



Sandra Wilson teaches English/gifted students at Elko Middle School in Sandston, VA.

“Follow Your Dreams”

High school dropout/ dyslexia/ rheumatoid arthritis/ English teacher at 40/model at 50

By Sandra Wilson, Teacher/Model

I have never really thought about my age. I have always done whatever I have wanted to do. Lately, however, there have been some eye opening moments. Recently, I asked my students to write in their journal about 9-11. They just sat there with blank stares.

Finally, I asked, “Why aren’t you writing?” One brave little soul spoke up, “We weren’t born yet.” Or the time I asked them if they knew who The Beatles or The Rolling Stones were? I got nothing.

If we’re lucky, we will all reach

the point where we realize that we are on the rear slope of life. It is kind of a wake-up call. However, it is what you do with that awakening that determines your happiness and success.

I was born in California to an Irish mother and an Italian father. What a combination! I am the middle child of three sisters and the only one that bears the mark of the Irish, red hair and freckles.

I was very sickly growing up. In fact, my mother would pull me around in a little red wagon.

She said I looked too frail to make it on my own. My mother and father divorced when I was 10 so my mom moved us back to Virginia.

I was at that awkward stage where I thought I was different and wondering where I would fit in. I was overweight and very shy and I was struggling at school.

As a confidence builder, my mother put me in charm school where they taught me how to stand erect and model. I developed an interest in cosmetology and fashion and dreamed of being on the runway or in a magazine.

I was still struggling in school, though. At age 16, I decided, much to the dismay of my mother, to quit school and become a hair stylist. It sure beat the repeated agony of wrestling with schoolwork.



Sandra Wilson cycles 40 to 100 miles a ride to fight rheumatoid arthritis.

So, at 17, I found my place or so I thought. At 19, I was married, and by 21, I had two beautiful girls. Of course, they were redheads! By the age of 25, I was a single mom.

My dreams were on the backburner. I was raising my daughters and just surviving.

It wasn't until my girls were in high school and I was in my mid 30s, that I decided to go back to school. I got my GED, went to community college and on to Averett University.

In college, I learned I had dyslexia. It all made sense. I knew what was holding me back and now could work on ways of coping with my disability.

It was always difficult for me to read and write, and spelling...Oh Lord...that was the hardest. I was working on my major in theater when my advisor told me that I needed to add another major to my degree so that I could teach in high school.

English, was she serious? I thought there would be no way that I could teach English, not with my disability.

Believe me, it was an awesome feeling to graduate from college the same year my youngest earned her high school diploma.

So, at the age of 40 I started my teaching career and became a grandmother. Oh, I forgot to mention that? Even with the new grandchild, I finally had time to do something for myself.

I had been enriching my mind so why not work on my body? I was training and participating in triathlons when the good old Arthur(itis) came calling. My formerly strong body was turning on me. I was spending weekends in bed and felt as if I were walking on baseballs; my hair was falling out and every joint in my body hurt.

Initially, I thought I had MS. Ultimately, I was diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis. I was

devastated. At first, I told the doctor that I was too young and did not want to ever be old and demanded that he fix me.

He laughed and said, "I can only give you something to fight the symptoms but it is up to you to fight it mentally."

That is just what I did. I couldn't run anymore due to the impact on my bones and joints. I had been cycling as part my training and it didn't hurt at all.

So, that is what I did and still do. I cycle long distance, 40 to 100 miles a ride. It helps me to stay limber and reduce the swelling around my joints. It was while riding that I thought about getting back into modeling and acting.

I must say I talked myself out of it about a thousand times. I thought, who am I to even attempt to do this while going on 50?

Then I thought, if I can conquer all of those other challenges in my life, why not this?

Soon, I found myself sitting in front of a young woman at a local

"I thought, if I can conquer all of those other challenges in my life, why not this?"

modeling agency with headshot and portfolio in hand. She informed me that there was indeed a demand for models my age.

Those young size 2 girls may dominate the runway but for me, being a size 4 to 6 works great for commercial, editorial and concept modeling. I was pleased and flattered when Lili Forrest of Deviations told me that I look like the women that she was trying to reach--mature and fit.