things that have been so important to her through the years. Again, please don’t take them, because Juanchella [audience laughter cuts off the rest of her sentence]. My
daughter says she doesn’t check books out of the library because they always want them back, and the DeKalb Library does want their books back tonight; so please leave those on the table.

I’d also like to thank the History Center, Sue Ellen and her staff, for sponsoring this event tonight. The History Center is a very important part of Decatur and DeKalb County. This is the group that is responsible for making sure that we’re aware of historic events in the community.

So we ask that you support them as well as supporting this wonderful event tonight.

We’ve got one last treat for you. Of all the people here who have said, “I wouldn’t do this for anybody but Elizabeth,” Judge Mike Hancock is no exception. He is absolutely wonderful, and he means a lot to Elizabeth. And having Mike here tonight has been a real treat for all of us. So Mike we thank you, and he is going to close it with the Lord’s Prayer. So would you please stand. [Audience stands as Judge Hancock takes the podium.]

JUDGE HANCOCK: It is interesting that today the International Sunday School Lesson was about the model prayer. And, if you would, please join me in bowing our heads as we go to the Throne of Grace in song. [Judge Hancock sings “The Lord’s Prayer.”] [Audience applause.]

[Recording ends with a photograph of Elizabeth Wilson.]

END OF RECORDING