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From litigation to landfills

How general practitioner Shawn Wilson, MAI, guides a busy practice toward lively, interesting work

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Charting Her Own Course

With work ranging from litigation to landfills, Compass Real Estate Consulting founder Shawn Wilson, MAI, has found her true north as a general practitioner

by Peter Haapaniemi

As president and owner of Compass Real Estate Consulting in Lakeland, Florida, Shawn Wilson, MAI, provides expert testimony and other litigation-related appraisal services. Typically, appraisers get into that type of work after gaining a great deal of experience in traditional assignments and then bringing that body of experience to the courtroom. But Wilson has essentially done the opposite, focusing on litigation from day one of her career — literally.

When Wilson first stepped into an apprais-

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JAY CARLSON

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— Shawn Wilson, MAI

er's office, she was a young IT consultant hired to help set up the Lakeland firm's computer systems. But owner Richard Klusza, MAI, SRA, saw Wilson's potential, and soon talked her into becoming an appraiser on his staff. "I started doing litigation work for him right away because his practice was 100% litigation," she says.

It was an unusual entrance into litigation-related work, and it led Wilson on an unusual career path — one that has taken her to unexpected places, geographically and professionally. It also has resulted in a wide-ranging, thriving business — and, just as important to Wilson, an interesting and satisfying line of work.

From new hire to new business owner

When Wilson joined Klusza's firm, she found it to be a tremendous learning experience. She began work on a number of fronts, helping her boss prepare for trials and doing litigation-related appraisals. She also assisted him in his role as chair of the Appraisal Institute's Professional Practice Compliance and Enforcement Committee, which helped her build deep expertise in valuation standards and methodologies. "That extra knowledge gave me confidence to take on unusual assignments," she says — confidence that would be key later in her career.

Wilson obtained her Florida appraisal certification after gaining the required three years of experience. "I sent the application in one day after my three-year mark, passed the exam on the first try, and voila, I was a credentialed appraiser," she says. Klusza encouraged his team to earn their MAI designations, and Wilson pursued that goal in earnest.

In addition to the nuts and bolts of appraisals and litigation, the job provided valuable insight into softer skills. "[Klusza] would say, 'I'm an expert witness, but what I really am is a teacher. My job is to teach the jury or the judge why my opinion of value was done correctly and is the one that should be trusted,'" Wilson says. "So everything the staff did — the way we told the story, the way we drafted the appraisal reports, the way we designed the exhibits — all of it was very teacherly with no jargon, no trying to dazzle the jury. Just honest and simple teaching."

Klusza's practice was set up to have just one person offering expert testimony, with the staff handling litigation support. But he bent that rule a little to provide Wilson with critical experience. "Through some legal procedural quirk, one of our cases ended up in a compulsory but uncontested jury trial — a unicorn event," she says. "He suggested that I do the testifying in order to cross a big hurdle for every expert: being qualified as an expert witness by a judge for the first time. I began co-signing appraisals with him after year one, so as a report signer I was able to step in at the last moment to safely testify, with no risk to the client, at my first jury trial."

After five years at the firm, Wilson was close to completing her MAI requirements, but the practice did not provide the breadth of assignments she needed to complete her final experience review. So she moved to a firm that did. While there, Wilson brought in a significant amount of business and earned her MAI, but it became clear that a partnership path was not going to open up anytime soon.

As she considered her next step, older colleagues in the profession urged her to go out on her own. With a 3-year-old daughter, the prospect was daunting. But it was also appealing. "I was moving up in professional circles, including my AI chapter, and doing presentations for professional conferences and legal events," Wilson says. "The MAI really made a difference at this point in my career." So in 1994, she started Compass. Soon, Wilson was getting calls for assignments, and within a few months had a contract for a large eminent domain project. "At that point I was the 'appraiser of record' and began testifying as an expert witness several times per year," she says. "It was off we go, and it's really been wonderful ever since."

One thing leads to another

When Wilson launched Compass, her litigation work was entirely focused on eminent domain assignments. But she's more of a general practitioner than a specialist concentrating on a specific industry, which has led her work to expand

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Shawn Wilson's lengthy list of fascinating assignments includes appraising the land under a petroleum tank farm in the Port of Guam in 2011. "I was a 'third appraiser' for a contract reset," she recalls. "That was a fun day!"

in a variety of directions. So, too, has the word-of-mouth grapevine. "Litigation appraisers often get atypical assignments — that's the nature of the beast," she says. "When clients know you have the experience to work on their unusual assignments — those that are outside the comfort zone for many appraisers — they will refer you to their colleagues who are looking for an appraiser to handle their unusual assignments." Or, she says, an attorney she has worked with on one type of litigation may want to put her talents to use on another case involving a completely different type of property. And so on.

Case in point: An attorney who saw Wilson's work on an eminent domain assignment thought her skills would be relevant to assessing the impact of an adult-oriented use on nearby properties. That assignment led to another diminution of value assignment for another type of project: a proposed solid-waste landfill sited amid several land parcels that the property owners had slated for residential development. Wilson recognized that from an appraisal methodology perspective, the two assignments were similar, but she told the attorney that she was not a landfill expert. "The client said that nobody she found who knew about landfills was qualified for the other necessary aspects of the assignment," Wilson says, "and she was confident that I could figure out the landfill part."

Wilson quickly realized that there was very little available appraisal research on landfills, and anything she could find was dated. A self-described "monumental research geek," she created an analysis of modern landfills in Florida. A key part of that effort was to take a firsthand look at landfills to compare those that were well designed and well located with those that generated a lot of complaints from nearby residents and businesses. In a trip her staff dubbed Landfill Tour 2007, she traversed the state for several days with navigation assistance provided by her recently retired mother.

These in-person visits were especially important, given the nature of landfills. "You can look at aerial photographs and maps, but sometimes

you need to drive to the property and look over the fence," Wilson says. Photos and maps can't reveal details like how much noise there is from truck traffic, what things are like a half-mile downwind, or whether an elevated site will cause a facility to be the highest thing for miles around. "So, drive down the street at different times of day. Use all five of your senses to understand what people in the area really experience, both good and bad," she says.

"As appraisers, we're often measuring market value, and market value is what a seller will sell for and a buyer will pay if they both know what they're doing," Wilson continues. "Ultimately, appraisers measure what people can be expected to do." A solid feel for the facility and its surroundings is critical to understanding that behavior.

When Wilson began a second landfill assignment a year later, it triggered another research trip: Landfill Tour 2008. When that assignment was completed, she decided to use the insight she had developed to write an article for *The Appraisal Journal*. "I thought it would save other appraisers from having to reinvent that wheel," she says. [Appraisal Institute members can access the full article in the Y.T. and Louise Lee Lum Library: "Evaluating the Potential Impact of a Proposed Landfill," *The Appraisal Journal*, Winter 2009.]

From there, more travel was in the cards — this time to Guam. The island is a U.S. protectorate, so for appraisers, working there is much like working on the mainland. Guam was in the process of replacing its only solid-waste landfill, a pre–World War II facility that was overloaded, leaking and threatening water supplies. "All of a sudden, they had to close down the old landfill and condemn a couple hundred acres for the new landfill," Wilson says. The Guam government needed an appraiser who knew not only about landfills but also about eminent domain, which it hadn't used in decades. And it needed one who didn't have a potential conflict of interest with the project — a significant challenge on an island with a population of less than 170,000.

In the search for candidates, the government attorney eventually talked to an appraiser in Alaska. "He had read my *Appraisal Journal* article on landfills and saw in my bio that I had eminent domain experience," Wilson says. "He told them, 'Call that landfill lady in Florida.'"

They did, and Wilson worked on eminent domain issues for both the new landfill and the old one, which needed additional land for more robust containment efforts. After that, she continued to work in Guam on a variety of fee appraisal assignments from 2010 through 2017. Eventually, a friend and local MAI-designated appraiser started her own business and became the go-to litigation appraiser and expert witness on the island. "I am fortunate to be invited to work on her team from time to time," says Wilson. "I returned to Guam for several weeks this year as a consulting appraiser on a huge project she's working on."

A varied portfolio

Today, Wilson and her team — three full-time staffers and one part-timer — handle a wide range of litigation-related work, and she is qualified as an expert witness in courts throughout Florida, as well as several other states and in U.S. Bankruptcy Court. The practice includes a mixture of eminent-domain appraisal assignments and a variety of litigation work. While eminent domain cases usually don't end up in trial, that possibility is always there. As a result, those appraisals are typically approached with litigation-strength rigor: "When appraisers are hired for eminent domain assignments, everybody behaves and writes reports [in such a way] that anticipates that they might all be in court together some day," Wilson says.

Wilson's litigation work has resulted in a long list of often-unusual assignments. In addition to landfills, she has worked on litigation relating to drainage canals, wetlands, wastewater treatment facilities, airport noise and aviation easements, unstable soils and muck (organic material) that can affect foundations, "dry sand" disputes over beach access, special government districts such as hospitals, Yellow Book appraisals for federally funded projects, and virtually every type of easement. She has appraised many miles of high-voltage electrical transmission

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lines (including a large project that she wrote up for a chapter in the Appraisal Institute textbook *Applications in Litigation Valuation: A Pragmatist's Guide*). And the list goes on.

Wilson worked on and off for 20 years as an appointed special magistrate, hearing property tax appeals. She says that the magistrate pay is modest, "but the work is rewarding, and if you're an expert witness, it's a great opportunity to learn." Appraisers are often part of these hearings, arguing about assessed value. Some who testify don't perform well, thus offering instructive examples of what not to do as an expert witness. Others excel. "You might have a homeowner explaining black mold and you think, 'That was so elegant, so easy to understand — I'm going to remember that next time I have to explain it.'" The experience also opened the door to yet another line of work. "Lately, I've been doing some interesting tax-appeal defense consulting in Florida and throughout the United States," she says.

Beyond her practice, Wilson is heavily involved with the broader appraisal profession. She has authored numerous articles on appraising and expert testimony, is an Appraiser Qualifications Board Certified USPAP instructor, and has volunteered with numerous professional organizations, including stints in executive and board roles at the Association of Eminent Domain Professionals and as a current member of the Florida Real Estate Appraisal Board. Wilson has also been active with AI, where she has created educational content, taught courses, and volunteered with her local and regional chapters. She served on the national Board of Directors and is her region's representative on the 2025 Nominating Committee.

Wilson sees these extracurricular professional activities as a way to keep learning and stay in touch with trends. "With litigation, the appraisal problem moves and the litigation process moves — as soon as they pass a law or change a regulation or create new case law, the appraisal requirements may change," she says.

In a field where word of mouth is critical, getting out into the broader community is also key to reaching potential clients. "My articles and textbook contributions for the Appraisal Institute were good marketing tools for me," Wilson says. Volunteering, creating education offerings and teaching also generated many referrals. "A primary marketing effort throughout my career has been volunteering my time as an invited presenter at conferences and professional meetings," she says. "This year I'll be presenting at two national education conferences and two legal conferences, as well as some regional professional meetings."

Lively and interesting work

Looking back at the wide variety of assignments that she and Compass have taken on, Wilson recognizes that her generalist approach could have drawbacks for some. "If I had concentrated my focus in a particular industry, specialization may have offered some financial advantages," she says. But her varied practice has provided a successful business, and for her, it's not necessarily all about money.

"All the different appraisal assignments I've been privileged to work on have created a lively and interesting body of work. I enjoy an intellectual challenge and seeing what complex appraisal problem will come along next," she says. "And I am endlessly curious about the choices that people make about real estate. Why did they build that, and build it in that spot? How did the parties come up with that particular price?"

She also finds satisfaction in what she does. "I enjoy being a trusted resource for market participants and for triers of fact. When people are faced with changes to their property, especially in a potential litigation setting, it can create anxiety and worry. An unbiased real estate appraiser whom the parties can trust can sometimes make the process less painful, and it is rewarding to be that appraiser.

"I guess what I'm saying is that I have a great and interesting business," Wilson says. "I really love it." ▲

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— *Shawn Wilson, MAI*