

**The First Secret:
The Story of Wilma Rudolph**

VOCABULARY Preparation:
Against All Odds: Wilma Rudolph

Vocabulary words in every unit were selected by my English Language Learners. They provide a comprehensive guide to vocabulary needs. Vocabulary preparation is FOUNDATIONAL to understanding text. Have the children create a vocabulary-building section/tab in their writing manual and put these words in it.

Pneumonia

remedy

fragile

defy

sorrow

paralyzed

persistence

submitting

electrified

collapsing

autobiography

obsessed

devastated

infirmary

necessity

rejuvenating

rejected

effect

dedicated

accomplishment

spectacular

determination

Olympics

competitor

imprisonment

physical

affection

microphone

photographer

reality

barrier

motorcade

accepted

terrified

peer

aisle

effort

improvement

courage

vowed

strengthened

delirious

banquet

escorted

trounced

spirit

nod

requests

immense

greeted

disabled

droves

recruited

disqualified

integrated

inspiring

mayor

resolve

gender

score

undaunted

rescued

baton

bobbled

triumphed

banner

Against All Odds: Wilma Rudolph

The story of Wilma Rudolph is an inspiring story about an African American woman overcoming severe physical handicaps, emotional difficulties, and social barriers.



Wilma Rudolph was born in the small country town of Clarksville, just outside of Nashville, Tennessee, in 1940. She was the 20th of 22 children, and due to a fall by her mother, was born at home, two months premature, tiny and weak. Medical care was out of the question for her poor family, and was mainly available to educated whites. The closest hospital for blacks was 40 miles away in Nashville. Wilma Rudolph was not expected to live.

Wilma's mother took care of her anyway, gave Wilma all her love and affection. But Wilma was so tiny and fragile she got every cold and sickness that came through town. Her mother gave her home remedies and put her under piles of blankets to sweat out the bad stuff. That worked on the measles, mumps and chicken pox; she lived through all of those—even when other kids around her died. At age four, she came down with double pneumonia and then scarlet fever. Once again, she should have died. Then the worst thing of all happened, she got the awful crippling disease: polio.

Polio bent and paralyzed her legs and the doctors told her that she would never walk again. (Imagine that you are a tiny kid who has been sick almost all of your life, and the doctors tell you that you will never walk again.) Wilma was crushed with sorrow and despair. But her mother had another notion—that they would defy the odds. Wilma later recalled, “The doctors told me I would never walk, but my mother told me I would, so I believed in my mother.”

Wilma's mother carried her twice a week to Meharry Medical College 40 miles away in Nashville. Wilma recalled, “Always a greyhound bus, always the same route, and always the people who were black sat in the back.” Once at the hospital, they massaged and moved her legs. She tried to help too, even though the sessions were very painful. Soon her mother learned how to do everything and gave her physical therapy at home. While other kids her age started school, Wilma

was left at home, her useless leg strapped into a heavy metal brace. In some ways this was her hardest battle; being alone, not being able to play with any of her friends. Wilma wrote in her autobiography, “Being left behind had a terrible effect. I was so lonely, and I felt rejected. I would close my eyes, and just drift off into a sinking feeling, going down, down, down. I cried a lot.”

During this time Clarksville's only African American doctor would come and visit her, free of charge. Dr. Coleman was a bridge over troubled waters for her at this time. Wilma recalled, “He would come by the house every so often to check up on me; I remember him well, he was such a beautiful man. He was so kind and nice, and never pressured the poor black people for money . . . He would say, ‘Wilma, everything is gonna turn out all right. You just fight this thing, you understand?’”

At night Wilma's mom would come home after a long day at work, and after she cooked dinner for her family of two dozen, she would devote herself to serving Wilma, even though she was as tired as tired can be. She would massage and move Wilma's legs and tell her it was gonna be fine someday. Wilma's therapy hurt a lot, but the hurt was kinda good; at least there was some life in her legs. But Wilma still felt like a sick little kid and still seemed to get every flu or cold that came along. She was almost always sick. One day however, when she was starting to come down with a sore throat, she got mad. Instead of collapsing and submitting to another infirmary, she screamed to herself, “Life cannot be about being sick all the time. Enough! No more taking everything that comes along, no more drifting off, no more wondering. Enough is enough!”

And what do you think began to happen? Wilma Rudolph began to fight, she would stand up to her sorrow, stand up to feeling sorry for herself, fight through the pain in her legs, try harder even if it hurt, and she began to develop her inner spirit, build her attention, and strengthen her focus.

But she got only a little better. She tried and tried with all her might, day after day, week after week, month after month—with no progress. She tried with all her attention, but every day she failed. Another day's hope had become the daily failure. Even still, she learned to accept her reality and her necessity, and so rested fully at day's end, because she gave her best.

Sometimes she wanted to quit, but didn't. Other times she did quit, but later began again. For years she kept up her courage and persistence, even though there was little improvement.

When she finally did get to go to school on braces and crutches she was not brave or even excited, but frightened. "I had been alone so much of my life that I was terrified of my own peer group. I knew I was poor, moneywise that is, and I knew my clothes were made by my mother and not bought in some fancy store."

Wilma wanted more than anything in the world to be accepted by her classmates. But they made fun of her braces and crutches and she was crushed again. She had been a failure everyday, dreaming of the day she would get to go to school. Now at school she felt like a failure again. She wanted to do something that none of her classmates would do so that she would be great and then her classmates would have to like her.

She worked extra hard at getting her legs stronger. For months there was no improvement, but Wilma did not give up. After another year, only the slightest improvement and her extra effort did not even seem to be helping. She still walked with crutches and a leg brace. But she didn't give up. Another whole year went by and again the most frustrating tiny improvement, but it was improvement. Wilma didn't give up. Another year went by and finally she could stand without her leg brace and take a step or two. But she would fall every time and it always hurt. Even then she wouldn't give up.

Finally, just before her tenth birthday, came the day she had been waiting for. She dressed in her Sunday best clothes and went to church. She waited until everybody else went in and sat down. When she got to the front door, she took off her braces and walked all the way down the aisle. Every eye was on her, everyone was so proud of her, every heart wished her the best.

Wilma was so happy she felt like she had exploded. She could feel the spirit of happiness rejuvenating her poor little body. Even her fragile and sickly legs could be transformed. Everyday she practiced walking without her brace, like a baby learning to walk. And slowly, like a baby, it took her two more years before her next goal was reached: she could walk all day without falling and she took off her

brace forever. She sent it back to the hospital with a note of thanks and suggested that another kid could now use it.

Wilma Rudolph had fulfilled her dream of proving her mother right and the doctors wrong. But more importantly she had learned how to persist through failure and frustration. Her attention was great, her focus sharp, and now, after eight years of constant struggle and metal imprisonment, she was healthy and happy. Now she had the right stuff to set her spirit to the extra-ordinary.

Entering the seventh grade, Wilma took up basketball and tried out for the team. Even though she was the weakest kid, she had one advantage: when Coach Gray asked the kids for long and hard practices, Wilma could outlast everyone else. Not because she was the strongest, but only because she was the most determined. She made the team.

Wilma continued to work harder than her teammates, and even practiced for hours after the team practice had finished, but did not get to play in real games except for the last couple of minutes if her team was far ahead or far behind. Wilma wanted to be a starter.

And the next year was the same, Wilma warmed the bench. But instead of quitting, she practiced harder than ever. Her persistence earned her the nickname ‘Skeeter’, slang for mosquito. Even still she only warmed the bench. “I used to sit there on the bench and dream about someday becoming a star for the team, but the coach didn’t seem to know I was alive.”

Finally, after two long frustrating years, she confronted Coach Gray: she wanted a spot on the starting team. The coach listened but said nothing. But when game time came Wilma got the nod and her spirit electrified the whole team. They played with such spirit they trounced the other team.

News of Wilma’s play spread through the town. People came in droves to see the little girl who had only recently shed her braces play in competition. And Wilma was not just a popular starter, she quickly became a star, racking up points, and inspiring her whole team.

Wilma Rudolph’s spirit took their team to the state championships, where they had to first play another strong team. Undaunted, Wilma tossed in 26 points to

lead her team to another triumph. The next team was a weak team and Wilma and her crew thought they would beat them easily. They dreamed they were going to win the whole thing and go on to be the Cinderellas of basketball. They did not bring their usual focus and attention to the game and the weakest team beat them.

Wilma was devastated. They had not been defeated by hardship, but by themselves. Wilma vowed that she would focus not only when it was hard, but also when it looked like it was easy too. Thinking too much of herself had brought defeat upon her. Obsessed with losing or winning consumes your attention and then you don't have enough left over for actually focusing! Wilma vowed to strengthen her attention even more, beyond winning or losing. Her only concern would be her attention, with giving it everything, giving when she wanted to let up, giving more and more; competing only with herself, on focusing now, on trying harder or trying again—winning or not. Her resolve let her also rest fully and deeply when she was not giving her attention. She vowed not be depressed by losing nor be big-headed by winning, but to stay focused only on doing her best, resting in dedication.

Continuing to strengthen her attention muscle beyond losing and winning, Wilma had learned a great secret.

“Winning is great, sure, but if you are going to do something in life, *the secret is learning how to lose. Nobody goes undefeated all the time. If you can pick yourself up after a defeat, and go on to win again, you can be a champion.*”

Wilma was recruited by a college track coach named Ed Temple to take up running. She brought the same attention and dedication to running that she had to basketball. The little disabled girl had grown into a runner!

Wilma learned the hard way, (that is by losing!) the skills of her new sport. And when she had learned those skills from Coach Temple, she took off like a bullet.

Within a year she was the youngest person on the US Olympic team! Only four years earlier she was wearing braces! Now the little girl from the country

town of Clarksville, Tennessee travelled to the other side of the world to compete for the United States in the 1956 Australian Olympics. She was sixteen, six foot tall, and only weighed 90 pounds. But, for the first time in her life, Wilma Rudolph felt like no one cared if the color of her skin was dark. She was just another competitor, another spirited champion amongst spirited champions. Spirit cares not for the color or size or gender, but only for trying and shining and caring.

Wilma did not make any of the cuts she needed to compete in the championship races in Australia, but her team did make the relay race. She felt failure again, but now it only strengthened her resolve. Wilma's performance made the difference in the relay race, and they captured a bronze medal. She was proud and amazed and very happy.



When her parents greeted her at the airport in Nashville, everything was complete. Now Wilma had a new determination. She would be back in the next Olympics.

In 1960, four years later, Wilma made the Olympic team again and went to Rome to go for the gold. In her first two events, she not only took the golds, she also set new world records. In

her final race, she was the last leg of the relay, and by the time the baton came to her, her team was far behind. Worst still, she almost bobbled the baton which would have disqualified her. But Wilma caught her attention just in time and took off like lightning, running faster than any woman had ever, ever run before. At the end, she put on a spectacular burst of speed and inched ahead of her competitors. The crowds went crazy for her.





“The feeling of accomplishment welled up inside me . . . three Olympic gold medals. I knew that was something nobody could ever take away from me, ever. After the playing of the ‘Star-Spangled Banner,’ I was mobbed. People were jumping all over me, pushing microphones into my face, pounding my back. I had to be rescued by the American officials.”

Now Wilma Rudolph was a world hero; the little disabled girl had shown them!

She had proven to everyone how spirit and determination had transformed dead flesh into light. Requests poured in for her company. Pope John XXIII received her and then Wilma and her team traveled to visit the leaders of Europe. When they returned to New York, Wilma was mobbed. One fan even tore her shoes off of her feet; the entire country was delirious with her accomplishment.

When she finally got back to Nashville, another immense crowd welcomed her. “Everybody was there—mayors of cities, the state governor, judges, tv stations, marching bands, scores of reporters and photographers.” A police motorcade escorted her to Clarksville for her victory party. Thousands of people lined the highway waving at her. Banners hung across the streets and when she arrived in Clarksville, the entire town, black and white, turned out to greet her. And all because Wilma had insisted it be so. “It was actually the first integrated event in the history of the town. So was the banquet they gave for me that night; it was the first time in Clarksville’s history that blacks and whites had gathered under the same roof for the same event.”

The spirit of giving creates a great celebration, and sees through all color and false limits to a kinder and stronger light.

Wilma died suddenly of brain cancer in 1994, but her spirit will always shine.

Writing Response

Discuss the accomplishment of a poor sick girl who was not suppose to live or walk. Ask the children to remember when the doctors told her that she would never walk again. Ask them to imagine going from her challenging! situation to world-excellence. What did Wilma say was the secret?

“Winning is great, sure, but if you are going to do something in life, *the secret* is learning how to lose. Nobody goes undefeated all the time. If you can pick yourself up after a defeat, and go on to win again, you can be a champion.”

— Wilma Rudolph

I give all my children small prizes to those who can recite it aloud. (That way it is heard about 30 times.) Naturally, you will want to explore what it means to “learn to lose.” Have the children talk about the feelings surrounding failure and how being honest about feelings empowers one to persist.

Writing Response: Have the children INTERVIEW an adult about a time they (Dad or Mom or _____) learned this lesson of persistence through failure and accomplished something great. Examples are: getting an educational degree, climbing a mountain, having a baby, getting a particular job, learning to paint or play music, etc.

The children can use any or all of the following questions to help with their interview:

What was one of the hardest things you've ever done?

Where were you living?

Did you want to give up? Tell me about it.

Were you afraid you couldn't do it? Tell me how you felt.

How old were you?

What were your expectations; what happened?

How did you feel when you were done?

How would you describe the lessons you learned that helped you later?

Based on notes from the interview, the students are to write the story for the teacher, telling their teacher about someone in their life who did something great. But before the story is turned in, the adult-interviewed is to read the story, add suggestions, clarifications or elaborations, (and perhaps a couple of grammatical points?) and then the child is to rewrite the story, incorporating those improvements. Here you begin to teach: "Writing IS re-writing."

As the beginning writing piece, I accept all submissions that are re-written at least once. We'll introduce full-scale editing and the five-step writing process soon. For now, all submissions are praised and many are shared.

Tie the “Attention Muscle” to Distraction Management, Personal Academic Achievement

Writing Response: Engage the children in a discussion on distraction management; talk about the difficulty of focusing at length on tasks, how different distractions are present at home and school. Have the children WRITE about ONE school task that they want to work on (multiplication facts, handwriting, paragraph writing, et cetera) -- even through distractions (co-create a list of distractions).

Personal Timeline

Make a Personal Timeline

1. Have the students make a Timeline, starting with the year of their birth. Give them one sheet of paper for each year they have been alive.
2. Have them write “1” in the first top left corner, “2” in the second, etc. Fold each paper in half, top to bottom, open back up and draw a line across the crease.
3. **Review basic “scale mathematics”**: for instance, in delineating their birthday on page one of the timeline, where would it be on the first sheet? (January 1, far left; December 31, far right). We see from this exercise that each year can be divided into twelve parts/365 parts.
4. *On the top half* of each paper, the students are to write down a significant event or two from each year of their life and their home life, graphing it on the timeline in **chronological** order (add pictures too, as student below did.) *On the bottom half* of each paper, the children are to write any significant social events that happened outside their family. (For **homework**, the children get elder input.)
5. Have your students tape these sheets together *chronologically*, making their own timeline.

After the students get input from home on things that happened in their life (that they want to share!) Collect and evaluate the basic writing skills of your students. Have your students share in appropriate

ways. Note the commonalities in personal and social notations.

Save this work for their autobiographies they will soon write.

