

COVER STORY

# The Wilson Way

BY MEGAN FERNANDES | [mfernandes@bizjournals.com](mailto:mfernandes@bizjournals.com)



PHOTO BY  
EUGENE TANNER



Twenty-eight years ago, Shelley Wilson was an 18-year-old combat medic in the Iowa Army National Guard, stationed at Camp Dodge, with plans to complete nursing school during her time in the service – until a near-fatal car accident with a drunken driver changed the course of her life.

The other driver had no injuries, but Wilson suffered a left arm fracture where doctors feared amputation, a right knee fracture resulting in a knee replacement, a crushed left foot, and numerous facial fractures limiting her eyesight – injuries that required multiple surgeries and procedures to heal.

She was wheelchair-bound for several years following the incident, staying with family in her hometown in Iowa as she recovered, needing assistance with even basic day-to-day needs.

“Once you’ve gone through a near-death experience like that, your perspective changes, knowing nothing’s going to ever be as hard as this,” she told Pacific Business News. “You don’t appreciate your health and well-being until you lose the ability to be independent and have to rely on people for everything.”

When the opportunity came to complete her recovery at Tripler Army Medical Center on Oahu, Wilson flew out for what she thought would be a temporary stay but Hawaii turned out to become her new home. At age 21, she started Wilson In Home Inc., later renamed Wilson Home Care in 2004.

“I knew I was a burden for my family,” she said. “I wanted to help other people be survivors. It’s easy to be the victim, but it is so hard to push on and become a survivor.”

Today, the 46-year-old is founder and president of Wilson Care Group, the umbrella company for Wilson Home Care and Wilson Senior Living. She has been recognized by PBN throughout the years, most recently one of this year’s Women Who Means Business.

Wilson recalls there were a lot of naysayers when she took the plunge to start her own business without a business or college degree. Some called it “a pipe dream,” and while Wilson was discouraged, she felt at that point she had nothing to lose.

“Sometimes I let those voices rattle around in my head,” she said. “If I could go back, I’d tell myself stick to the passion you have in your heart for taking care of people. I believed I could succeed because I have been the patient – I know what I needed, and what I didn’t have that could have entirely changed my experience.”

Hilton Raethel, president and CEO of Healthcare Association of Hawaii, told PBN that Wilson’s entrepreneurial spirit, leadership and commitment to the community has set her apart during her longtime, active membership in the association.

“It’s a real pleasure to have members

## TIMELINE

### 1996

► Opened Wilson Home Care, which became Hawaii’s largest home health care provider and the state’s largest female-owned business.

### 2011

► Formed Wilson Care Group.

### 2013

► Added her company’s first care home, Wilson Senior Living, in Kailua.

### 2020

► Started BeWellHawaii.com and AlohaMask.com, to provide the community with PPE.

like Shelley, that are so supportive of the health care community,” Raethel said. “She has grown her business into the state’s largest licensed home health care provider and become a leader in the industry. We appreciate the work she and her team have done to become a resource to health care providers and other businesses across the state, on top of the work she does to run her business.”

Recent months have been a challenge for her and the health care industry, but she persevered to not only keep her business afloat, but to throw lifelines to other businesses, too.

## THE COVID-19 PIVOT

Before the pandemic hit this year, Wilson was in the process of developing an adult day-care program.

“It was a necessary component of what we do and what the community needs, but certainly now, that’s not possible,” she said. “With people unemployed or working from home, the need has shifted away.”

Recent months have forced Wilson and others in health care to reassess their operations from the bottom up.

“We’ve been retooling the business and to figure out how we’ll move forward,” she said.

Raethel explained that the industry reacted proactively and on the fly, which is vital because trends in the health care sector, are a reflection of trends in the community. If there is a lot of Covid-19 spread in the community, there will suddenly be spikes in the hospitals, too.

“It is remarkable that we have not had a single death in a skilled nursing facility in Hawaii,” Raethel noted. “Even though the number of positive cases have gone up, the reality is we have done incredibly well as a state.”

Wilson’s companies received a Paycheck Protection Program loan of more than \$1 million, which allowed her businesses to keep employees, even with a decrease in demand.

“People assume that with the virus, health care companies and hospitals must be thriving, but it’s quite the opposite,” Wilson said, noting that people are spooked

of further exposure to the virus.

Some patients have canceled services – either because their loved one is home more and able to care for them, or because they are afraid to seek medical attention or invite caregivers into their homes.

“We are fortunate for the PPP loan we received, it bridged a gap in the interim,” Wilson said.

Raethel said that Wilson’s struggles are common among the association’s members, and the industry as a whole is feeling the brunt of the pandemic’s economic effects.

“There are multiple challenges our health care providers are all facing and battling every day,” he said. “A lot of people are too scared to go see a doctor, get admitted to a hospital, or visit a care home after hearing horror stories [of cases spreading like wildfire in care facilities] on the Mainland or in other countries.”

Cost is another uphill battle for health care providers. According to Raethel, not only is the industry using personal protective equipment, or PPE, at roughly 10 times the pre-pandemic rate, but it is paying three to five times more than pre-pandemic costs.

“Pre-pandemic, an N95 mask would cost about a dollar to \$1.50 per mask, but now it costs us \$6 per mask,” Raethel said. “As we continue using way more than we normally use, we continue to pay a lot more, which makes purchasing a burden for all providers, on top of added costs for more cleaning supplies, labor, and employee, visitor and patient screening.”

Revenues at Wilson’s businesses initially dropped 20%, which was only worsened by the added costs of PPE for more than 500 employees.

Collectively, her employees would clock in more than 8,000 hours per week with clients, and that number has taken a significant hit as people cancel services.

“We are not yet back to where we were before, and fear is a big part of that,” she said.

Beyond the price that businesses have paid to survive the pandemic, Wilson had other challenges to solve in keeping

CONTINUED ON PAGE 16

**“I wanted to help other people be survivors. It’s easy to be the victim, but it is so hard to push on and become a survivor.”**

SHELLEY WILSON, Wilson Home Care



## COVER STORY

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 15

her employees and patients both safe and comfortable.

Masks, she explained, can appear disorientating or threatening to elderly patients with memory loss and because of new Covid-19 procedures, health care workers cannot console a patient with a reassuring touch or smile. Wilson had to reconfigure the way the staff interacts with each other and with their patients.

As part of that solution, nurses in her senior living facility in Kailua volunteered to move in to the facility on a 30-day quarantine rotation. Nurses work 12-hour shifts, and room with other teammates.

“It sounds super aggressive, but that’s the best way in which we thought we could lower the risk of residents from getting sick,” Wilson said. “A lot of good that has come from challenges that we’ve overcome and bonds we’re forming. You know, in the Army, if you have a mission and you go through something extreme and intense, you’re instantly bonded. The pandemic has bonded the staff, as they lean on one another.”

Wilson has been putting in 16-hour days, seven days a week.

“I look like hell,” she said with a laugh. “It’s hard, trying to help others while also trying to save your company. It isn’t easy, but if I don’t, who will?”

**BECOMING A PPE PROVIDER**

In January, Wilson watched closely as the PPE supply shortages started to occur on the Mainland, knowing it would happen here in Hawaii, too.

“I knew my staff and the state would need masks, so I brought in larger quantities to have a little extra to share with health care industry,” she said.

Demand for these products became so high that Wilson started a separate company called BeWellHawaii.com to provide medical grade PPE supplies to hospitals, first responders, licensed medical professionals and government agencies statewide.

“Shelley has gone out of her way to help,” Raethel said. “She has been remarkable in what she’s done to service needs of the community, health care and non-health care industries.

To date, the company has provided PPE to more than 1,000 businesses, organizations, and agencies throughout the state of Hawaii.

“Everyone is in the same boat right now,” she said. “That’s why we’re working together to get Hawaii supplies to keep the community safe.”

In April, \$250,000 worth of N95 masks and surgical gloves was stolen from a storage shed near the Kapiolani Boulevard offices of Wilson Care Group. Despite the setback, Wilson restocked and continued to act as a PPE provider.



Top left: Shelley Wilson’s passion for health care started in the Iowa Army National Guard, and directed her to become a leader in Hawaii’s health care industry.

Top right: At age 18, Shelley Wilson was a combat medic.



Bottom: A photo of Shelley Wilson’s car accident in 1992 that changed her life.

PHOTOS COURTESY SHELLEY WILSON

Raethel noted that supplying PPE was a gamble. If the pandemic had not been prolonged, Wilson would have been stuck with enough PPE to last her companies years.

She started to get phone calls from local businesses and schools that had little access to the necessary supplies to re-open safely. Wilson saw a problem and decided to be part of the solution, creating AlohaMask.com, where businesses can purchase non-medical grade PPE in volume.

“I didn’t think it would be that popular,” she recalled. “I later realized that there’s a lot of people out there that still don’t know how or where to get supplies. And with this new reality – that we will likely face for a while, we need ample supply for the local community.”

Wilson risked a lot in recent months, even taking a second mortgage out on her home to financially support her businesses and purchase PPE in large quantities.

“I leveraged everything, risking my home and businesses, but if we can save lives – that has no price tag,” she said. “I think the risk is worth the reward. There’s a gap, and we have to ask: If not us, then who will fill it?”

**‘THE WILSON WAY’**

Everything that Wilson has done, she said she’s done in “the Wilson Way” – a philosophy of hers that has become the foundation of her companies’ culture.

The Wilson Way is simple, she explained: “It’s

always doing the right thing, being the eyes, ears, and advocate for those in need,” she said. “It’s part of our mission in caring for the community to be selfless, giving our undivided love, time, and attention to those we care for. Ultimately, the mantra overall is the foundation for everything we do ... care for your ohana as we would care for our own ohana.”

This philosophy has been at the backbone of Wilson’s work across her career, especially during the pandemic.

“Hawaii is home, and I will do everything I can to continue supplying the community and businesses,” Wilson said. “It is a temporary situation, but who knows how long temporary is. In this PPE world, I feel blessed and privileged to be that supplier in the interim.”

Wilson said that looking ahead, Wilson Care Group will continue to provide care for the community, both in-home and in its senior living facility. On the medical supply side, Wilson will continue to provide PPE locally, and will assist hospitals and health care partners across the Mainland, too.

“Our team continues to focus on our main mission in caring for those in need, whether it’s care or supplies,” she said. “These are unprecedented times and I believe they require creativity, tenacity, grit, patience, and of course love. We’ve been in business serving Hawaii for the past 25 years and we hope to be celebrating another 25 years in the future – that’s the plan.”