



Winter 2000  
*Bowdoin*

*Winning Ways*

*Wil Smith '00*

*Education and Technology*

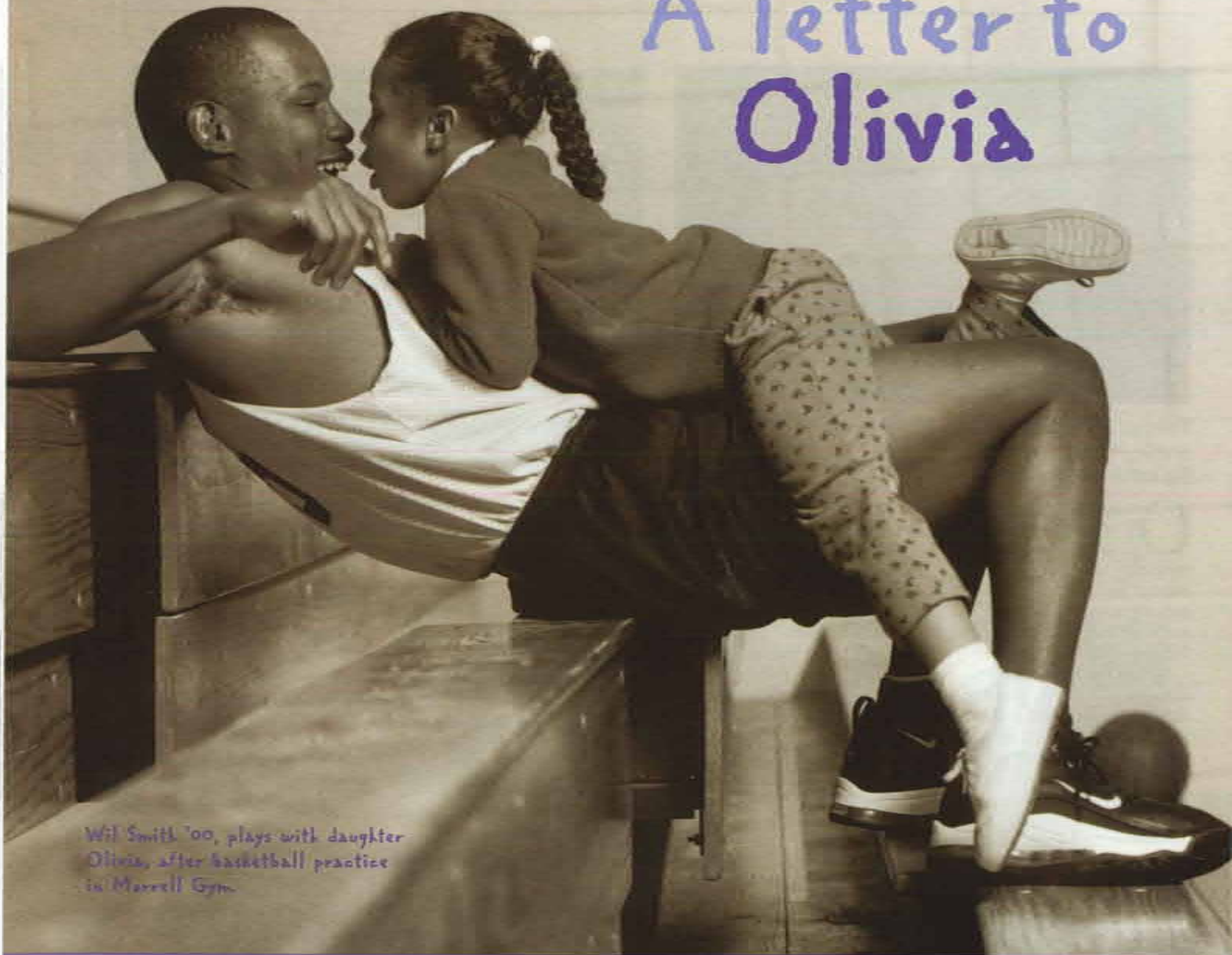
*Bowdoin authors featuring*

*Douglas Kennedy '76*

*A tribute to Frank Noyes '17*



## A letter to Olivia



Wil Smith '00, plays with daughter Olivia, after basketball practice in Marcell Gym.

Dear Olivia,

I am writing this letter to you on November 27, 1999, your father's 31st birthday. I want to tell you the story about your father, Wil Smith, and about your years together at Bowdoin College. One day you will probably ask him about these years when he was a single dad, with a young daughter, struggling to stay in school, to compete in a top Division III basketball

by Mel Allen

Photographs by Mark Alcaez

program, and to provide a home for both of you. Everyone who knows your father says how modest he is, so I suspect he will leave out a lot of the details.

You are a bouncy, pretty little four year-old girl, with braided pigtails and happy brown eyes. One of the men's basketball coaches said that when he walks with you across the campus, students are drawn to you as if by a magnet. Tim Gilbride, the head basketball coach, is so used to your presence during practice, he'll sometimes swoop you up and direct the practice with you snuggled in his arms. It was easier for Coach Gilbride to hold you when you were one or two. You're getting bigger. Last year he gave you his set of keys to play with during a practice. You ran off happily, and the keys have not been seen since.

During the games you roam through the stands as the free-spirited, and totally trusting child that you are; it must seem as if the whole world knows your name. Wil says that he plays with his head on a swivel, always looking to find you during breaks in the action. You live together in a two-bedroom apartment a few blocks from campus. Both of you eat in the student cafeteria. You have a hamster and lots of books; a stuffed Winnie-the-Pooh sleeps beside you. Most nights you are in bed by 9, and while you sleep Wil studies until 2, then wakes up at 6:30 to get you ready for your day.

Assistant basketball coach Charlie Gordon is Maine-born, used to waking at daybreak. He says on road trips he'll be up at 6, only to find Wil dressed and studying in the hotel lobby. "He never complains," says Coach Gordon. "He just does what has to be done. We have good kids on the team, but they complain they're tired, or overworked. They have no idea what it means to be Wil Smith."

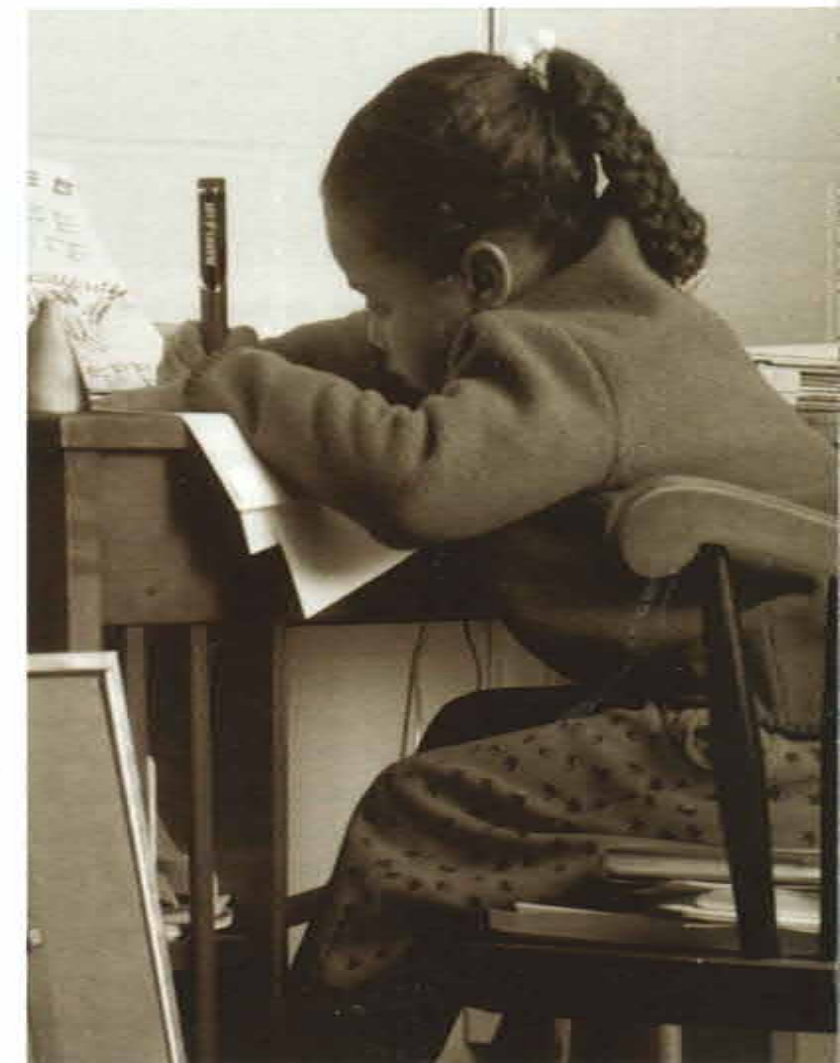
Olivia, when you are older you will remember little of these days, but when you are 12 or 14, or 16 I hope your father gives you this story, so you'll understand why Craig McEwen, the Dean for Academic Affairs, calls Wil "the most remarkable and unique student I have known in 20 years at Bowdoin."

Wil calls you "my complex joy." He says, "I know people look at it as a disadvantage having Olivia. I see it as an advantage. If it was just me, with the academic background I had coming to Bowdoin, I'd never have made it. There've been nights when I've been so tired, I've been ready to quit on papers. But then I look in on Olivia sleeping, and I turn right around and go back to my paper. To tell you the truth, I can't imagine a life without her."

You have always come first, but he is also co-captain of the men's basketball team, a four-year starter on a nationally ranked team at an age when other men are playing weekly pickup games at the YMCA. You will have only a vague memory of seeing your dad play, and even then he was what

we call past his prime. As Wil puts it, "I've lost a few steps." None of his teammates or coaches or opponents has seen him at his prime. When he was younger he was a shooter and a scorer; now he takes pride in stopping the other team's scorers. Last year he led Bowdoin in assists and steals, and he made the conference All-Defensive team. I watched him practice. If a teammate is not playing hard enough he'll hear about it from Wil. Coach Gilbride says, "Next year without Wil, we'll really have to coach again."

Over half of the Bowdoin students arrive from lives of privilege and private schools. Your father came from the Navy, a decade after graduating from a public urban high school in Florida. "I remember going to school when a successful day for a teacher was just getting home," he says. "When parents were just concerned with getting food on the table." His first year at college he had to work twice as hard just to keep up with the others. He feels angry about the disparity between his high school preparation and that of his Bowdoin classmates. "All the friends I grew up with," he



Olivia colors in Coach Gilbride's office while her dad practices.





*Wil at work at the Brunswick Naval Air Station in Brunswick. An avionics technician in the U.S. Naval Reserves, he still works regularly on the base.*

says, "never had the opportunities that Bowdoin students have had."

College administrators say Wil is the first single father to attend Bowdoin. He is a black student and athlete at a college and in a state with few people of color, and he has made it his business to make life better for others who will come after him. "I try and educate people about the people I come from," he says. "The story has to be told about the people I come from."

Betty Trout-Kelly is the Assistant to the President of Bowdoin College for Multi-Cultural Affairs and Affirmative Action. She says, "Wil will be great one day. Wil Smith will be a nationally known figure."

Wil's story begins far from Bowdoin, in the northwest section of Jacksonville, Florida. When you see your father, when you remember his caring, you are also seeing a woman you never knew, your grandmother Mildred.

"My mother was the most incredible person I ever met," Wil says. "I was the last of ten children she raised, pretty much on her own. She worked every day, and still found time to coach boys' and girls' baseball and basketball. When people say it's incredible what I'm doing," Wil says, "I say 'This isn't extraordinary. This is what I'm supposed to do.' My

mother always put us first. A lot of what I do today, I just want her to be proud of me."

Everyone in northwest Jacksonville knew the Smith boys, because they were athletes. Wil's brother Otis, four years older, was tall and rangy, a natural on the basketball court. When they weren't in school, Wil and Otis were playing ball. When Wil stopped growing he stood 5'10, the smallest of all the Smith boys, but he was fast and tough, and nobody worked harder. He wanted to play on his mother's teams, but she said no, she wanted her children exposed to the best competition. She put Wil and Otis on buses or in taxis to play for coaches in other parts of the city, coaches who knew the sport better than she did. Wil played sports year-round. He was an all-star in football, basketball and baseball.

As a freshman he became the starting quarterback for N.B. Forrest High School. His brother Otis, who went on to play seven years in the NBA, was setting school records there in basketball, records that still stand for rebounds, scoring, blocked shots. "But Wil was never just my little brother," says Otis. "He was good enough so people knew him for himself. He was loved for being himself."

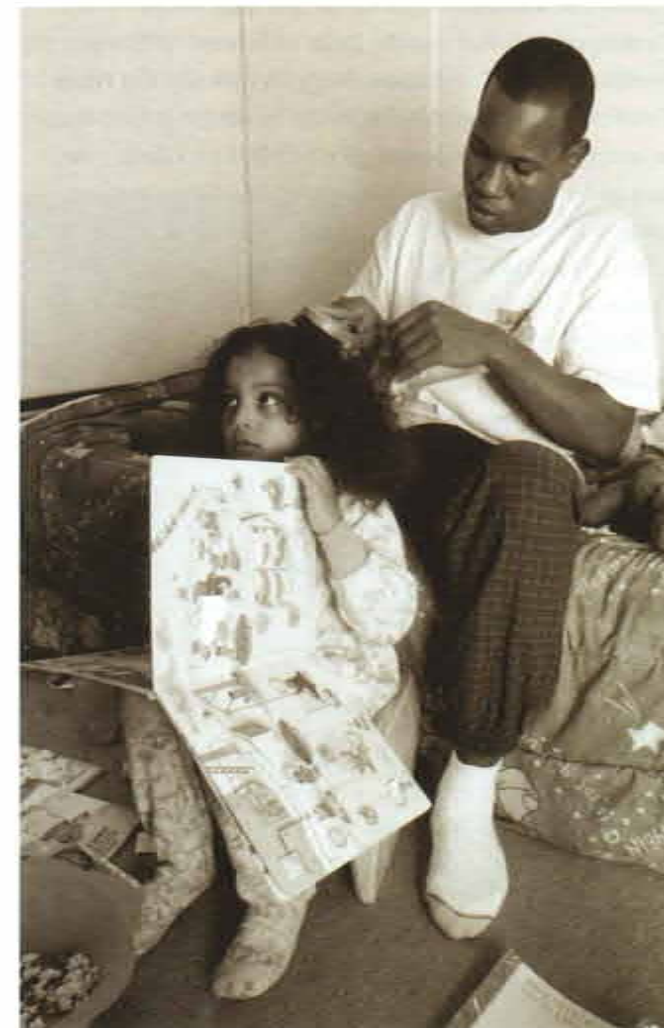
Mildred never missed a game. She learned how to drive at age 50, just so she could get to the games. She had all these

kids playing something, and sometimes she had to leave in the middle of one game, in order to see the end of another. She died of cancer on November 27, 1983, Wil's 15th birthday. When she died, she took a lot of Wil's passion for sports with her. "My mother was my biggest fan," Wil says. "When she passed away, it was like, 'why am I still playing?' A lot of my joy in sports came from my mother's look."

Wil struggled to cope. "I'd never dealt with loss," he says. He still played, and his talent carried him to all-conference honors in three sports. But he was drifting. "I never reached the heights everyone thought I would," Wil says. When colleges sent recruiting letters, he didn't bother to respond.

Reluctantly he attended Florida A&M in Tallahassee for a year. He played one season of winter baseball, but his heart wasn't in it. He left school. It was now 1987.

"I was hanging out at a store with my friends," Wil says, "and I'll never forget this. Sports Channel came on. It was a baseball highlight. One guy said, 'Wil, man, you don't belong here. You're different. I expected to see you up there, playing ball on TV.' I always remember that. I witnessed pretty heavy stuff. But there's no way to get away from good roots. It's so hard to enjoy being bad if you have good roots."



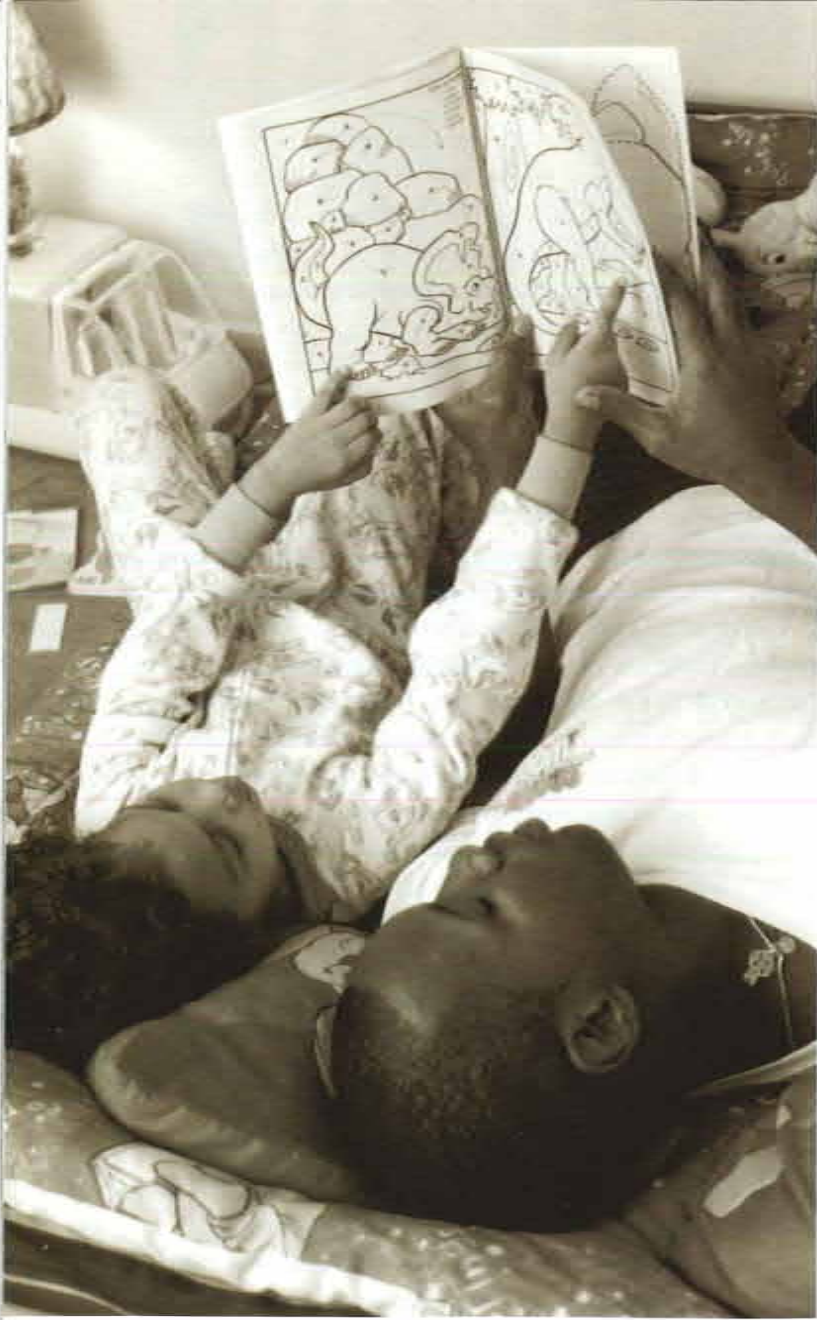
In May 1989, three years after graduating from high school, Wil enlisted in the Navy. He was trained to be an aviation electronics technician, specializing in land-based anti-submarine aircraft. He has seen a lot of this world: Sicily, Bosnia, Saudi Arabia, Iceland, Greenland, Panama, and Puerto Rico, Argentina. He served in the Gulf War. In June 1991, while stationed in Italy his orders sent him to the Naval Air Station in Brunswick. "I was happy," he says. "I thought it was Brunswick, Georgia, near my family in Jacksonville. I'd never heard of Brunswick, Maine." In Maine people still glance with curiosity at a black man walking down the street. "Kids at Bowdoin see a police car and think, 'I'm safe,'" says Wil. "When I came to Maine and I'd see a police car, I'd think, 'trouble.'"

One night he was driving back to the Navy base with his nephews in the car. He had brought two nephews from Jacksonville to live with him so they could attend Brunswick High School, a school that he knew would give them a better chance to succeed in college. Three squad cars of base policemen pulled him over. "They were looking for a black man driving a blue Thunderbird who had committed a crime," Wil remembers. "It didn't matter that my Thunderbird was white. I showed four different forms of I.D. Still they refused to believe me. They were trying to make me say I was someone else."

Each day at the base when Wil finished work he'd head to the gym for pickup basketball, but he wanted to do more with his time. "I'm best as a human being when I have others besides myself to focus on," he says. He saw an ad in the local newspaper for a volunteer football coach at Brunswick Middle School. Wil was the only applicant, and he got the job.

"I was 22 years old," Wil says. "I had 60 white kids on my team. Most of these kids had never been in contact with a black man. I had no problem with the kids, but it wasn't an easy adjustment for the parents, seeing a young black man coaching their kids. They asked for a meeting with me. They said I was too intense, they didn't think their kids were ready for it. I told them that every day after practice I'd ask kids, 'Anybody hurt? Anybody not having fun?' The kids always said they were fine. I told the parents, 'I'd like you to be on my side, but as long as your kids are with me, they're mine for three hours a day.'" By the end of the season, some of those same parents would phone Wil and tell him their kids were slipping in their work, would he come talk with them. Soon Wil became a community fixture, coaching basketball as well as football. His teams played hard, and they won. During the summer of 1995, while coaching at a basketball camp, Wil's ability and character caught the eye of Tim Gilbride, Bowdoin's men's basketball coach. Coach Gilbride asked Wil if he had considered college. Would he like to apply to Bowdoin?





apply for student aid, or room and board. He started class in September 1996. You were fourteen months old, and he had no choice but to bring you to class with him. The professors learned that when you were sick, Wil would not be able to come. The money he had saved from the Navy went faster than he could have imagined. Some days he did not eat for two or three days, just so he had enough food to feed you. "Coach didn't know," Wil says, "but I lost 17 pounds. I couldn't sleep. I got an F in a course — Latin American Studies — that required you to read about twenty books. I didn't have money for the books, and I didn't know about books being on reserve in the library. I said to myself, 'I can't make it. This is just too hard.'" What he told his advisor was simply, "Things are hard for me right now." The advisor called Betty Trout-Kelly.

On a Sunday afternoon late in his first semester Betty Trout-Kelly sat Wil down in her car. "I told him 'I know you feel you shouldn't need this support system,'" she says, "but if you don't take the help we can offer, it will be your fault. And if you don't accept it, you won't make it."

For the first time Wil told her about his struggles. "The survival piece was so great," says Betty Trout-Kelly, "he couldn't be a student." She called meetings — the Development Office and the Dean of Student Affairs and the President of the Board came. Betty Trout-Kelly and Dean Tim Foster telephoned Wil after the meetings. A fund from an anonymous donor would give \$25,000 for Olivia's day care and after school care. Wil would be able to move to campus housing, and to eat regularly with his daughter at the school. She said to Wil, "I know you can do well at Bowdoin. You'll have an opportunity to prove yourself."

Wil replied, "Thank you. I'll prove myself worthy." Olivia, in four years your father has become as well known off campus as he is on it. He says, "I feel like I have an obligation to every young person I come in contact with." He is a sociology major, and he puts what he learns in the classroom to work. He is the community advisor for Civil Rights Teams at Brunswick and Mount Ararat High Schools. He travels around the state of Maine giving talks to educators about the problems and challenges of diversity. Bowdoin is also on his agenda.

"It's so tough, socially, to be of color at schools like Bowdoin," he says. "I've been challenging Bowdoin since I've been here. Before, they were looking for students of color at prep schools. The ones at prep schools are closer to whites in their experiences. Bowdoin has got to also look to the inner city kids. And they're starting to understand." He attends conferences with the governor. Because of Wil, Bowdoin athletes now volunteer in a rural Maine school. In summer, he is a counselor at Seeds of Peace International

Wil was at a professional and personal crossroads. He had served seven years in the Navy. He was due to re-enlist. But the Navy meant six months overseas every year, and by that summer he was your father. You'd been born in May. He had met your mother in Portland after returning from overseas duty. Their relationship broke up. You lived then with your mother, but Wil came for you every Thursday, and kept you until Monday.

Wil applied to Bowdoin then left for a six month overseas assignment to Sicily. It was there that he decided he would go to college and not leave you again for that length of time. His last day of active duty was April 25th, 1996, a date that stands out for him because that is also the day your mother gave him full custody of his eleven month-old daughter.

Though Wil had been accepted to Bowdoin, he did not know the questions to ask, questions that so many parents of college students take for granted. He did not know how to

Camp in Otisfield, Maine, where Israeli and Palestinian kids live together. "I e-mail about 300 middle-eastern kids every week," he says.

None of this has come easily. Olivia, you have asthma, and when you're sick, he still has trouble trusting anybody else with your care. Last season you had a fever at the same time the team had a weekend road trip. Wil told the coach he couldn't play. It took all of Coach Gilbride's skills of persuasion, and his saying that his wife had raised three kids, and would care for you, before Wil agreed to go.

During spring semester of his junior year he was called to active duty — he's still a member of the Navy reserves — during the Balkan conflict. Just before he left, he received the Bowdoin Athletic Department's Leadership Award. He never made it on Sports Channel, but that night everyone in the room stood up and cheered in response to his award and his speech. Before leaving, he scrambled to get you to Florida to stay with your aunt, finished work for two courses, took incompletes in the rest, and left for possible war. He did not know if he would be gone six weeks or six months. He came back before summer, picked you up, finished some papers, and got ready for his final year as a student-athlete.

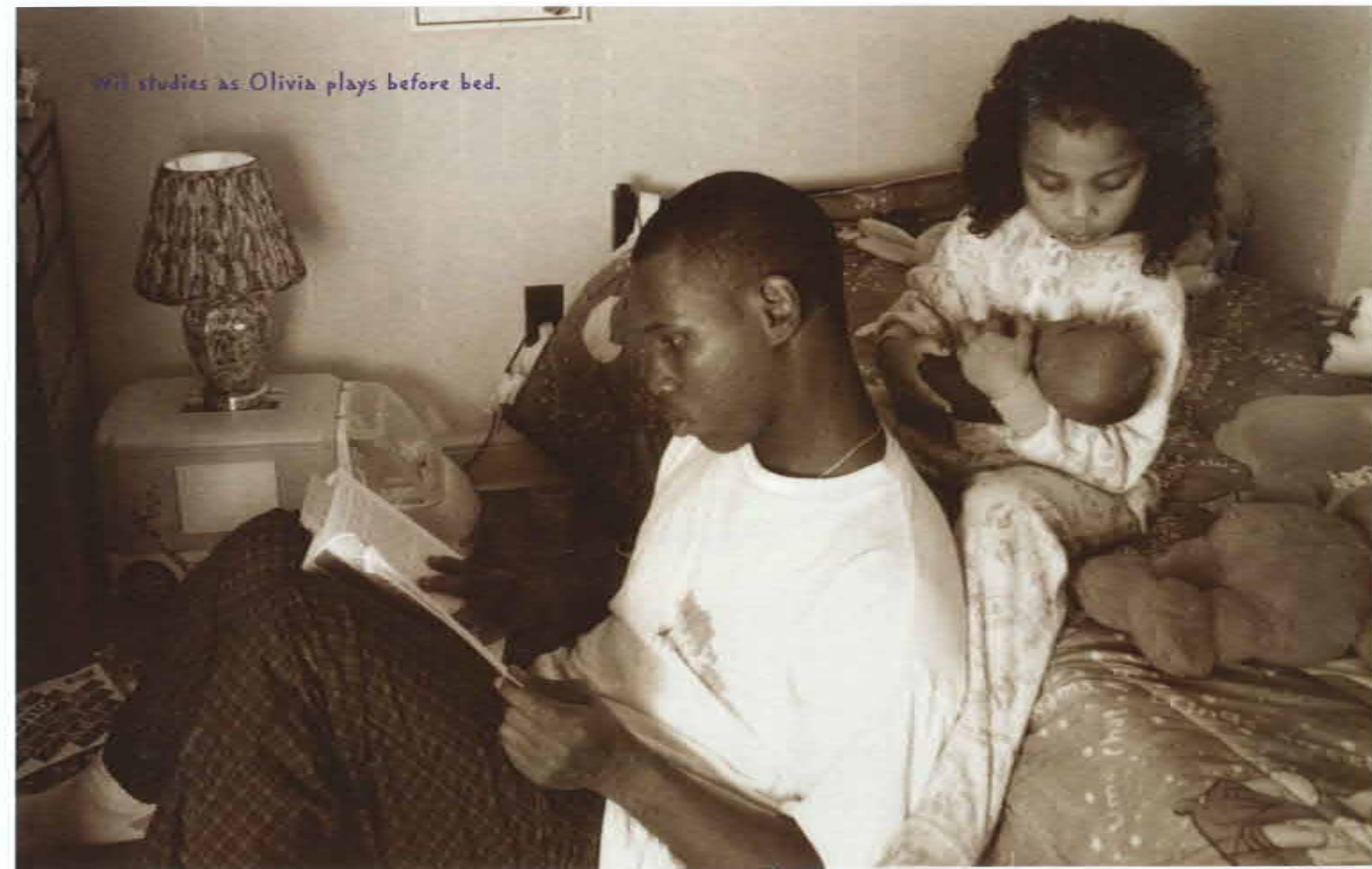
I wonder where you will be when you read this. Wil is torn about what he will do when he leaves Bowdoin. Law School is a possibility. His roots are in Florida, but Maine has opened his world. "I've had this conversation over and

over with myself," Wil says. "I saw an old friend last year in Jacksonville. I had Olivia in my arms. This guy is still an active drug dealer. He has a son now, and he said to me, 'Wil, I'm depending on you to make this place better for my son.' I can't forget about home, but my mom would want me to keep moving forward. Since I've left home, I've moved forward."

Everyone who knows him knows that whatever he decides will be in large part because of you. I talked to Wil on the phone tonight, as I am writing you this letter, and he said he had forgotten to tell me a story about you.

"When she was two," he said, "I was walking her to school. It was cold, and I was holding her hand. My mind was in turmoil. I had midterms, my car had broken down; we had no money. Olivia was talking about leaves and trees. I didn't even realize she had let go of my hand. I had taken another ten steps without her when suddenly I turned. She said, 'Dad, talk to me.' She was saying in her own way, 'Look, none of this other stuff matters.' She put life in perspective for me. All she cared about is we were there. She was glad the car had broken down. That meant we could walk to school together."

*Mel Allen has been a senior editor at Yankee Magazine for 20 years. He says Wil Smith is one of the most inspiring stories he has ever covered.*



*Wil studies as Olivia plays before bed.*