

## Judicial Profile

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# Hon. Ann Claire Williams U.S. Circuit Judge, U.S. Court of Appeals for the Seventh Circuit

AS THE FIRST African-American woman appointed as a U.S. district judge in Illinois and the first African-American appointed to the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Seventh Circuit, Judge Ann Claire Williams has been a trailblazer in the legal field, serving with distinction as a federal judge for more than 20 years. As the daughter of a bus driver from Detroit, she has worked tirelessly to mentor others and to make the road easier for those who follow her.

Judge Williams graduated from Wayne State University in Detroit and began her professional career as a music teacher and a third-grade teacher in an inner-city school in her native Detroit. While working full time, she commuted to the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor and earned a master's degree in education. As she was completing her studies, a friend who was applying to law school convinced Judge Williams to do the same. Ann Claire Williams settled on a career in the law as a way to teach and work for social justice.

After earning her law degree from the University of Notre Dame Law School, Judge Williams became a law clerk for Judge Robert A. Sprecher in the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Seventh Circuit, where she was the first of two African-American women to serve as a law clerk. After her clerkship, Judge Williams joined the U.S. attorney's office for the Northern District of Illinois in 1976. She was impressed with the professionalism of the U.S. attorney's office when she served as a law clerk, and she wanted to continue her career in public service; therefore, she viewed representing the government in court as an honor. She also viewed it as an opportunity "to make sure that the system operated fairly for all people." By 1978,



she had become the supervisor of criminal litigation in the office. From 1980 to 1983, she served as deputy chief of the criminal receiving and appellate division. Dan K. Webb, the U.S. attorney at the time and now a well-known trial lawyer at Winston & Strawn LLP in Chicago, has described Judge Williams as "authoritative but not irritating" and as someone who could mesmerize a jury. In 1983, she was named chief of the Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Force for the Northern Central region and was responsible for organizing federal investigatory and prosecutorial activities in a five-state region, including Illinois. While working on the task force, Judge Williams met and interacted with several U.S. attorneys and Department of Justice officials, several of whom recommended her for a new district judgeship in the Northern District of Illinois. Republican Sen. Charles Percy invited her to apply for the judgeship. In 1985, when she was 35 years old, President Ronald Reagan appointed her a U.S. district judge for the Northern District of Illinois, making her one of the youngest judges ever appointed to the federal bench.

In 1999, after Judge Williams had served on the



Judge Williams with other African-American women judges at a celebration of the integration of the federal judiciary held in 1992 in Chicago.

bench with distinction for almost 15 years, President Bill Clinton, with considerable bipartisan support, nominated her to the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Seventh Circuit; she was the first African-American to serve on the court. The elevation of Judge Williams to the Seventh Circuit Court of Appeals was a major celebration in Chicago, with a standing-room-only crowd in the James Benton Parsons Ceremonial Courtroom in the Dirksen Federal Building. No fewer than three other courtrooms carried the event over video monitors for the overflow crowd. The two U.S. senators from Illinois, Democrat Richard J. Durbin and Republican Peter Fitzgerald, praised Judge Williams at the event, as did former Illinois Republican Gov. James R. Thompson and Notre Dame Law School's Dean Patricia O'Hara.

Judge Williams has served as president of the influential Federal Judges Association, which has a membership of almost 900 federal district and appellate judges and is dedicated to preserving the independence of the judiciary. Chief Justice of the United States William Rehnquist appointed her as chair of the Court Administration and Case Management Committee of the Judicial Conference of the United States. Judge Williams is the first African-American to hold either of those positions. In 2005, Chief Justice Rehnquist appointed Judge Williams to a three-year term on the Supreme Court Fellows Program Commission. Justice John Paul Stevens has known Judge Williams since she was a law clerk and describes her as an old friend and an "excellent judge." Justice Stephen G. Breyer, who has worked with Judge Williams in connection with the Federal Judges Association, has stated that "Ann Williams is a fine judge and a marvelous human being who has contributed much to the federal judiciary."

Judge Williams attributes much of her success and inspiration to her parents. Both of her parents received college degrees but were denied work in their

chosen professions in the 1940s: Her father had a degree in psychology but was forced to drive a bus in Detroit to support his family; her mother was a teacher but was unable to find a teaching position in the public schools and was forced to teach in a training school.

When Judge Williams was growing up, her parents stressed the importance of education, perseverance in the face of adversity, and the adage "to whom much has been given, much is expected." Taking her parents' counsel to heart, Judge Williams has exemplified a deep commitment to mentoring and public service. While a third-year law student, she mentored younger African-American law students. While working as an assistant U.S. attorney, she mentored younger lawyers, promoted diversity in the office in order to deal with the diverse defendant population, and helped found Mi-

nority Legal Education Resources Inc., an organization that helps Chicago-area African-Americans to prepare for bar exams.

Judge Williams has also devoted considerable time to Just The Beginning Foundation (JTBF) — the idea for which was born when Judge Williams proposed that her colleague, Judge James Parsons, be recognized for serving with distinction for more than 30 years on the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of Illinois. The 1992 event to honor Judge Parsons and other African-Americans was so successful that in 1993 Williams co-founded the foundation, a multiracial organization dedicated to improving the legal system in the United States and to preserving and honoring the legacy of African-Americans in the federal judiciary.

The organization's activities include its JTBF in the Schools Project, a program designed to help underprivileged high school students understand the legal system and to encourage them to pursue careers in fields related to law. Judge Williams regularly speaks to the pupils in Chicago's public schools, urging them to set career goals and work toward them. JTBF also publishes *Know Your Rights*, a newsletter that deals with topics such as housing, employment, civics, and criminal law; the newsletter is distributed to the community in partnership with local churches. In 1997, Judge Williams — along with judges, lawyers, and bar groups — founded the JTBF Law School Consortium, which is designed to help minority law students in Chicago area law schools achieve greater academic success and assist them with career planning. JTBF also has sponsored national conferences, with the seventh conference scheduled to be held in Cincinnati, Ohio, in September 2006. Judge Williams continues to serve as president of JTBF's board of directors.

Retired Sixth Circuit Judge Nathaniel R. Jones has said, "Judge Williams has been the inspiration of and



Judge Williams (center) with judges of the Ghanaian Court of Appeals and justices of the Supreme Court of Ghana.

plays a direct role in these celebrations”; her passion “has been contagious and inspirational.” Judge Jones has noted that “Judge Williams approaches her judicial duties with the same energy and resourcefulness as she does the many other activities in which she engages, and she is a master at multi-tasking.”

Judge Williams’ commitment to training and education extends beyond her activities in the United States. In 2002 and again in 2003, she led delegations to Ghana to train members of the Ghanaian judiciary in judicial ethics, case management, and alternative dispute resolution. Judge Williams also has served as a member of international delegations that traveled to the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda in

Arusha, Tanzania, and to the Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia at The Hague. As part of her work in both courts, she taught trial and appellate advocacy courses to the attorneys who were prosecuting persons accused of serious violations of human rights law committed in Rwanda and the Former Yugoslavia. As recently as January 2006, Judge Williams trained lawyers in Kenya.

Judge Williams has received numerous awards. In 2000, she received the *Chicago Lawyer’s* 2000 Person of the Year award for her contributions to the law and the legal community. In 2005, she received the Arabella Babb Mansfield Award from the National Association of Women Lawyers — the organization’s highest honor. In 2006, Judge Williams received the Spirit of Excellence Award from the American Bar Association’s Commission on Racial and Ethnic Diversity in the Profession.

In her spare time when she is not teaching or speaking, Judge Williams enjoys movies, bicycle riding, and singing. She is a vocalist in the Chicago Bar Association’s Barristers Big Band.

Judge Williams, the bus driver’s daughter from Detroit, has achieved many firsts in her life and has served as a trailblazer in the legal field, opening the way to more diverse representation on the bench. With her distinguished career and considerable bipartisan appeal, another first would be an appointment to the U.S. Supreme Court as the Court’s first African-American female justice. Time will tell. **TFL**

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