

Legislation Text

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Recognizing the work and contributions of attorney and grassroots community activist Leon A. Williams Esq., whose political involvement as an independent candidate inspired a reimagining of the criminal justice system and laid the groundwork for future generations of innovative public servants in the City of Philadelphia.

WHEREAS, Leon Aristotle Williams, Esq. was born on August 7, 1948 and grew up in North Philadelphia, sharing a home with his parents, Louise and Eugene Williams, and his five siblings. Mr. Williams attended Reynolds Elementary School, Strawberry Mansion and Thomas Fitz-Simons Junior High School; and

WHEREAS, As a middle school student, Mr. Williams was discouraged from testing into a specialized high school by his school principal because of his perceived academic ability. Mr. Williams became determined to attend Dobbins, a specialized high school, and eventually passed the entrance exam. Passing the entrance exam helped him realize at a young age that he would need to rely on his confidence in his abilities rather than the perceptions of others. He graduated from Murrell Dobbins High School in 1966; and

WHEREAS, Upon graduating from Dobbins, Mr. Williams worked at a foundry, making \$1.25 an hour melting metals and making castings until 1968, when he was drafted to serve in the military during the Vietnam War; and

WHEREAS, He served in the military for two years, and his deployment to Vietnam was his first time traveling outside of the Philadelphia region. Mr. Williams was greeted into the war zone with bullets flying past his window; and

WHEREAS, Mr. Williams returned from his military service in 1970 and enrolled in Community College of Philadelphia the next year, where he earned his first "A," inspiring confidence that he could be as successful as his caucasian peers in a college classroom; and

WHEREAS, While attending CCP, multiple professors became invested in his academic growth, including Dr. Frederick Burton. Dr. Burton introduced Mr. Williams to activism and taught him how to organize around African American issues and work to uplift his community. He eventually transferred to Temple University, where he graduated with a Bachelor of Science in Education with an English Major and a certification in English Communications in 1976; and

WHEREAS, While at CCP, he met his wife, Judy, and they eventually transferred to Temple University together. The two married in 1978 and went on to have three children together: Jamie, Samantha, and Justin. Mr. Williams is also the father to three other children: Leon, Charlotte, and Malcolm; and

WHEREAS, Mr. Williams began working as a substitute teacher with the School District of Philadelphia upon graduation. Although he enjoyed teaching, he aspired to pursue post-graduate education. He attended Temple University to earn a Master's Degree in Psychoeducational Processes as one of only two African Americans to earn his Master's from the program at the time; and

WHEREAS, Mr. Williams later set his sights on law school and was accepted into the Delaware Law School at Widener University. Of 250 students, he was one of two African American students in the class. Mr. Williams enjoyed sitting in the front row in the class while answering questions from law school professors as they employed the Socratic method. He was frequently asked to tutor his peers, as he was one of only four students able to earn A's in class despite law school's rigid grading system that limited the number of A's that could be given at the end of the semester. He graduated from law school in 1982 and passed the Pennsylvania Bar in 1983, when he began his legal career at the Public Defender's Office; and

WHEREAS, In his adult life, Mr. Williams bought his home on Divinity Street in Southwest Philadelphia, where he became the block captain and began his involvement in grassroots movements, including organizing neighbors around community safety, hosting neighborhood cleanups and collecting donations to sponsor youth-focused activities; and

WHEREAS, Mr. Williams' career at the Public Defender's office was short lived, as he felt as though he was working in an arena where he couldn't be fully independent. He had always envisioned his life as an attorney as fully aligned to the needs of his clients and the Constitution, without any allegiance to politics or a power structure. He quickly opened his own law practice inside of his home on Divinity Street to practice law in a manner more true to his ideals. He eventually moved his office to a building he purchased in Center City with his best friend from law school, coining himself "the easiest lawyer to find on 13th and Pine"; and

WHEREAS, In the late 1980's, Mr. Williams also took part in movements fighting for education justice. He lobbied for changes to the School Board of Philadelphia and, at one point, even took over the school district building with more than 300 protestors over the firing of an African American counselor. He also advocated in Harrisburg for an elected school board, as Philadelphia was and continues to be the only school district in the state that appoints their school board; and

WHEREAS, Mr. Williams' organizing experience created the foundation for his political platform, tying the success of crime prevention to the involvement of criminal justice partners in the community. He began his political candidacy in 1985, when he ran for Judge of the Court of Common Pleas; and

WHEREAS, Being concerned with Black men being gunned down by police and the police not being held accountable for their actions, he researched an underutilized law that allows citizens to bypass the District Attorney's office and file a private criminal complaint seeking an arrest warrant. In 1988, he filed a private criminal complaint against an FBI agent that shot and killed an unarmed Black man, after the District Attorney at the time, Lynne Abraham, refused to prosecute him; and

WHEREAS, The private complaint was a case of first impression, as no attorney had sought to bypass the DA's office when seeking an arrest warrant for a law enforcement officer before. The Court of Common Pleas and Superior Court both rejected the complaint. A year later, Mr. Williams filed another private criminal complaint against two state patrol agents that shot an unarmed Black man, after DA Abraham refused to charge the agents. Mr. Williams won his petition, and the Court of Common Pleas ordered the agents to be arrested. The decision was appealed all the way to the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania; and

WHEREAS, His work to hold law enforcement accountable led Mr. Williams to pursue the role of District Attorney in the City of Philadelphia. He ran for DA against Lynne Abraham and Jack McMahan as an independent candidate in 1997 and again in 2001, calling out corruption and racism that was espoused by both opponents. In 2016, Leon Williams ran for State Representative, again as an independent candidate. These races were ultimately unsuccessful, as Mr. Williams struggled to raise enough funds to convince voters to cast their

vote outside of the two-party system; and

WHEREAS, Despite these campaign losses, Mr. Williams' candidacy was monumental, as his political platform took aim at police corruption and prosecutorial discretion to incarcerate low-level drug offenses in the name of the war on drugs. In 2001, Mr. Williams connected this policy to the over-representation of Black and brown people in jails, calling the war on drugs "essentially a war against people of color"; and

WHEREAS, Leon Williams' political involvement influenced many future leaders to come, even in his own home. Two of his daughters are dedicated public servants, each of whom are responsible for groundbreaking legislation to protect the rights of Philadelphians; and

WHEREAS, In the future, Mr. Williams hopes to see Philadelphia leadership unified and organized on important issues like voting and gun violence. He is hopeful that we are raising a generation of young people that will be able to unite to address these long-standing issues; now, therefore, be it

RESOLVED, BY THE COUNCIL OF THE CITY OF PHILADELPHIA, That we hereby honor the work and contributions of attorney and grassroots community activist Leon A. Williams Esq., whose political involvement as an independent candidate galvanized a reimagining of the criminal justice system and laid the groundwork for future generations of innovative public servants in the City of Philadelphia.

FURTHER RESOLVED, That an Engrossed copy of this resolution be presented to Leon A. Williams and his loving wife, Judy, as an expression of the sincere sentiments of this legislative body.

FURTHER RESOLVED, That an Engrossed copy of this resolution be presented to Samantha Williams Esq., his loving daughter and Director of Legislation and Policy for Councilmember Jones, as an expression of the sincere sentiments of this legislative body.

FURTHER RESOLVED, That an Engrossed copy of this resolution be presented to Councilmember Jamie Gauthier, his loving daughter, as an expression of the sincere sentiments of this legislative body.