



Remarks at Groundbreaking for the
Eugene & Elaine C. Driker Trail on Belle Isle
April 26, 2022

A trail is of course just a connector between two pathways. But thinking of the Driker trail in that way hardly describes the pride and delight that Elaine and I feel in having our names linked to a 2000 mile roadway that will provide pleasure for hikers and bikers across the state for generations to come.

That our names are visibly joined with the name of Ralph C. Wilson Jr. at the beginning of the Iron Belle Trail is a rare and prized honor for the two of us and our families.

But an even greater honor than the tangible connection of these trails is to have our names permanently linked with a man whose vision and philanthropy will forever change the face of this city and region.

I had the very good fortune to meet Ralph Wilson late in my legal career and to become not simply his lawyer, but his friend.

And to be a friend of Ralph Wilson was to be embraced by a man of limitless kindness, generosity and commitment to the public good. He embodied what was best about the American dream, which he lived to fullest in his long and productive life. That the Driker name will be tied to his name is a distinct tribute for which the two of us are deeply grateful.

And there is yet another connection that arises from attaching our names to this trail. It comes from the 100-year-old love affair that the Driker family has had with Belle Isle.

Last Thursday marked the centennial of my mother's arrival in America, as a 17-year-old orphan from a village near Kyiv, Ukraine.

Like my father, who arrived two months later from a nearby town, the two of them were fleeing that century's mayhem in their native land that is today being so inhumanely destroyed before the eyes of the world.

The two of them met in night school, married, and soon opened a business together, the Lafayette Hand Laundry. This was a small shop located under the approach way to the ambassador bridge, which was then under construction, right next to where, starting next month, the Ralph C. Wilson Centennial Park is to be built.

Like many struggling immigrants, my parents lived over the store, where both my sister and brother spent their early years. As you can imagine, places for recreation and fresh air were in scarce supply so they found a refuge that attracted so many other new Americans who lived close to the river—the magnificent island we stand on today.



From my earliest memories of childhood, right through today, Belle Isle has been a very special place for the Driker family. Here is the earliest photo, taken in 1940 when I was three years old, of my parents and me standing on this iconic site.

Belle Isle has provided so much pleasure for Elaine and me, our children and our grandchildren, from picnics, to boating, to visits to the children's zoo, to baseball games I played in the lawyers league, to fundraisers Elaine organized for Carl Levin in the casino, to the last big celebration we had here—a surprise 80th birthday party that those closest to me arranged in Detroit's most beautiful small building, the Albert Kahn-designed aquarium, a building we visited many times with our children and grandchildren over the years.

How very fortunate we are that this special place was selected to now honor the two of us.

So, to all of you who have made this possible, from my fellow trustees and the exceptional leadership and staff of the Wilson Foundation, to the talented and dedicated members of state government, you have brought our family back to its earliest roots in America in an enduring and meaningful way, and in doing so you've connected us in the most generous way possible with Ralph C. Wilson, Jr., an extraordinary citizen of Detroit.

Elaine and I are very much in his debt, and in all of yours.

Thank you.

Eugene Driker
April 26, 2022

