James Arnett Wilson, Marion High School Class of 1937, was a fighter pilot with the pioneering aviation crew the Tuskegee Airmen, the first African-American pilots in the U.S. armed forces. Even more precious to him were the years he spent working with at-risk students on the south side of Chicago, as a high school math teacher and later a college math instructor.

Wilson was one of nine children growing up in a family that placed high value on education. (His grandfather Tucker Wilson had been the first African-American to graduate from DePauw University in 1888, and James and most of his siblings earned advanced college degrees.) He fell in love with flying as a boy in Marion, when a family friend took him and his siblings up in a rudimentary aircraft in the early days of aviation. After the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, it was undoubtedly that experience with flight that turned him toward Tuskegee and its groundbreaking flight training program for African-Americans.

Before that choice gave him a place of honor in our nation's history, though, it was a Latin teacher at MHS who paved the way for him to continue his education after high school. Gladys Neal lobbied successfully for a full scholarship for him to attend Earlham College (Richmond). After graduating from Earlham, he went on to Howard University (Washington, D.C.), where he was working toward his master's degree in mathematics when he signed on with the Army Air Corps and its Tuskegee flight school.

Before 1940, African-Americans were barred from flying for the U.S. armed forces. The Tuskegee Airmen broke that color barrier, and the “Red Tails,” as the Tuskegee pilots became known due to their red-tipped airplanes, became well-respected for their expert skill and dedication in protecting bombers, which they escorted on their runs in World War II.

Wilson graduated from the Tuskegee Institute in 1944 and went on to serve with the 99th Fighter Squadron of the Army Air Corps, stationed primarily in Italy. He recounted years later in a radio interview in Chicago how the Tuskegee pilots challenged stereotypes and preconceptions, remembering that many bomber pilots were shocked to find that the fighter pilots who had so expertly protected them from German Luftwaffe were African-Americans. In a time when such opportunities were scarce for their peers, the Tuskegee Airmen proved without a doubt that it was a gross misconception that minorities lacked the skills and dedication needed for such an endeavor.
Wilson was among about 300 Tuskegee Airmen and widows who represented the thousands of men and women involved in the Tuskegee program as they were awarded the Congressional Gold Medal by the U.S. Congress and then-President George W. Bush in a ceremony at the U.S. Capitol.

After the war, Wilson returned to Howard University to finish his master's degree, then pursued doctoral studies at the University of Chicago. He became a math teacher at Chicago's Phillips High School, where he taught for 20 years. Former students and co-workers remembered him as an exceptional teacher who encouraged students to face challenges head-on and without fear.

He went on to teach math at Kennedy-King College in Chicago for 23 years, retiring in 1990 to a 100-acre farm in Michigan. In retirement he volunteered at elementary schools and spent nearly 20 years planting and tending trees on his farm, part of a legacy of reforestation that he held dear. He was also a prolific gardener and shared his harvest with neighbors and friends.

Wilson died at the age of 92 in August 2012, survived by a daughter, Carol Wilson Saffold, and a son, James Wilson Jr., along with four grandchildren. He was also survived by five siblings.