

Pursuing Happiness for Others in Georgia
By Tim Echols

Some years ago my friend, Ken Wales, produced a movie called “Amazing Grace” about the remarkable life of William Wilberforce. Wilberforce, a Member of Parliament who took office after the Revolutionary War, not only changed Britain, but impacted the world. Many of us could learn a lesson or two from his life.

Most historians remember Wilberforce as the man who, through passionate conviction and dogged determination, almost single-handedly achieved the abolition of the slave trade in the British Empire in 1807. In fact, after his death in 1833, black leaders in New York City heralded him as the “Hercules of Abolition.” In 1858, Abraham Lincoln wrote that every schoolchild in America was familiar with William Wilberforce.

Today, those who are familiar with the story of Wilberforce know that his efforts and influence extended far beyond the political realm. Wilberforce set about to build a coalition of people and organizations that would alter the moral climate in Great Britain, the superpower of the day. After his conversion to Christianity, he made it his goal to make “goodness” fashionable among the leadership class of his day and he started with the Prime Minister and the King.

He and his followers were instrumental in creating a variety of charities with missions as diverse as educating the blind, printing and distributing Bibles, promoting animal welfare, treating ailing seaman, sponsoring vaccination efforts, easing the plight of the poor, and even helping those in debtors’ prisons. He saw great value in encouraging others to assist in any way they could.

Maine biographer, Kevin Belmonte, combed through the works and letters of Wilberforce and observed several core principles underpinning his opposition to the slave trade and his efforts toward private philanthropy and moral renewal. One of these principles was the promotion of the happiness of others. Unlike Thomas Jefferson who penned the famous “pursuit of happiness” phrase in our founding documents, Wilberforce believed that when individual citizens promote the happiness of others they are most truly promoting or pursuing their own happiness. For most people, personal fulfillment is a prime motivator, but Wilberforce believed that contributing to the happiness of others was a greater calling.

Belmonte noted that these principles “produced tangible results and, ultimately, the rich legacy of moral renewal and philanthropy associated with Wilberforce's name.” In other words, it worked, and it did so because doing “good” became a national pastime.

I love Wilberforce’s sense of individual responsibility. While he acknowledged that we must pursue excellence in the political sphere, he knew that many problems are better addressed by individuals and coalitions of people giving their time and private funds for the good of others rather than by government programs.

I know many non-profit leaders harbor an entrepreneurial spirit and could probably build wealth by working in the private sector if they desired—but they choose to serve a charitable mission instead. I understand the blood, sweat and tears they put into charity work. We should celebrate people who make these sacrifices for our communities.

As we observe Thanksgiving and enter the holiday season, let’s emulate Wilberforce by getting involved! Volunteer. Give financially. Or help lead an organization that can promote the happiness of others. When we get involved, we take the steps that William Wilberforce proved can positively impact our cities and state.

Tim Echols serves on the Georgia Public Service Commission. He founded the non-profit Family Resource Network and its program, TeenPact (see www.teenpact.com), and grew it into a national youth ministry working in 40 states. He is married to Windy and they have seven children and live in Athens. He has three degrees from the University of Georgia including a Masters in Non-Profit Organizations.