TheWriteQuestion_1006_DanielBlakeSmith_WilmotCollins

Lauren Korn Hello and welcome to The Write Question, a radio program and podcast featuring authors from the American West and beyond. The Write Question is supported in part by members of Montana Public Radio and by the Greater Montana Foundation, encouraging communication on issues, trends, and values of importance to Montanans. This episode is also supported by a co-op of independent bookstores in Montana, Fact and Fiction Books in Missoula, Montana Book Company in Helena. Chapter One Bookstore in Hamilton, and Bookworks of Whitefish. I'm Lauren Korn, speaking with Daniel Blake-Smith, or Dan, and Wilmot Collins. Dan is the author of Run! The Wilmot-Collins Story, from Liberian refugee to first black mayor in Montana. Wilmot fled the devastation of the Liberian Civil War after losing his family members and witnessing the collapse of his home. Dan traces Wilmot's extraordinary journey. From violence and displacement to Helena, where he and his wife, Maddie, rebuilt their lives. In a community where he stood apart racially, culturally, and politically, Wilmot emerged as a unifying civic leader, ultimately becoming, in 2017, the first black mayor in Montana's history. Dan and Wilmot will be touring run through Montana at Montana Book Company in Helena on October 6th. At the Missoula Public Library in Missoulo on October 7th and in Bozeman at Country Bookshelf on October 8th. Dan, welcome to The Right Question. Thank you, Lorna.

Daniel Blake Smith I'm thrilled to be here.

Lauren Korn And Wilmot, thank you so much for being here.

Wilmot Collins It's a pleasure to be here, Lauren.

Lauren Korn So, Dan, you live in St. Louis, is that correct? I do, St. Louise, Missouri. Been here for 16 years. How did you hear about our conversation partner here, Wilmot Collins, and what was or what is it about Wilmot's story that made you want to write it down to share it as a biography?

Daniel Blake Smith Well, I first ran into this idea by watching Morning Joe one day back in, I think, 2019 when Wilmot was making what turned out not to be the most successful run, but a brave one for the US Senate. And they were talking to me. I thought, this is wild. This is Trump country. Here's this Liberian refugee. And he's running for the Senate and was getting a lot of support in various quarters. Japan. And then they tell the back story about how he had escaped the horrors of the Liberian Civil War in 1990, and his wife was there with her child, and he finally got to arrive himself in 1994. And I thought, this is the greatest fish out of water story, this is a filmmaker of me, because at first I was thinking, I want to make a movie out of this. So I thought who do I know in Montana? The answer was basically no one except this one guy. An actor named Nick Wilder, who Wilmot knows quite well. And I emailed him and said, I saw the story, but this is months later, but I saw this story about Wilmot Collins. I wonder if you'd know him at all. He said, well, I did this on July 4th. He said I'm actually here with him as part of a July 4 celebration at the, what was it, I forget the name of his estate where they were doing the music for July 4. Anyway He brought me over, got on the phone with Wilmot, and I talked briefly to him about, hey, this is a fantastic story. I'd love to get the rights to your story. And he said, well, I've already sold them to a woman in New York who's a playwright, but she hasn't really produced much. And if she doesn't do something by the end of the term, I may get back to you, Dad. And sure enough, that's what happened. Months later, and I came out and interviewed them, because I wanted to do a movie. And we did start out working on a movie script at first. And so this is kind of backwards because, you know, they always say books first and

then the movie, but this was a movie script. But all along I was thinking I could tell a richer, more detailed story that would be appealing to a lot of people as a book. I just got to find the time and make sure we could pull it together because I was focused on, you know, trying to produce this movie. It's now in different hands. I think we, by the way, are negotiating a deal we hope will work out with Taye Diggs, So, TV, film a star who... From I did Red to Chicago and Murder of the First, a whole bunch of other things. And then finally I decided, okay, we were kind of in a break between producers who he had attached to make the movie. And I decided I want to begin with full onslaught into making and writing the book. Cause I, you know, I've read lots of books before and I thought this would be just as entertaining in a different way, immersive and entertaining as a book. Cause this is a kind of a bulletproof story. If I could just use a lot of the interviews I had with everyone in the Collins family, Wilbot, his wife Maddie, Jamie, and Bliss, as well as many other players, their campaign managers, a whole bunch of people. This would work as a book told kind of in an over-the-shoulder fashion. You were there, not some analytical scholarly book. I wasn't trying to do that. I wanted it to be a a companion piece of speak to my film, and here we are.

Lauren Korn So, Wilma, it sounds like other people, apart from Dan, have been interested in your story. What was it like when those first people, this woman from New York, for instance, when they came to you and said, this story needs to be told either as a film or a book, however, What were you feeling or how did you feel in those moments?

Wilmot Collins You know, when I first got the message from this lady, she wanted to do a movie. And I talked to my family, we were all pretty excited. And we were happy, yeah, let's get it going. And it kept dragging on, it kept drag. And my life is a rolling stone, I can't sit still. So when she was dragging on and then I just said, You know? If it will happen, it will happened. I told my family, let's keep moving. And then when I got the call from Dan saying, hey, this is interesting. So now that's the second person talking about wanting to do this story. And I'm like, man, maybe there's something there I'm not looking at. And so I told Dan, hey, let us run with it. And then Dan is going both ways. We got to do the movie, we got to the book. And It's becoming more and more interesting because Dan is more and more upfront and telling me, let's go ahead and do this stuff. And we started it and he came to Montana. He visited with us for four or five days and just getting the story right with all the players, with my camping manager, with our host family, with family, and I saw the seriousness in that and that's how we just started moving forward.

Lauren Korn Let's take a really big step back. Wilmot, tell us about your childhood, where you grew up, where you came from.

Wilmot Collins I'm from Liberia, West Africa, it's a small West African country that was founded by slaves that were freed from this country. In Liberia where I'm, you know, the slaves went back to Africa and named places like after here, like originally I'm From Maryland in Liberia. The capital city of Liberia is Monrovia, named after the fifth U.S. President James Monroe. The largest hospital in Liberia is called the John F. Kennedy Memorial Hospital. And where I grew up is the Firestone Plantation Company. Where you get your firestone tires, BF Goodrich, Bridgestone, all the material comes from that company. And that's where I grow up. I lived there with my mom and dad. My mom was superintendent of schools. My dad was a civil engineer. Both of them worked with the Fire Stone Company. And so we stayed there until I went to a boarding school. Carroll High School is a Catholic boarding school for boys. And when I graduated, I went to a Baptist junior college. After that, I to the University of Liberia where I obtained a political science

and sociology degree. And then I started teaching and then the war happened and all hell broke loose.

Lauren Korn So I would advise our listeners to get their hands on a copy of Run to get the complete story, but briefly tell us about why Helena, Montana, of all places, became the place that you and your wife, Maddie, settled upon escaping the civil war in Liberia.

Wilmot Collins In the early eighties, there was this program in Liberia called the. African foreign student exchange program, you know, and my wife came on the foreign exchange program. And she lived with the family here in Helena, Montana. Bruce and Joyce Noxine. Bruce was assistant principal at Helena High. Joyce was an elementary school teacher at Bryan School. She lived with that family and went to Helena High, graduated from Helena High went back to Liberia. And went to the University of Liberia. At the university is where we met. And then when we fled Liberia because of that brutal civil war and went into Ghana, my wife says, let's go to America. And I'm like, okay, how do you suppose we do that? And then she says, in fact, let us go to Montana. I said, lady, make up your mind, we go to a America or we go Montana. We can't just go. She said Montana is in America. And so she contacted the host family that she lived with while she was on the exchange program. And they just opened up their hearts and home to us and started the process with her. And that's how Carroll College awarded my wife a full nursing scholarship. And I had to go through the United Nation High Commission for Refugee Program. And that is how I came here to America as a refugee two years and seven months later.

Lauren Korn This question is for both of you. Dan, I'll address it to you first, though. Putting someone's life in your hands, literally, to tell this story, I imagine it requires a great deal of trust between the two of you, Wilmot had to trust you, you had to Trust Wilmot. How did you establish that relationship, both in a personal way and in a creative way, and in a creative writing way in order to write. This story. So Dan, I'll start with you.

Daniel Blake Smith That's a tough question to answer, but it's a natural one. It's tough because you don't think about that, at least I didn't, in approaching Wilmot. He seemed an open-hearted, straightforward guy. I'd like to think I'm similar. And in fact, I'm pretty easy to see through. I get pretty ambitious about things. And you could tell I didn't want to do this. And Wilmot, I thought, had such an incredible story. And I felt like I had a purchase on, at least the basic outline of it, that he could say, Okay, this guy. Didn't live our life and can't speak from lived experience, but he understands the struggle. And at least I felt like he believed that he could trust my storytelling. And nonetheless, I shared the script with him in various stages because it did start off as a movie script. And they made some changes and corrected some things I had mistaken about and so forth. But otherwise... Our trust deepened and I felt like I'm telling a story that sounds like it rings true to them. You know, I'm doing a story and I've done several adaptations of books and historical things where there's an interest in, gee, are you telling me historical truth line by line? And of course, in a dramatic film like this, this wasn't a documentary after all, dramatic film. Where, again, actors play these parts of her. You have dialog that, of course, we didn't, I couldn't work from recorded conversations that Wilmot and Maddie and the kids had. I had no idea, though they gave me snippets of things that they remembered saying, and I sure as heck used those. But I always went, one of the three part referentials, the first thing I would imagine is, gee, I wanna tell this story, did it happen? And is it objectively true? And if the answer was yes, it goes in the film, or it goes to the book. The second thing you sometimes think is, well, I don't think this happened, but could it have happened? And that means other representative things like this happened, just not this exactly. And if that was true, I would say, okay, be careful about that. But you know, it was probably all right. But

then you have to worry about the third thing. Should it have happen? In other words, I know it didn't happen. I'm not even sure it's representative of what went on back then, but boy, it would sure help the drama of this moment. Could it, you know create that moment? And I don't think I did that, but once or twice, and it did what I like to say served the emotional truth of the story, maybe not the historical truth of exactly they went on this day and did this and said this to one another, but you know that the emotional truth of moment you're trying to create is being realized by the story you're telling that helps advance the story. So you do that in film, I didn't do that into the book, but in the film there's places where I had. But I call it emotional truth moments. Don't want to be giving away the inside story about believe you make you, but especially when it involves a true subject. But I just tried to make sure that it was always being true to the emotions of what went on and never would make up a story that was obviously false and depicted what was going on in their lives in a nefarious or just the incorrect way. A couple of times I got facts wrong, because I'm obviously a fallible person, but I tried to correct them and I feel like I've clung to that approach most of the time. And you know. Like the very title of my book comes from them, Bliss. I totally, he told me kind of late in the game, but he said, I think the best title for this film and your book would be run. And I thought, I thought about this, especially since it's a well-known story, then it just all flows from there because you're running from danger, they're running a corrupt and failing homeland, but they're writing toward hope and resilience that are new, second chance at life. So it really has other meanings as well, but I thought that was a terrific insight from Bliss and nicely captured what the story was about.

Lauren Korn And what about you, Wilma? Like, how did you feel having this, ultimately a stranger come to you wanting to write your story? How did you develop this trusting relationship? It sounds like Dan was just wanting to get going right away and get the truth of it. How did your develop that trust? How did that relationship form for you?

Wilmot Collins You know, Lauren, my family, we're a family, we say our lives is an open book. All right, my life has always been an open book because from the time I fled Liberia and had to explain what went on at the American embassy in Ghana, had to go through, they read all my personal letters. I thought, you know, oh geez, if they can read all these personal stuff that Matty and I wrote each other, this is an open book. But coming back to Dan, when Dan and I started talking on the phone, we were going back and forth, and he was very interested. And then he said, you now, I wanna come and pay a visit. And I'm like, oh, geez, you know, Dan flew into Montana and he met with me and my family. And of course, we're all there, we are observing, we're taking notes, we a watching. And Dan met with all of us and met with us individually, met with our host family, met with my circle, so to speak. And everybody said almost the same thing. He's a nice guy. He's a respectable guy. So our guard started to dwindle. You know, we started opening up more and more and started to get comfortable with him. Like Dan said, you know, getting the name of the... And he was very open because when he started this project, every step of the way, he would seek consultation from me, Bliss, my son, my daughter, my wife, or whomever. He had. And so we were there every step of the way. All right. We were not excluded from anything so to speak. And it made it so much easier. It made us so much, we were more open to get it. Like he said, the title run, my daughter-in-law, my son Bliss's wife, said, you know, Wilma, you've been running your whole life. Why don't you just mean run and I'm like Oh, not a bad idea. So when Bliss told Dan, it was just so befitting. So, yeah, that's how we got to where we are today.

Lauren Korn I want to talk about a couple of things that you two have been talking about in your answers. And the first is this idea of Helena, Montana. So I'm from Helena. So, I know it very, very intimately myself. I know what this town is like. You experienced racism

in Helena Wilmot, you experienced unkind people, but you also experienced a great amount of this and I'm wondering... How you made sure Dan expressed or represented this very white but very unique town in Montana correctly. How did you how did you two work together to make sure that your readers understood Helena Montana, the way that you wanted it to be represented.

Wilmot Collins You know, Lauren, for me, the truth was always the forefront of whatever I did, because it's so easy to research the truth. And whatever we decided to talk to Dan about, Dan could research it and find it. Like when people marked our home with KKK, go back to Africa. And my neighbor collected the neighborhood together to go and wash my walls down. That told me I belong here with the negative stuff that went on. But look at that positive. Now you see racism all over the country. Have you ever experienced such a reaction? No. People picked it up. People ran with it and so I always try to tell him the truth about what was going on because it's too easy to research. I will not blemish, I will tell a fib about something as serious as this because now it's going into print, it's going into the media. So. The truth was always the forefront. And when some things, even when Dan was writing, we would send back and say, oh no, Dan, let's put it this way, because this was closer to the truth than anything else. So that's how we did it.

Lauren Korn Wilma, how did your experiences, both in Liberia and in Helena, how did they shape your understanding of or your view? We're talking about community coming out for you. How did they shaped your understanding of communities such that running for office or joining the National Guard seemed like natural next steps for you, becoming a part of these communities like this?

Wilmot Collins You know, whenever there was a negative situation here in Helena, there was always an overwhelming positive experience in the end. And so when people trashed my car, you know, and they were caught, when they trashed our The neighbor who got together. And so I just felt that, jeez, you know, I will experience this anywhere in America, but I keep getting these positive experiences. And my ultimate goal when I came into this country, this country had provided life a second chance at life. And so, I said, I gotta get back. That was something that I instilled in my kids. Jamie and Bliss, we have to give back to our second country. We have to get back. So of course, I got into the military. What better way to give it back than to sacrifice yourself to the country? I got in to the military and my wife, we decided she couldn't join the military because we had two young kids. So she stayed out. She started working as a nurse at the VA hospital taking care of veterans. And then she was six months from being too old to join the military when she joined. And she had to give a waiver because she was in her 40s when she join. But she joined and lasted 10 years. Then my daughter decided, dad, I wanna join the militair. I said, no, I don't want you join because of me because of anybody. She said, dad, this is my plan B. I said, okay, I'll take you around and introduce you. And she joined and she's enjoyed it. We've enjoyed giving back to our country.

Lauren Korn Dan, I want to talk about the we've been talking about this idea of truth that that you and both you and Wilmot just are looking to represent the truth in both the book and in the film. But when you're looking when you when you came to this story, when you come to his story, what did you see the emotional truth being? You know, this book is called Run, Is it resilience? Is that the emotional truth that you want your readers? To get from Wilmot's story? Is it community? What do you want people to see in his story as the emotional core of it?

Daniel Blake Smith Well, of course, Run does mean, has different meanings, and he was understandably running from violence and bloodshed and a country that was falling apart and showing no grace towards its citizens, really. But I just felt like he was running towards things that ended up becoming increasingly important for building a better kind of community for Helena and, by extension, other places. Because what he, as he's said already, picking up from his comments, is a behavior that these were people who are very resilient because they had a lot of obstacles that would have thwarted many of us or forced us into depression or kind of a giving up, and they just never did. They, You have to be resilient to be a successful immigrant refugee. In coming to America, especially in the time, let's not forget, they came at a time, or at least his decision to get political ultimately in 2016 and 17 was at the time when Trump was first ready for office. And so people like, well, modern man, the whole family, anybody, some refugee from West Africa was not anybody's idea of what's going to land well with the people in Trump's country because, you know, they just like went on a fake mission. Moments in the book is when this woman whose name I will mention was a nemesis of his and Helena often attended his rallies and screamed things at him and say thanks to him to his face like you're a muscled terrorist. You're gonna break Sharia law here and all. He said his great comeback was, ma'am, I'm a Methodist, which is true. And so what he was The truth of all this is that Wilmot was bringing, obviously, courage. He and Matt, he had to be courageous to even get on that cargo ship, that Nigerian cargo ship and make their way to what turned out to be Ghana. But they had to keep that courage afloat. You know, Wilmot didn't mention the part that, except by passing it, the two years plus that he had to wait after Matt had got accepted into the U.S., he was half the time in, I guess you'd say, a state of homelessness, on the Ivory Coast, and Ghana, and I guess a couple of trips back to Liberia. But so I think you have to have an unbelievable amount of courage and resilience. And when we get closer to the political decisions that are the climax of the book, it's about being a public servant. And all the things he did in the community and for the community, whether it's maybe superficial things like singing karaoke and country western karaoke at that, or coaching soccer or working with abused children and just the list goes on and on, the things that he did and the community literally threw himself into becoming the best citizen he could be, which probably outstripped the citizenship. Valor of the most native-born Americas, really, that he could justifiably, successfully depict himself as someone who cares about this community. He wasn't just some guy. The last thing he was was a West African refugee who wanted to secretly get into the country and impose Sharia law or something. He wanted to be the best American he could be and oftentimes better than some the people in the town. Or would be in the true community town, really. We all know people who are Americans from many generations, but they don't act like it. They're not that patriotic or not that kindhearted or willing to do things for the community. They're just in it just for themselves. And this whole giving back thing is something that, I don't know if I'd call that, you can correct me on this, well, what if that's that West African tradition or something where you were raised, well, you were raise this way. I don't know. Which more people in America were raised that way. We know that phrase give back, but it kind of is lost out in translation the way people live their lives. But so hope, resilience, community-mindedness, trying to show that, gee, how much he felt welcomed in Helena, why don't we extend that to everybody and keep it going for Helena's sake. And, you know, I think Wilmot offers a rarely seen model for how we could have a new blueprint for civic leadership in America. It could be about being a public servant rather than being a professional politician.

Lauren Korn Wilma, do you want to answer Dan's question? Where did that understanding of public service, that giving back, would you say that came from your parents or growing up in Liberia? Where did come from? How was that pulled from you?

Wilmot Collins You know, Lauren, both of my parents were educated here in America. When they went back and we found out that the way they looked at America was like here. They spoke highly of this country. And then when we got engulfed in that civil war and coming back and trying to get back into this country, get into this that my parents, I spoke highly on. It was something, and don't get me wrong, before coming, we had a lot of congressional leaders that had helped in trying to get me over into America. So as I'm reading these letters that they are sending, I am like, wow, this place is special. And these are total strangers Da-da. Intelligently trying to help me get into safety. What can I do when I get there? And that was my thought process. So when I came, when I finally arrived, that was the first thing we started to talk about. How can we give back? This is not just one person that helped us, a community, a country, because we're talking about church world service, then we're taking about the government, then we're talking about congressional leaders, then we're taking about church leaders, and then we come down to just ordinary citizens. So, in my opinion, hey guys, we gotta get back. I'm talking to my family. We gotta get back. We got to tell this country thank you. And what better way can we do that? But by first becoming Americans, SECOND getting involved in our communities, you know? I always tell people, you gotta get involved, you gotta take risks, and you gotta step outside of your comfort zone. And all of what we've done, we had to step outside our comfort zone, I never knew anything about the military, never. And I'll be the first to tell you, when I went to boot camp, I was 31 years old. I was called grandpa at boot camp. Because I was dealing with 17 year old and some of them 16, 18 year old. I still remember the first time I had to go to the shooting range. I broke down crying because all that Liberian stuff came right back to me. I could not shoot the weapon. But If I wanted to give back and say thank you, I had to go beyond that. I had do whatever I could. So I went and spoke to the chaplain and we talked about it, we walked through it. And then I went back on the range and I became Mark's man. The next time I became shop shooter and next time, I became expert. So what I'm seeing here is that we were determined to say thank You America.

Lauren Korn This might be a self-evident question, but especially because you just talked about shooting for the military and being triggered in those initial moments and not being able to shoot the weapons, how close to the surface, Wilmot, do you keep your memories of Liberia and Ghana, the Ivory Coast, during that civil war? And Beyond that, I'm curious about what it was like recalling them for a biographer like Dan.

Wilmot Collins You know, it was difficult. It was difficult because you know, memory failed, memory fades, you know? But that's why sometimes when I'm with people, I tend to talk, because Dan learned so much that I left out from my campaign manager. He learned so from my circle, like Rachel and Diego. They told him some things, and he was like, I didn't know that. You know, and so but um, sometimes these things are triggered by an incident Like I you know during July 4th My wife hits July 4 What you call it fireworks? Because it brings back memories, you know, like when we were in Ghana, I remember one time in the car backfire and The two of us only the two of was hit the floor Hit the ground everybody's looking at us. It was one of the car that backfire. So it depends on the incident that would trigger an experience. But we kept telling our story until Dan picked it up. And so that's how we were able to, and sometimes when he asked questions, those things would come back. That's how were able go through it. Ed, don't get me wrong. Sometimes it's still pretty difficult. Like I know July 4th is difficult for my wife, Maddie. I don't know if you know the movie Hotel Rwanda. Yeah. It took my wife and I three chances to finally watch it fully, full through. First time we went, uh, it was at, uh the Murnaloy we get there, we were excited and quarter way through it, both of us bawling, we walked out

of there. The second time we tried it again, we went halfway and we couldn't do it. Took us three times to see that full thing because it brought back so much.

Daniel Blake Smith I didn't know that.

Wilmot Collins Hey, yo.

Daniel Blake Smith Too late now.

Lauren Korn You see, that's what happens. You see these things happen. We've been sort of circling around your politics, this run for mayor. Let's get into that. Wilma, we've been talking about your community service, your want to give back to your community of Helena. You want to get back to this country that you took refuge in. Why did you want to run for Mayor? Talk about that decision-making process. To start us off on this particular conversation.

Wilmot Collins You know, Lauren, this was something so far away from me. That's was something I was not even thinking about until I'm at home. I was just about getting ready to retire my 22-year career with the military. It was in June of that 2017. I was getting done. My son Bliss was at the University of Montana in Missoula. He was a junior student. And He drives from Missoula to come to Helena and tells me, hey, dad, we need to talk. I'm like, what about? But he doesn't want his mom to hear, because whatever he is about to tell me, he knows that his mom would not like it. So he said, no, let's go on the side. So anyway, we get away from her, and he said dad, I think it's time. I said, time for what? He said, it's a time for you to get into politics. I'm the, whoa, whoa. Well, keep me out of those people thing, you know. He said, dad, who are those people? You are those, people. You can sit those people, you are part of it. And then I'm telling, I'm trying to convince this kid not to get me involved at all. So I said, hey, give me three reasons why you think if I were to run, I will win. He said dad, you know everybody, everybody know you and you're an educated person. I said well, that's not enough. What is it I need to do? He said that, why don't you invite some of your friends over and talk to them? And if they don't think you read it, they will tell you, but if they think you're ready, they would tell you. So I invited three couples over to our home for dinner. We had dinner after dinner, uh, sitting, I having drinks. I say, Hey guys, this is what I plan to do. I want to run for mayor and one of the latest year. Oh my God, this was fate. And I'm like, what's fate? She said, just last night, we're thinking by asking you to run. And so my son puts his hand up in the air. I rest my case. So I said, now what is it I need to do? And they said, well, the first thing you need to convince your family to get on board because you can't do this alone. And so now the hardest part about that whole conversation, there was a wife. This is why Bliss did not want to discuss it with her there because She doesn't like politics. She thinks all the politicians are, you know what? And so I told Bliss Knife, you want him to get involved in this thing, you got to talk to your mom about it. He said, oh no, Dad, she's your wife. You talk to her. And so he, and I'm like, that was the hardest thing about the whole campaign. So I told her, I said, hey, you now, we're thinking about getting into politics and I am thinking about running for mayor. She said, Oh, no, let's vote on it. Let's vote everything in my house. So we vote. So my daughter is stationed in Bahrain and Liz and, and I didn't know bliss that even spoken to her about it because he knew we will come down to voting. So he called her up and said, Hey, Jamie, you got to vote for dad to run for mayor. So I didn't know anything. So we called Jamie up on taste time and everything. And Jimmy said, yeah, dad, go for it. So now the vote was three to one. So she had to get on board and so that's how the process started.

Lauren Korn I'm not entirely sure the question I want to ask next, but maybe I'll just ask a really broad one. How did you feel Wilmot when you realized, and I'm sure it was a very quick realization, that you were running not only as mayor of Helena, not only during this time of a lot of unrest politically in our country, in our state, but also as the very first black mayor of Helena and Montana. Like, what were you thinking? Like, did that- I wasn't thinking. Did that have any- Sure.

Wilmot Collins You know, Lauren, I'll tell you this. When I got in it, I got into it with everything I had. And sometimes I was doing some risky stuff. Like I remember one time Maddie and I were going from door to door, dropping flyers. And it was around quarter to nine in the evening. And I said, Maddie, we just got this much more to finish, let's finish it. And she said, you know, this state is staying your ground, right? If people feel threatened by you going to the house, you know what could happen. And then it hit me. Because even though I knew that, but I'm looking at all these people that are just so warm. People who didn't even want to vote for me, still welcome me and say, hey, I want to hear about what you want to do, even though, I'm not voting for you, but let's talk. But when Maddie said, you know, this is a stand your ground, you the castle doctrine. And I'm like, oh geez, okay, let's close it up and. Go back the next day. And so, talking about first African-American mayor, black mayor, didn't cross my mind until the day of election. And then when I won, I got a call from Huffington Post. And then the reporter on the line said, hey, Mayor LeCollins, congratulations. How does it feel to make history? And then I'm like, history? So I said, hold on one minute. I put him on pause. And then I go to my son and my camping manager, I said, hey, there's a reporter on the line saying we made history. What history we made? And then my son said, dad, you know, you're the first black mayor in Montana history. And you heard that, and then I'm like, are you kidding me? Why didn't you tell me? He said, Dad, you would have lost focus. Your head would have gotten big, you would not have been focused. And so then I got back on the lines. Oh yeah, it feels great to make history. It's pretty good. The guy heard that and said, you didn't even know you made history, you know, so. But, and I think it was great that I didn't know until the day off because I think my son was right. I would have lost focus because that's what I would've concentrated on. But instead I concentrated on the election and winning the hearts of the people.

Lauren Korn I want to zoom out again to the writing process for this book. I'm curious, and this is a question for you both, but Dan, I'll address it to you first. Was there a specific moment or story or kind of context during your interviews with Wilmot, his family, campaign managers, his circle that surprised you? Something that you hadn't fully processed or expected to uncover? Were there any surprises? Explicit surprises for you.

Daniel Blake Smith Well, yeah, a couple of them. Maybe not aha, this is this is crazy. It's not out of the blue stuff, but I I came in just thinking that if you're in Trump country and you're with the Trump people I mean, I don't mean they're friends with him, but they Clearly vote for him. I couldn't get it around my head how it could be that you would support somebody like Wilmot and then after talking to Bruce Dockstein He kind of seconded, in a different way, what Bliss had told him, you know, maybe six months before it, which was, because I asked you, I said, I guess, did you think all along you would vote for him? Because, you, you knew he's not an independent, he's certainly not a Republican. He said, no, I know, I don't know. But he said, you don't look, it's about trust. People know this guy, know him. They like him, they respect him. And that's everything. And so he would say, I even had to tell Wellmont something like that on the eve, whatever week, near the end of the campaign, because for all kinds of good reasons, Wellmont was kind of nervous about, is this thing going to work out or am I going to get my butt kicked? And he

was supremely confident that he would win for those reasons. And that's that public servant, he used these words, but it's back to that public servants mentality, I think, had a lot to do with it. And the other thing related to that that surprised me, I thought it was in some ways, all his campaign managers, including Bliss, were right to criticize him for this, but then he was ultimately right for doing what he did. I think he probably remember this from the script. It's in the book too, but in a different way. Wilmot, when you were being advised here and there, just a couple of times, that you've got to say something about the immigration policy that Trump was in favor of, that Jim Smith was basically giving support to, is you have got to drop this idea that you just want to keep it clean and talk only about Helena. Because this is where they're coming from. You know, saying you've got to meet people where they are, and where they were was caught up in this anti-immigrant tirades that Trump had surrounded everybody with. And it surprised me that you had made that decision. And except maybe one time when somebody asked you specifically about a speech that Jim Smith had made for one of these right wing groups that were anti-African, you just never did bring up Trump. And if you recall, your campaign circle, including Bliss, thought that's not really the smartest approach to make here, if you want to give votes. But I guess you proved everybody wrong because maybe they would have said, oh, so you really or just a. Never-Trumper type guy. That's all you amount to. I don't know if you were thinking about that outcome, but it's probably more, I don t want to make this about this guy who you do oppose, but you know, he doesn't live in Helena. So who cares what his thoughts are? You know, I'm just interested in serving the people of this town, and that's it.

Lauren Korn Wilmot, do you want to speak to that? Yeah, like why did you make that decision?

Wilmot Collins To add to what Dan said, you know, there was a tape floating around, you know, and where my opponent says some nuts, so nice things about refugees. And when they brought it to my intention, the first thing they said was, we got the election, we won, we want listen to this. And when I heard it, because, and I know the guy, you know, he has never been disrespectful to me. He has always been courteous. But when I heard this, I'm like, jeez, what do I do? But I have vowed to run a clean election. And my team is saying, oh no, if you don't put this out, you will lose. I said, well, I don't mind losing on a, if I have to go dirty, I do mind losing. But let's keep the election, let's, let's give our campaign clean. Let's, you know, then they say, let us publish it. That's a note. You will not publish it. This is the one time I was firm. I've never been so firm before. I said, no, you will now publish it, if I'll lose, I'll loose. But no, don't publish it because I vowed to keep this election clean and I won. And so I was really proud of that decision and it didn't affect anything.

Lauren Korn Wilma, what was it like reading your own life back to you as a finished manuscript? Was there a specific section or chapter that you got emotional at while reading that you didn't anticipate? Or what was your experience of the page, I suppose, is my question.

Wilmot Collins You know, the first thing that really caught me off guard was when my son Bliss and his family read the full script, and then he called, he said, why didn't you all tell us about these things? And I'm like, I'm sure we told them. But if that was the first time it actually hit he and his wife, because they were Like, we didn't know all these things happened to you. And I'm like, yeah, they did, you know? But, and that hit me because I thought we have really spoken to our kids about all the trials and tribulations. But when they saw that in print, it got to them. And then we realized that, oh my God, this is real. You know, because we thought we had told them a lot of stuff, but then. And they're repeating some of the things they've never heard. They've never, mom, who didn't know

you went through that? Mom, we didn't even know you almost got shot. And, you know, it was, it wasn't real.

Lauren Korn There are so many things that we haven't talked about in this conversation. There are many stories from RUN that we haven't brought up. But is there anything either Wilmot or Dan that you want our listeners to know that we have yet talked about, whether that is a story or something about the process? Is there anything you want our listeners know before we sign off today?

Daniel Blake Smith Yeah, this is not about Helena at all, but it's about that early period to be one of the most powerful moments in the story. I'm not really bragging about myself because they'll keep calling this a bulletproof story. My job was sort of to get out of the way and let the story tell itself because they brought all the drama and power to it. But when they were in Ghana waiting things out, it just had just gotten there. And Wilma was at the SOS Children's Village, tried to get a job teaching there like he'd been doing in Monrovia. And a previous cargo ship that had dislodged some kids that had been in his class in Monrowvia had arrived before him. They were playing soccer or something out there and a couple of them came up there and one of them started crying. And Wilma just went, well, why are you crying? And they said, is that you, Mr. Collins? And he didn't quite get what's with all the tears and he had to go to the restroom. We went in there looked at himself in the mirror and he weighed 92 pounds and they were crying about how different he had come to look because of the starvation and I guess you ended up being in the hospital and got it. Did he will not because of that?

Wilmot Collins Yeah, that was a, ah, geez, that's a pretty, you know, and that's one of those emotional moments for me. Woo. Yep. Cause you know, like what Dan said, I used to teach at the SOS Children's Village. And when those kids saw me in that day, they started crying and say, Oh, Mr. Collins, Oh, mr. Collins. I thought they were gonna be happy and embrace me. But when they knew Mr.Collins, he was 175, 180 pounds. And that day I'm 92 pounds, but I didn't know that until I went into the bathroom and saw the scale and got on the scale. And I was 92 pounds and my wife was 85 or 87. We were literally dying on our feet and didn't even know that. And so, and that part gets me all the time. It gets to me all that time. Oh, you know, geez, I'm a little teary up right now. So yeah, that's a moment that, you know, will forever be in the back there.

Daniel Blake Smith His kids could see on his face and his body the horrors of war in ways he had not been able to see yet.

Wilmot Collins I mean, my face was so sunken in, I didn't know that until I went into the bathroom and looked in the mirror for the first time in months, in my jaws, and oh, geez, and in the book, you see the picture of me when I was like 92 pounds, there's a picture of in that and uh yeah.

Lauren Korn Wilmot, thank you so much for sharing your story here and with Dan. Dan, thanks so much for taking up Wilmot's story so that the rest of us can read about it and hopefully soon see it on a big screen. Thanks to you both for being here.

Wilmot Collins It was a pleasure and an honor to be able to tell this story. It's been a pleasure talking to you and I appreciate you having us on.

Lauren Korn That was Daniel Blake Smith, or Dan, and Wilmot Collins. Run, the Wilmot-Collins story from Liberian refugee to first black mayor in Montana, is out now from the

University Press of Kansas. A reminder that Dan and Wilmont will be touring Run in Montana at Montana Book Company in Helena on October 6th, at the Missoula Public Library here in Missoulo on October 7th, and in Bozeman at Country Bookshelf on October 8th. To listen to this conversation again, to share it with friends, or to learn more about Dan and Wilmot, head to mtpr.org. You've been listening to The Write Question. This episode was produced by me, I'm your host, Lauren Korn. The artwork for The Write Question was designed by Molly Russell. Funding for The right question is provided by the Greater Montana Foundation, encouraging communication on issues, trends, and values of importance to Montanans. This episode is also supported by a co-op of independent bookstores in Montana, Fact and Fiction Books in Missoula, Montana Book Company in Helena, Chapter One Bookstore in Hamilton, and Bookworks of Whitefish. Many thanks to Humanities Montana for supporting this program since 2008, and thank you for listening. The Write Question is a production of Montana Public Radio.