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Williams recalls courtroom days

Judge served as a mentor to the new recruits in Cook County traffic section

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For nearly half a century, retired Cook County Circuit Judge Walter Williams did not possess any proof that he graduated from college.

His alma mater, Jackson State University in Mississippi, never awarded him a diploma in 1962 because of Williams' involvement with the civil rights movement.

Williams was president of the student body and was kicked out of school during his senior year because of his activism, he said.

Though he went on to attend The John Marshall Law School and serve a quarter-century on the bench, he never had a diploma to hang on his office wall.

But in 2011, Jackson State finally awarded Williams his college degree, thanks to the efforts of a professor there that knew Williams' story.

"I was very proud the day I walked down the aisle," Williams said. "They called me up specially — I was called out from the graduating class. They made quite a bit about it."

Williams' retirement on Nov. 30 marked the end of a 26-year judicial career that included time in the 1st Municipal District and the Juvenile Division.

Since 2005, he served as the supervising judge of the traffic section, the training ground for new judges.

"This is where you help them transition from lawyer to judge," Williams said. "And it's fun to see them grow and mature and develop into very fine jurists."

After graduating from John Marshall in 1970, Williams feared that, without a college diploma, he

would not pass a review before the Illinois Supreme Court Committee on Character and Fitness.

"It came up, but they said they understood what was going on in the South at that time, so they weren't concerned about it," Williams said.

He spent the first 16 years of his career practicing criminal defense at Williams, Slaughter and Williams in Chicago.

In 1986, he was appointed to the Cook County Circuit Court as an associate judge and spent four months in the 1st Municipal District before moving to the Juvenile Division.

Williams considered the Juvenile Division his "most enjoyable" assignment, but it was also where he encountered public criticism over his handling of some child abuse cases.

"It was gut-wrenching for me at times, but it was rewarding," he said.

In 1993, news reports blamed Williams and others for allowing 3-year-old Joseph Wallace to live with his abusive mother, Amanda Wallace, who later hung the boy in their apartment.

"Judge Williams was one of the people who was maybe a little bit more willing to live with the risks of kids being in troubled families — because maybe he was a little more conscious of the risks of pulling kids out of homes they are comfortable with," said Bruce A. Boyer, director of the Loyola University Chicago School of Law Civitas Child-Law Clinic.

Williams said he received much of the blame for the Joseph Wallace case, even though he was not assigned to that case when the boy died.



Walter Williams

Retired Circuit Judge, Cook County

- **Appointed:** 1986.
- **Career:** Attorney at Williams, Slaughter and Williams, 1970 to 1986.
- **Age:** 73.
- **Law school:** The John Marshall Law School, 1970.
- **Interests:** Walking, reading and traveling.

"I was not the judge that sent the child home at that time, but it was attributed to me," Williams said.

Williams was reassigned to the 1st Municipal District a year later.

"That case changed everybody who came near it," Boyer said.

Cook County Circuit Judge Sophia H. Hall worked as the presiding judge of the Juvenile Division at the time of the Wallace case. She said such cases can present difficult decisions for a judge and Williams handled the scrutiny well.

"He's a very caring, compassionate judge who really cared about the children," she said. "He took everything to heart."

Williams said he always considered what was in the child's best interest.

"I listened to all the arguments on both sides and I made my decisions based on that, and that's all you can do," he said.

The Illinois Supreme Court appointed Williams as a circuit judge

in 2005 to fill a vacancy. He became supervising judge of the traffic section that same year, which placed him in charge of dozens of newly minted judges. The high court recalled him for two, three-year terms after that.

"You're the first division any judge hits," said Cook County Circuit Judge Diann K. Marsalek, who worked in the traffic section with Williams. "You have a chance to really mold them, to try to get them to be a good judge and do good things."

Williams tried to teach new judges to avoid "robitis" — or letting the black robe inflate their egos.

"You have to remind them constantly," Williams said. "When they put that robe on, they think that's it, but you have to tell them you still have to treat everybody with decency and respect and tell them to follow the golden rule — do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

Cook County Circuit Judge Anthony C. Kyriakopoulos, who became a judge in 2010, said that lesson stayed with him.

"His main concern was to make sure that we not only did the correct thing with the law, but that we treated the litigants and the lawyers with respect and dignity," he said.

Williams often kept a quiet demeanor and avoided talking about himself, Hall said.

For example, he did not make an announcement about receiving his diploma in 2011, despite getting featured prominently in Jackson State's campus magazine.

"It's just, you don't go telling everybody your business," Williams said.

Williams currently serves on the New Judges' Education Advisory Committee in Cook County, which works to refine the training of new judges.

Marsalek said Williams helped guide many young lawyers and judges in their careers, making him an ideal fit for the traffic section.

"He was perfect in my mind for this job because he was so good at mentoring people," she said.

In retirement, Williams hopes to spend more time with his three grandchildren.

"It's been a long, enjoyable career," he said. "I couldn't have asked for more."

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