Reflections on Starla Williams: In Appreciation of a Friend

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In my years as dean of the Widener University School of Law, I often referred to the Widener Law community as family. When Starla Williams joined that family, just a few years ago, she did not simply expand it; she enhanced it. She added to this body of legal academicians and rounded it out. Starla was gracious enough in the piece she wrote for this year's Dean's Leadership Forum on Diversity to recognize me for "valor" and "vision," but I would recognize Starla for her warmth and light, and there is little reason for valor without the warmth of family and friends to return to, and no possibility for vision without light.

Needless to say, my experience with Starla was one that was always pleasant. How could it have been otherwise? Starla loved this family, and there was nothing she would not do, asked or unasked, to help make us better. G.K. Chesterton once observed that those who love the most are also those who seek to improve the most and are also the most tenacious about doing so. I suspect Mr. Chesterton had envisioned Starla Williams. Starla zealously sought to love everything and everyone she encountered, here at Widener, a little closer to perfection. Starla loved the law, but she was not satisfied with its imperfections. Starla loved the students, but she was always pushing them to be better. Starla loved justice, not as a word or a fiction but as an absolute and as a perfect reflection of the right in triumph over the wrong, and therefore she made it her "business" both to right the wrong in the sphere in which she operated and to train others to lift the veil of injustice anywhere they encountered it.

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3 CHARLES DICKENS, A CHRISTMAS CAROL 25 (Brimax ed. 1992) (1843) (" 'Business!' cried the Ghost, wringing its hands again. 'Mankind was my
The Jurist Academy was one of the projects I was most passionate about here at Widener during my tenure as dean. Though the Jurist Academy serves a multitude of purposes, the one closest to my heart is to take people who have never envisioned the possibility that they could become lawyers and give them a reason to believe that their life's work could be to use the law to help people transcend the biggest obstacles in their lives. Needless to say, I was thrilled when it was Starla who came to me volunteering to bring the Jurist Academy vision I had started on the Delaware campus to Harrisburg. I knew there was no better person to do this job, and she, not surprisingly, successfully gave substance to my vision. Later, when I needed someone to embrace the role of Harrisburg's first Multi-Cultural Affairs Director, once again, I turned to Starla, knowing that she would find a way to give it her all without compromising the commitment she had to the students and alumni of our Jurist Academy. Of course, Starla proved me right.

My encounters with Starla were not solely as dean to faculty member or mentor to mentee. In our short time together we shared a lot. I enjoyed her sense of humor and cannot recall a time when we saw each other that we did not share a laugh. We shared our families. Starla was most proud of her birth family. Her sister's name is Angela, and so was my sister's, and the last correspondence from Starla to me was one of condolence for the loss of my sister Angela. I heard a lot about her nephew and about how he was maturing and becoming an outstanding young man. It was no secret that Starla loved and deeply respected her dad. We talked about our shared African-American heritage and reinforced in each other the pride we had in having made it, in the words of James Weldon Johnson, "thus far on the way."4 We talked about changes in our bodies, our mortality, especially after her struggles to recover from her own health issues and then my heart attack. We shared our principles of spirituality and our belief that we are business; charity, mercy, forbearance, and benevolence, were, all, my business.'

not alone. On the dark days of being a dean I could count on Starla to cheer me on to the finish line. I knew she had the best interest of this institution at heart, and I knew she cared about my welfare as a person.

When a dean hires a faculty member, that act is to be regarded as an investment in the institution potentially for decades. A dean watches the young professionals she has hired as they struggle to make their mark and to train others to join us in the law. As I watched Starla, I watched a woman giving all she had to make herself better so she could make others better. Starla understood all she gave to be the true measure of love. I am missing her, and I will never forget her, and I thank God that, for a brief moment in time, our paths intersected and we journeyed together. Along that journey, my traveling companion was always there to remind me that a life well lived is one that brightens the corner where we find ourselves today. She inspired me to use the opportunity I had as a dean to make this place a citadel for the training of lawyers who understand that the rule of law on paper and in practice, however imperfect it may be, must always aspire to benefit even the least of us.

There is an old song that Mahalia Jackson used to sing that reminds me of Starla. The lyrics, in part, are as follows:

If I can help somebody as I pass along,
If I can cheer somebody, with a word or song,
If I can show somebody, he's traveling wrong,
Then my living shall not be in vain.
My living shall not be in vain.
Then my living shall not be in vain.
If I can help somebody, as I pass along,
Then my living shall not be in vain.\(^5\)

Starla's life helped many "somebodies," including students, colleagues, family members, friends, neighbors, and even people who never knew her name but felt the effect of her love. Starla has passed along, but you can be assured that her living was not in

vain. To the Williams family, we offer our deepest condolences but even more our deepest appreciation for their sharing Starla with us.