



## **‘Adversity hurts but quitting hurts more’: Meet the Arkansas honoree for Women of the Year**

CHRISTINE TANNOUS, THE COMMERCIAL APPEAL

[Robert Medley](#) Fort Smith Times Record

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*Michele Wise Wright is one of USA TODAY’s Women of the Year, a recognition of women across the country who have made a significant impact. The annual program is a continuation of [Women of the Century](#), a 2020 project that commemorated the 100th anniversary of women gaining the right to vote. Meet this year’s honorees at [womenoftheyear.usatoday.com](https://womenoftheyear.usatoday.com).*

This year marks the 30th anniversary of a milestone in the life of Michele Wise Wright.

In 1992, she became the first Black full-time student to earn a Master of Science degree in engineering management from the University of Tennessee Space Institute.

Wright, of North Little Rock, Arkansas, would go on to make more marks, earning a Ph.D, creating The Wright Cystic Fibrosis Screening Tool©, promoting drinking water for healthy lifestyles for children, and writing the fictional “My Water Buddy” to “edutaine” – educate and entertain, she explained – young readers, a mission inspired by her own journey with an autoimmune disease, she said.

But it is the story of her husband and their years of unknowingly struggling with cystic fibrosis that is the subject of her film, “54 Years Late.” The film was one of five nominees for outstanding short film at the [2022 Black Reel Awards](#).

“His story is so important,” Wright said.



**USA TODAY's Women of the Year from Arkansas: Michele Wright (2:56)**

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She met Terry Wright on a blind date on Nov. 1, 1999.

Doctors had not suspected Terry Wright had cystic fibrosis. But the disease is relatively rare among African American people. She describes living through 17 years of “medical hell” that would include trips to emergency rooms, days, weeks and nights in hospitals.

With his diagnosis, she has become an advocate for diagnosing and living with rare diseases, particularly in diverse communities.

She is the recipient of the Nations of Women Change Makers 2021 Global Leadership Award and a nominee of the EveryLife Foundation of Rare Diseases' RareVoice 2021 Award for Diversity Empowerment. She is the co-founder and chair of the nonprofit National Organization of African Americans with Cystic Fibrosis

*This conversation has been edited for length and clarity.*

## Who paved the way for you? Who did you pave the way for?

Without question, it would be my parents, Frankie and Garland Wise. They were there for me from the very beginning and have never left my side.

I would never forget my mother, Frankie Berry Wise, grabbing my hand at the age of sixteen to take me to Burger King in Tuskegee, Alabama to encourage me to begin my career at the earliest time possible nor her jumping on a neighbor's bike to help me turn in a mandatory engineering school assignment with minutes to spare. Likewise, I will forever be appreciative of my father, Garland Wise, for filling out my engineering scholarship application so that I could become an electrical engineer in lieu of a solid gold dancer. I will also deeply treasure him driving me 6-7 hours to and from Oak Ridge, Tennessee every other semester so that I could co-op with Martin Marietta as part of the same engineering cooperative education scholarship that my dad helped me to secure.

Three decades ago, my dad wisely told me, "If I have seen at all and done any actions worthwhile or made any contributions, it was because I appreciated, respected, and emulated the legacies of my forebears, and was motivated enough to stand on their shoulders." How honored, grateful, and humbled am I to still have my parents and to stand on both of their shoulders as well as the shoulders of the many trailblazers who helped to pave the road I traveled as I continue to prepare for others to stand on my own shoulders.



Michele Wise Wright sits in her home Monday, Feb. 28, 2022, in Little Rock, Ark. Wright co-founded the National Organization of African Americans with Cystic Fibrosis with her husband. The organization helps educate and bring awareness to the disease as well provide resources for Black Americans. Christine Tannous / The Commercial Appeal



## What is your definition of courage?

My definition of courage is learning to hold on to possibility in the face of impossibility, strength in the face of fear, hope in the face of hopelessness, faith in the face of disappointment, love in the face of hate, and life in the face of death. Courage is having the absolute audacity to believe the best is yet to come in the most difficult and challenging of situations while knowing that quitting is not an option. Courage is a way of “Thinking” beyond one’s circumstance!

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Michele Wright

## Who do you look up to?

Unapologetically, there is no short answer to this question.

Foremost, I have a very close relationship with God, my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, and make it a point to always look up to Him. I also look up to my husband, Terry Wright, because he is not only my partner and soul-mate but he is such an amazing, God-fearing, gentle, kind, and most uplifting human being whose spirit is one of love, strength, faith, and tenacity.

I also continuously and wholeheartedly look up to my mother, Frankie Berry Wise, and my dad, Garland Wise, because they are my rockstars. I look up to my mother-in-law, Rose Wright, whose strength and fortitude are amazing and who loves to inspire and encourage me to slow down and take one breath at a time. I look up to my older sister, Monica Wise, for taking my dad’s old Amway chalkboard from 1982 and teaching me algebra and geometry and always telling me to keep my trunk up!

Both my grandmothers, Nan Wise and Doris Rutledge Parham, were the epitome of exceptionally strong, powerful, and resilient women who always selflessly and graciously put helping others before themselves.

I am learning to look up more to myself to commit to continuously becoming a better version of who I was yesterday. Because, if I can’t move beyond that which I have already mastered, then I will never grow.

## How do you overcome adversity?

Adversity hurts but quitting hurts more. I always try to focus on and embrace something positive in the face of adversity.



## **The pandemic has been a challenge for everyone, especially women. What has helped you?**

What has helped immensely through the pandemic is having a strong bond with God as well as my husband, family, friends, and closest village of supporters and confidantes. It also helped me to maintain my passion and focus on making a life-changing difference for others as it pertains to achieving diversity, equity, and inclusion for Blacks, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC).

Undoubtedly, having a mindset to help others is one of the best solutions to overcome any seen or unforeseen challenge, especially for women, during any season of one's life.

## **What advice would you give your younger self?**

I would unreservedly tell my younger self, "Michele, you are beautifully and wonderfully made. So, please make sure to know how uniquely special and phenomenal you are. And remember that your work is not in vain and the end of a matter is better than its beginning, and patience is better than pride." I would also tell myself to count it all joy, because all things – good, bad, and/or ugly – work together for the greater good.