

A Scholar's Legacy: The Life and Career of Professor Alma Rene Williams, PhD, (1947 - 2000)

Admired for her intelligence and kindness; **Respected** for her dedication to excellence and to the study of African American history, and **Honored** for her community involvement, Dr. Alma Rene Williams will always be remembered by her students, friends, and professional colleagues.

Born in Memphis, Tennessee in 1947, Dr. Williams grew up in a large, loving and tightly knit family of six girls and three boys. Frequently reminded by their parents that a good education was important for a successful life, as children, Dr. Williams and her siblings looked forward to completing secondary school and going to college. Additionally, Christian education was important to the Williams family. Dr. Williams decided to remain close to home, attending LeMoyne-Owen College in Memphis where she earned her Bachelor of Arts degree in history (1969) and where she pledged Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc. Nearly two decades after her graduation, Lemoyne-Owen College selected Dr. Williams as their honored Alumna of the Year, a recognition attesting to her accomplishments both as a college student and as a professional. Dr. Williams continued her studies in history, culminating with a Doctor of Philosophy degree in history (1978) at Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri. Raising little known African American figures into the light became her early passion; thus, her dissertation aptly focused on one such little known figure, Robert Weaver, a member of the unofficial Black cabinet advisors of President Franklin D. Roosevelt. As she pursued the terminal degree, Dr. Williams also launched her teaching career at East Arkansas Community College in Forest City, Arkansas and then at Shelby State Community College in Memphis.

Dr. Williams moved to Atlanta, Georgia, in 1979 to accept a teaching position at Clark College (now Clark Atlanta University) and within a short time, the new history instructor received high praise for her stellar performances as a professor, researcher, and skillful and concerned faculty advisor to her students. After receiving tenure, Dr. Williams also held several administrative posts, including chair of the history department, chair of the faculty assembly, and coordinator of a faculty exchange program.

Through the years Dr. Williams pursued some of her myriad interests in history sub-fields and geographical areas. She studied Military History at the United States Military Academy at West Point for two summers during the late 1980s and then taught courses on the subject, always with an African American slant. During the following decade, Dr. Williams joined professors from around the nation in a project co-sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities and Duke University to document the Jim Crow system in the South. Following her participation and research for the Jim Crow project, Dr. Williams presented the research to her history colleagues, after which she designed two popular history courses on the subject. In 1995, Dr. Williams traveled to Cairo, Egypt as a Visiting Fulbright Fellow at the American University. One of Dr. Williams' projects during her time in the Middle East was an essay entitled, "The Education of Egyptian Girls."

Christian education had been important to Dr. Williams and her family since she was a child. She was baptized at Brown Baptist Church in Memphis when she was ten and remained a

faithful member until she left for college. After arriving to Atlanta, she joined Providence Missionary Baptist Church where she remained loyally involved in many areas such as the Deaconess Board and Matrons Circle. She also started an active Girl Scout Chapter which provided support and guidance, not only to adolescent and teen girls in her church community, but to many in the surrounding community, as well.

Dr. Williams, scholar, writer, international traveler, community worker and Christian activist made an indelible mark on the Clark Atlanta University and surrounding communities when she created her very own **Black History Quiz Bowl**, which became a much-anticipated annual event held during the University's Black History Month Celebration. While the exhibition itself was held in February, Dr. Williams encouraged students to study for the Black History Quiz Bowl throughout the year and even offered study questions and sessions to assist them. Her Quiz Bowl attracted audiences and participants from throughout the Atlanta University Center campuses, Clark Atlanta University, Spelman College, Morehouse College and Morris Brown College.

For a substantial portion of her teaching career, continuing to just before her unfortunate passing in 2000, Dr. Williams' Black History Quiz Bowls enabled Atlanta's collegians to display both their knowledge of Black History and their friendly competitive spirit. . Additionally, Dr, Williams' creative programming attracted faculty members, campus administrators, community residents and even students from nearby public schools crowded into Davage Auditorium or the Student Union building to cheer on their favorite contestants. Whether student participant or audience member, back then and even today, we honor and celebrate the memory of **Dr. Alma Williams** and her Black History Quiz Bowl that "served up" intellectual food for our minds and souls. **BlacFacs** is a feast of Black history that honors her.

Janice L. Sumler-Edmond, PhD, friend, and history colleague of Dr. Williams.