

Eulogy for Shirley Williams

God bless you all, Shirley's family and friends, for being here to celebrate her wonderful, loving and giving life.

Her passing marks the loss of a remarkable woman.

Shirley was a pioneer to all who knew her.

She was born just a few days before Christmas, on December 22, 1923, in Roanoke, Virginia. Her father, James Davis, Sr., attended college and worked for the Norfolk & Western Railway. Sadly, she lost her mother, Lillian, when she was only 8 years old. Then she lived with her father and his parents, Cora and W.W. Davis – Shirley called them “Mama” and “Papa” – and her two brothers, Leonard and James Davis, Jr.

Cora and W.W. Davis were pillars of the African American community. Cora was a school teacher, and she and her husband founded the St. Paul United Methodist Church in Roanoke where we are gathered today in loving memory of Shirley.

To Shirley, Grandmother Cora was “all lady.” She and W.W. taught Shirley and her two brothers to do right, be honest, and be strong in the face of adversity.

Shirley lived these lessons -- devoting her life to helping others, working tirelessly for what she believed in, and, with her dear husband, Norval, raising a wonderful family, including four beloved children, JoAnne, Norvalle, Gene and Denise.

Greatest Experiences

During our visit last year I asked Shirley to tell me about her greatest experiences and this is what she said.

Her three years at Bennett College in Greensboro, North Carolina were blessed. During her freshman year she was inspired by her meeting with Mary

Bethune. Bethune, the great educator and civil rights leader who grew up working in the cotton fields of Maysville, South Carolina, founded Bethune-Cookman College in Daytona Beach, Florida. Shirley was so happy to tell me that her granddaughter, Kia, attends Bethune-Cookman College today.

After college, Shirley lived in Brooklyn, New York, attended night school and worked as a legal secretary in lower Manhattan. She loved New York and said, it was “like walking into a dream,” with so much to learn, to see and to hear. She heard Billy Holiday sing in a Harlem night-club and attended the original American folk opera “Porgy and Bess” on Broadway. These were thrilling experiences for a young woman from a small Southern town, and Shirley continued to love music throughout her life.

She might have never left New York were it not for the fact that her beloved grandmother, Cora Davis, was in declining health. Shirley considered it an honor to return to Roanoke and care for her grandmother. For her, it was the best thing that could have happened.

Shirley began seeing Norval Williams, a man her brother James told me was “hard to beat.” Shirley and Norval were married in early 1947. They raised their four children in a house on Gilmer Avenue that she dearly loved. Full of happiness and pride, Shirley told me, “I never thought I could be so fortunate to have such wonderful children.” She said, “they were all good kids,” they treated their parents with respect, and were easy to talk with.

Shirley enjoyed many accomplishments but none meant more to her than her children, who she loved with all her heart. She was crazy about her brother Leonard – he had a terrific sense of humor -- and her brother James and his wife, Gloria, who were always so thoughtful and kind to Shirley and Norval and their children. Both brothers, she said, made a big difference in her life and meant the

world to her.

Our dear Shirley had such a big heart! She believed her love for Norval and her children filled it to overflowing and then, to her greatest joy, she welcomed with love and pride the birth of each of her grandchildren – Emil, Kayrida, Keisha, Kia and Sheree – and her great grandchildren: Kiara, Bryan, Hailey, Amayah, Deja and Mariah.

Shirley did everything she set out to do and she did it well. She was one of the first legal secretaries to be hired by the Legal Aid Society of Roanoke Valley, in the late 60s, and she worked there for over 30 years. Just out of law school, I went to work for Roanoke Legal Aid and Shirley was my legal secretary. Like so many lawyers who came before and after me, Shirley had a profound impact on my life. She worked harder than anyone I had ever known and was totally dedicated to our clients. It seemed that everyone in the Roanoke community knew and respected Shirley Williams. In time, Shirley became the heart and soul of the Legal Aid Society of Roanoke Valley, its greatest heroine, its strongest champion for individuals and families afflicted by poverty, crime, domestic problems, slum landlords, greedy creditors and wayward children. Whatever good I have been able to accomplish in my life and career is in no small measure due to the example set for me by Shirley Williams.

I have known and loved Shirley Williams for over 35 years. During that time, she treated me as a son and I enjoyed every minute we were together and every conversation we ever had. As her family knows so well, Shirley had the unique gift of making everyone she met feel good about themselves. She was always a pleasure to be with and her words, ever cheerful and warm, were always funny and wise.

Our last visit was a blessing. Shirley was recovering from a serious

operation and was able, with the help of her loving children, to return to her home in Roanoke. I had the opportunity to spend time with several of her children and grandchildren, and to meet her brother, James, for the first time. Best of all, I was able to spend a whole night talking with Shirley and hearing more about her early life and family. There is one more story she told me I want to tell you.

At or about the time Shirley returned from New York to care for her grandmother (in the 1940s), she wanted to buy her a hat for Mother's Day. Grandmother Cora, she said, had "very good taste in clothes" and always liked to look her best. So together they went to a fine department store in downtown Roanoke and picked out the most beautiful hat they could find. Shirley asked Cora to try on the hat. Sadly, in those days, people of color were not supposed to try on clothes in a department store, just pay for them. Grandmother Cora Davis, being a lady, did not want to try on the hat, fearful she would make a scene. But Shirley, having lived in New York and experienced a measure of equality, insisted: "I want to see you in it and I'm not buying it unless you try it on." Grandmother Cora relented and tried on the hat. Shirley pronounced it looked beautiful on her. Then she paid for it and they left the department store without incident. Because of the courage of our dear Shirley, never again would a woman of color need to buy a hat in that department store without first having the opportunity – the same opportunity as any woman – to try it on and see how it looked before taking it home.

Speaking of her personal struggle for civil rights, I was surprised to hear Shirley say, "Sometimes I wish I had put one foot a little ahead of the other." It is clear to me that Shirley Williams did as much as anyone to further the cause of justice and equality in society. She moved mountains with a kind word and a smile. She was one of God's people put on this earth to make all of our lives

better, and she succeeded admirably.

Now God has called Shirley to her well deserved rest in His eternal home. Knowing her, as I do, I believe that Shirley will make even Heaven a better place. And I know that she will continue to enrich our lives, that she will watch over and protect us, that she will laugh with us when we are happy and cry with us when we are sad, and that her example and her memory will never die as long as we – all of us, young and old -- shall live.

So let us celebrate the life of Shirley Williams, let us rejoice at having known such a remarkable person, and let us follow her shining example by doing what is right, being honest, and always helping others in need.

-Roger Stetter
December 23, 2006