

Larry Williams - A Lifetime of Public Service

By Leslie Fisher

A recognized leader in city and county government, Hot Springs resident, Larry Williams, has served his community for over 30 years. His interest in politics dates back even further to when he was a boy growing up in Malvern, Arkansas. As an homage to his hometown, it was there that Williams announced his intentions to run for Commissioner of State Lands in 2018.

Williams is the son of "L.A." and the late Jean Williams. His only sibling, Debbie Williams Burcham, died in 2007 from breast cancer at the age of 53.

Born January 6, 1952 in Pine Bluff, Williams was raised in Malvern, where he enjoyed a happy childhood and developed an interest in government and politics at an early age.

When he was just nine years old, he wrote a letter to then-President John F. Kennedy expressing his condolences over the death of Sam Rayburn, who was serving as Speaker of the House of Representatives. Williams still has the letter that he received in response. It was signed by Ralph Dungan, special assistant to the president, who sent the president's regards and thanks for writing such a nice letter.

In his hometown, Williams knew who all the elected officials were. His grandfather would take him to local political rallies at the courthouse and other places. During his eighth grade year, Williams worked for the Malvern Daily Record, delivering newspapers to all of the offices in the courthouse as part of his daily route.

After graduating from Malvern High School in 1970, Williams' interest in current events led him to pursue a degree in journalism from Henderson State University (HSU). He moved to Garland County in 1975 and has been active within the community ever since. He spent most of his political career in the County Judge's office, working for 15 years as administrative assistant to two county judges before being elected as County Judge.

Williams assumed the office of County Judge on January 1, 1995 and was re-elected to the position seven more times for a total of 16 years served. In his last contested election as County Judge, he received 93% of the vote. With his eighth term, he broke the record to become the longest serving county judge in Garland County history.

As County Judge, Williams obtained a \$600,000 grant from the Arkansas Department of Human Services for the major portion of funding for the construction of the juvenile detention facility, renovation of the courthouse and the former county library building, construction of the new courts building and implementation of a house-to-house residential solid waste collection system.

He also served on the Commissioner of State Lands Advisory Council during the tenure of, then Land Commissioner, Charlie Daniels.

During Williams' tenure as County Judge, he became an early champion for Garvan Woodland Gardens, or what he calls "Heaven on Earth." As a charter member, he served on the initial Advisory Board and attended meetings of the Arkansas Natural and Cultural Resources Council (ANCRC) to support funding requests by Garvan Gardens.

As a result of his efforts, Garland County provided an in-kind match that enabled the Gardens to receive its initial grant from the ANCRC. The state land commissioner is a permanent member of the Council. Before leaving office, Williams programmed Arkridge Road leading to the Gardens as a state aid highway project and secured the necessary right-of-way for subsequent improvements to the road.

In 2008, the American Society of Landscape Architects Arkansas Chapter presented Williams with the Award for Community Service to the Profession for his support of the Gardens. The award is presented to a non-landscape architect for exemplary support of the environment, the art and science of landscape architecture and service to the community in a manner which benefits the profession as a whole.

Williams, who appreciates its natural beauty, hosted a campaign fundraiser at the Gardens when he ran unsuccessfully for State Representative for House District 24. He enjoys bringing his out-of-town guests to walk the trails and experience the holiday lights display. He has also officiated several weddings at Anthony Chapel, located within the Gardens. (Williams has performed nearly 600 weddings.)

There is a saying that appeared on a name plate in the office of former Connecticut Governor Ella Grand that speaks to Williams and his philosophy of community service: "Bloom where you are planted." Williams moved to Garland County as a young man uncertain of his future but was fortunate enough to find a job with a small advertising and public relations firm, which put him on a path toward community involvement. Like the flowers at Garvan Gardens, Williams bloomed where he was planted, becoming a strong leader for the community with a long list of accomplishments.

Williams has served numerous organizations and committees: He was president of the County Judges' Association of Arkansas and a member of the Arkansas Public Defender Commission. He was a member of the Board of Directors of the Southwest Central Regional Solid Waste Management District, the West Central Arkansas

Planning and Development District, and the Garland County Economic Development Corporation.

Williams retired as Garland County Judge on Dec. 31, 2010. In retirement, he developed an interest in antique collecting. He also enjoys attending horse racing at Oaklawn Park, walking and weight training, and spending time with his cat, Tux.

With a desire to continue serving his community and improving the lives of its citizens, Williams ran for the Hot Springs' Board of Directors and was elected to represent District 4 in 2014. As a City Director, Williams worked for downtown revitalization, public safety improvements, a long-term water supply and city-county cooperation. He also sponsored an ordinance requiring 24 hours' notice of all special board meetings instead of the minimum two-hour notice required by the state's Freedom of Information Act.

Throughout his political career, Williams has been a mentor to younger generations. He is an adjunct faculty member for the University of Arkansas at Little Rock (UALR), where he teaches American National Government in hopes of inspiring future community leaders.

Williams holds a Master's Degree in Public Administration from UALR and a Bachelor's Degree in Journalism from HSU. He has had the honor to judge beauty pageants at HSU and at other colleges and events, including Brickfest in his hometown.

Williams judged his first pageant in 1994 and has judged multiple Miss Arkansas Preliminary pageants. He has a good eye for talent, having judged the current Mrs. Arkansas Julie Fuhrmann Pasquinzo three times in Miss Arkansas Preliminary competitions. Well-spoken and with a strong stage presence, she was always first on his ballot. Many years later, he encouraged her to compete in the Mrs. Arkansas pageant, which she won in 2017.

Public service, in its many forms, has been central to Williams' life. He is presently a member of the Board of Directors for the Area Agency on Aging of West Central Arkansas and the 18th Judicial District Criminal Detention Facilities Review Committee. He is a member of Grand Avenue United Methodist Church in Hot Springs.

Throughout his political career, Williams has developed a wealth of knowledge and expertise in public administration and local government. He is eager to put his experiences to use on the statewide level, where he will work hard to serve his state and improve the lives of all Arkansans.