

David Williams II, *In Memoriam* 1948–2019

On February 15, 2019, hundreds of people gathered at the Temple Church in Nashville to celebrate the life and impact of David Williams II. As remembrances were spoken from the pulpit, and as tearful exchanges occurred between friends in the crowd, it was clear that people, communities, institutions, and lives were forever molded by this man—this fearless leader who left us unexpectedly.

In remembering my dear friend David, it is impossible not to think big. Words like “leader,” “trailblazer,” and “revolutionary” may seem diffuse on their own, but they are clear in their description of a man who always thought about the bigger picture, who always put others before himself, who always engaged with the “why” and the “how” that linked everything together—from social justice to our shared history to personal growth.

It may go without saying that David was many different things to many different people: a professor, a mentor, a coach, an advocate, a manager, a friend. He furthered the aspirations of hundreds of student-athletes, he drove the success of Vanderbilt Athletics, and he propelled our university toward the equitable and diverse institution that it is today.

And throughout it all, he remained a lawyer to his core. He loved the law unequivocally and took great pride in teaching it. A few short years after graduating from law school in 1982, he returned to it, in a new form, for his first career: teaching. He taught law for more than three decades, and it is what he wanted to return to after retiring from his role as Vanderbilt’s Vice Chancellor for Athletics and University Affairs. Even then, he not only planned to teach a few law classes but—in typical David fashion—his “retirement” included plans to build a new Sports, Law and Society Program from the ground up.

From the beginning, David's path to studying law was closely tied to his love of education. He went to law school after ten years as a middle school teacher and coach in the Detroit Public Schools, a transition he credited, at least in part, to Richard Kluger's book, *Simple Justice: The History of Brown v. Board of Education and Black America's Struggle for Equality*.¹ After his own time as a law student—earning a doctorate of jurisprudence from the University of Detroit and a master of laws in taxation from New York University—he returned, yet again, to education, settling in for his first position as an assistant professor at the Ohio State University Moritz College of Law.

While his trajectory may seem straightforward enough, David did not see the law as a linear path. For him, being a lawyer was not the end goal in itself but a robust platform from which he could expand his impact, deepen his knowledge, and activate change in a multitude of realms—college athletics, racial equality, and student advocacy, to name only a few.

To David, studying the law was not just about learning to analyze complex issues, read between the lines, seek truth, and manage disputes—although it is certainly all of those things. More critically, it was about setting the precedents for change and laying lasting groundwork. In the classroom and on the field, within teams and individuals, among eighteen-year-olds and seasoned university leaders, he did this time and time again.

I will never forget a conversation I had with David nearly twenty years ago, shortly after he had made the transition from Ohio State to Vanderbilt. As fellow law professors, he and I gravitated toward each other immediately and would often discuss pressing issues in the legal field, our most exceptional students, and our visions for our lives. As we sat in my office one day, David spoke specifically about the importance of our jobs as teachers: how it is our critical mission to figure out what is wrong, to determine what can be made better, and to create solutions. It may sound simple, but those three things were calls to action that have always stuck with me. The conversation confirmed, early on, that David was someone who was going to roll up his sleeves and change lives for the better.

And sure enough, that is exactly what he did. He revolutionized the Commodores—he boosted morale, he led our teams to four NCAA national championships, he championed diversity at every turn, and he guided outstanding student-athletes.

1. RICHARD KLUGER, *SIMPLE JUSTICE: THE HISTORY OF BROWN V. BOARD OF EDUCATION AND BLACK AMERICA'S STRUGGLE FOR EQUALITY* (First Vintage Books 2004).

He was always in the spotlight—not by design but because his achievements made headlines inevitable. And yet, throughout all the media attention and the buzz, he always put student-athletes first: seeing them as individuals with strengths, needs, and specific potential. To David, being a student-athlete at Vanderbilt was not just about winning the next game; it was about gaining the perspective to have a rich and fulfilling life for decades to come. By creating an environment where grades could skyrocket alongside scoreboards and where student-athletes could grow holistically, David invented and embodied “The Vanderbilt Way.”

His vision for our student-athletes, however forward-thinking, was also rooted in the past. David did not shy away from our university’s history—even its most difficult chapters. He fiercely advocated for recognition of the Vanderbilt trailblazers that are now featured through portraits and interactive exhibits in the university’s main administration building, Kirkland Hall. He reunited our university with Perry Wallace, the SEC’s first black varsity basketball player who faced injustice as a Vanderbilt student in the late 1960s and someone with whom David shared a love of the law and a long, successful legal career. David often said that he was especially proud of this accomplishment. To me, it was a highlight of the many ways that David bridged gaps between people, between decades, and between right and wrong.

There were so many milestones throughout his time at Vanderbilt, but there were undercurrents, too: the steady contributions that he made to our community, day in and day out. Upon coming to Vanderbilt in 2000, David served as the university’s general counsel and secretary. He provided legal counsel to just about everyone on campus, from the Vanderbilt Board of Trust to university administrators to student organizations, to faculty and staff.

From the start, he was integral to solving complex situations and managed to do so in a way that—instead of causing rifts—brought people together. He understood the nuances of the Vanderbilt ecosystem and brought his kindness, innovation, and legal perspective to solving a wide range of problems.

The scope and depth of his interests is also reflected in his legal writing, which spanned topics including reflections on contemporary civil rights battles,² college affordability,³ and tax implications for

2. David Williams, II, *We Still Have a Ways to Go – Equality and Civil Rights over Four Decades*, VAND. LAW., Fall 2002.

3. David Williams, II, *Financing a College Education: A Taxing Dilemma*, 50 OHIO ST. L.J. 561 (1989).

international students.⁴ He practiced what he preached and he preached what he practiced—pairing grand visions and hopeful goals for the future with the most grounded of facts and observations.

He kept a hand in the wider community as well and was an avid member of the NCAA's General Advisory Board, Academic Council, and Enforcement Task Force and a chair of the association's Infractions Appeals Committee. He served on numerous nonprofit boards in Nashville alone and chaired the boards of United Way, the Nashville Public Education Foundation, and the Nashville branch of the Atlanta Federal Reserve. He was a member of the American Bar Association, where he served on the Bar Admissions Committee. He had the rare ability to look fully outside of himself—and even outside of his immediate environment—to see where there was room symbiosis, for outreach, for improvement.

Since we lost him, I have been thinking a lot about the art of commemoration. How do you pay tribute to someone whose actions far surpass the limits of language? For whom even the loftiest words—"leader," "trailblazer," "revolutionary"—are not quite enough?

Remembering David here, in a widely respected student-run journal for a university and discipline that he adored, is a good start, and I am so grateful to the *Vanderbilt Law Review* for commemorating David Williams in this way. I am also honored that David's name will forever grace Vanderbilt's beloved Recreation and Wellness Center and proud to say that painter Simmie Knox—the artist behind our Trailblazers series—is creating a portrait of David to hang, so fittingly, alongside the heroes that he championed. These are bittersweet addendums to a great life, mere strides toward honoring his impact, his reach, the justness of his cause.

But the more I think about it, the more I think the best way to honor a man like David Williams is not just through words but through action—action as lawyers, as citizens, and as human beings, united and together in this world.

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4. David Williams, II, *Foreign Students and Scholars and the United States Tax System* (Univ. Houston Law Ctr. Inst. for Higher Educ. Law & Governance Monograph Series 91-2, 1991), <http://www.law.uh.edu/ihelg/monograph/91-2.pdf> [<https://perma.cc/SB2D-BQCM>].

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