

The Second Act

For 25 years, James Wilson, MD '89, was the sole pediatric neurosurgeon practicing in the state of Maine. "The average neurosurgeon does 150 to 200 cases a year, and I averaged more than 425 cases," he says.

Those patients were referred from across the state, as well as New Hampshire, and included pediatric vascular neurosurgery, brain and spinal cord tumors, craniofacial reconstruction, spina bifida surgery, and pediatric head trauma.

"I was basically on call every day and every night. Even if I wasn't on the call schedule, I would get called to help manage patients until I got there in the morning," Dr. Wilson says. "I had spectacular partners that covered for me in my absence, but it was pretty much never ending."

Because of the demands of his profession, Wilson made a concerted effort to prioritize family time and recreational pursuits. He says he was fortunate to grow up with a wonderful father himself, an auto mechanic who taught him the skills of his trade as well as to hunt and fish. By contrast, he had an uncle who was a neurosurgeon, who he viewed as a miserable father. "In undergrad and medical school, when asked what kind of doctor I wanted to be, I'd respond, "Anything but a neurosurgeon," he says.

But in the course of his studies, Wilson found that neuroanatomy came easily to him. "It just made sense," he says.

Setting a path to become a neuroradiologist, Wilson needed to pick up additional neuro-related electives to bolster his residency application. That included a rotation with Michael Shende, MD, HS '69, a neurosurgeon practicing at Crouse Irving Hospital. "It was so above and beyond anything I'd seen in my life," he recalls. "Within a week, I knew that was it."

Wilson completed his neurosurgery residency at the University of Vermont, where he



Dr. Wilson turned his lifetime passion for hunting and fishing into a second career as fishing and big game hunting guide.

became very close to his faculty members, in particular, the pediatric neurosurgeon. "He had done his fellowship at the Hospital for Sick Children in Toronto, which was the foremost institution for pediatric neurosurgery in the world, and I basically followed in his footprints," he says.

He knew he wanted to practice in an area where he could hunt, fish, and raise a family. As it happened, his residency program was starting a rotation at the Maine Medical Center, and as a fifth-year resident, Wilson was the first slated to go. Two weeks in he was offered a job. "I signed a contract that I would do my fellowship and wouldn't look elsewhere for jobs," he says.

Two years later, he moved to Maine and never left. "I absolutely adored my job and my patients. I felt so blessed to be taking care of these children, and the families were just humbling with their strength," says Wilson. "I didn't get burned out; I just wanted to do other things."

In 2015, Wilson made plans to retire at the end of 2020. He and his wife, Meg, a novelist and screenwriter, split their time between Westport Island, Maine, and Florida. Over the years, Wilson turned his love for hunting and fishing into more of an avocation, obtaining a master license as both a hunting and fishing guide as well as a master captain's license from the U.S. Coast Guard.



He guides big game archery hunters in Northern Maine in their pursuit of moose, black bear, and deer, as well as high-elevation backpack hunting in Alaska, British Columbia, and the Rockies.

Otherwise, whether taking out a charter or on his own, Wilson says he's on the water by 5 a.m. each morning fishing for striped bass, or later in the season, for shark or bluefin tuna. "We live on a piece of water called Hell's Gate. It's a violent gorge where water comes rushing through from two very large bays and it's just ideal fishing," he says. "And that's right in front of my house."

In winter months in Florida, he spends five out of seven days in pursuit of Tarpon, or backcountry fishing in a nearby marine preserve. When not hunting, fishing, or spending time with one of his five adult children, you might find him in his welding shop, working on a classic car. "Right now, I've got a 1967 Firebird convertible that's taking up some time," he says.

In other words, life is good. "I feel extraordinarily fortunate with my family, my career, and the way life has panned out," he says. "I'm very blessed."