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## Darrin Lavell Williams Sr.

Darrin Williams was raised by his adoptive parents in a home filled with faith and love. As he is about to become the state's first black speaker of the House of Representatives, Williams relies on hi



By ERIC FRANCIS SPECIAL TO THE DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE  
This article was published June 3, 2012 at 4:31 a.m.



PHOTO BY STEPHEN B. THORNTON  
Upcoming Speaker of the House of Representatives Darrin Williams.

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LITTLE ROCK – The old adage says you don't get to pick your family, but that's not entirely true.

"My friends who have biological parents," says Darrin Williams, cracking a smile, "I tell them that folks like me who are adopted are special because my parents actually picked me and their parents didn't actually have a choice."

Born in Danville in Yell County 44 years ago, Williams was adopted as an infant by Warren and Catherine Williams, a Church of Christ minister and a schoolteacher. He credits his upbringing for his academic and professional success that led him to law school, public service and elected office. A third-term Democrat in the Arkansas House of Representatives for District 36, covering east and south Little Rock, Williams was chosen by the House membership as speaker designate for the session that begins in January. He's the first black ever selected for the post.

"I tell folks that I won the parent lottery," Williams says earnestly.

By Williams' account, his parents provided him and his older siblings - a brother who was also adopted and twin sisters who were actually his mother's cousins - with an upbringing full of faith, love and encouragement.

The family also had a broader gap of years between parents and kids than the families of Williams' friends.

"My parents were the age of most of my friends' grandparents," Williams says. "Dad had to be in his 50s and mom in her 40s when I was adopted."

The greatest impact of that difference came when his father died in 1983 at the age of 72, when Darrin was in the ninth grade. But age had never been an excuse for Warren Williams to slack off in the parenting department.

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"I wasn't the best athlete and I remember playing basketball in the seventh grade at Henderson Junior High," Williams recalls. "It was Saturday at 8 a.m., some ungodly time, and nobody came to the game but the two junior high teams and the coaches and my dad."

The senior Williams was about 70 years old at the time, and Darrin remembers looking up to find his father asleep in the stands.

"My buddies on the team started teasing me and I remember saying, 'At least my dad is here.'

"Football, basketball, baseball - he made everything," Williams says. "He was a great example of how to treat a wife, raise children, run a family. I couldn't ask for a better father figure, even though it was but for a short period of time."

Both his parents endeavored to set Christ-like examples for their children. Williams says his mother was "equally wonderful" - a woman who began her teaching career before integration at Conway County Training School in Menfee and ended it at North Little Rock Northeast as a high school English instructor.

She also had mad kitchen skills.

"You can look at me and tell I like to eat," says a grinning Williams, who is cherub-cheeked and comfortably plump. "She was a wonderful cook. We had a hot breakfast every morning and a hot dinner every night, usually a couple of different courses. Even when I was at Central High School and she was long retired, a bunch of buddies of mine and I would come home and she'd cook lunch for us. We'd have fried chicken and green beans and all that at lunchtime."

Catherine Williams remained active in church, raising money to support Southwestern Christian College in Terrell, Texas (founded by her great uncle), and tutoring after she retired from teaching. She died in 2007 at age 86.

"I jokingly say if my parents don't make it to heaven based on their lives, then I don't even need to try," Williams says.

#### HIGH SCHOOL PRESIDENT

On the cusp of assuming one of the state's top political offices, you might suspect Williams considers himself to have reached the pinnacle of his career. You would be wrong.

"To this day, my favorite elected office was student body president of Central High School in 1985-86," he says. "Every office since then has been downhill."

Williams laughs again - he's big on laughter, and has an easy smile that gets a lot of use. His blend of affability and enthusiasm has served him well in the state's political environment, but he's also quick to credit his education.

"I am the biggest proponent and fan of Central High School," he says. "It was a wonderful educational experience. I am tickled as I can be that Darrin Jr. - D.J., we call him - will be a freshman next year and my daughter, Payton, will follow him the year after that."

Williams says many of his closest friends today are the same ones he made at Central. Being exposed daily to the historical significance of the school - especially as a black student - had a lasting impact on him. When visitors come to town, the first place he takes them by is Central.

#### VANDERBILT INSECURITIES

After Central, Williams attended Hendrix College in Conway, graduating in 1990.

"I received a wonderful education at Hendrix," he says. "Hendrix is very deserving of its academic reputation. That was pretty important after leaving there and going to Vanderbilt Law School."

Williams recalls attending the first meeting of the Vanderbilt Black Law Students Association as a freshly minted Hendrix grad. Many of his peers were graduates of Ivy League universities like Harvard and Yale.

"I remember thinking, 'Boy, I'm from Little Rock, Arkansas, and I went to Hendrix College' - and President Clinton wasn't president yet so nobody knew where Little Rock was. I remember thinking this is the big leagues, now."

But he did well in law school, Williams says, and he feels Hendrix gave him the preparation he needed.

Williams has kept in touch with many friends he met at Hendrix. One close friend is Darren Peters, a lobbyist for Entergy in Washington who also went to Central.

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Having become close friends in high school, the two wound up as roommates at Hendrix. When Williams finished law school and went to D.C. to pursue a graduate law degree at Georgetown University, the two bought townhouses in the same neighborhood.

“One thing for sure is he’s super smart,” Peters says. “His mother and father instilled in him some things that make him what he is today. He’s a hard worker; he studies and researches and tries to make sure that the decisions he makes are fair and just. And he tries to be as balanced as he can, which I think is ideal for a politician.”

The two men also shared atypical upbringings.

“I was very close to my grandfather and lived with him for quite a long time,” Peters says. “Darrin ended up befriending and [getting] so close to my grandfather that my grandfather almost considered him like a son or grandson.”

But exactly what that closeness meant wasn’t clear to Peters until after his grandfather died.

“Darrin had been working with my grandfather, unbeknownst to us in our family, to square away his finances and get his will squared away,” he says. “And of course, he didn’t charge; it was all pro bono.”

“I think that just speaks to him and the fact he would not have ... he could not have done something like that without putting his all into it and taking the time to make sure things were done right,” Peters says.

As for his friend’s election to the speaker’s podium, Peters believes it is an honor well deserved.

“I think Arkansas has a jewel, and hopefully he’ll be able to shine enough for folks to see more of him in the future,” Peters says.

#### **BROKEN WINDOWS AND FIRST DATES**

Williams was in his second year at Vanderbilt and serving as chief justice of the moot court board when he took note of a first-year student named Nicole Sippial.

“I kind of spotted her early on,” Williams says. “She was cute.”

As they got to know each other while studying and working on papers, Williams found out they had a lot in common. He eventually worked up the nerve to ask her out on a date. So it transpired that one rainy, February day in Nashville, he picked her up in his Volkswagen GTI.

“It was an old, raggedy car,” he recalls. “The passenger window was broken and I had it shimmed in. We were going to the movies and I hit a bump and the whole window falls down into the door.”

Williams is laughing aloud at the memory now. “And it’s raining and cold and she’s sitting there, and I remember thinking, ‘Boy, that’s not a good first impression.’”

“And in spite of all that, she still married me.”

“I didn’t go out on that first date because of his car. Or his apartment,” Nicole says, laughing. “He was just this nice, smart guy. We seemed to have a lot in common.”

She suspects he acquired his great personality from his mother, who was a warm, welcoming woman. Her husband is much the same way, Nicole says, taking calls from people who hope he can help them with a problem even if they’re not in his legislative district, or even if it’s not something he, as a legislator, has any direct influence over.

“But he always takes the time to figure it out, to find something to help someone,” she says. “I always loved that about him. He’s very patient.”

He also harbors a secret desire to be a rapper, she says, laughing again.

“We always laugh,” she says. “We are always like, ‘How did we decide to get married?’ We still can’t figure it out. We just always hung out in law school and next thing you know, we’re talking about getting married.”

But it came down to the fact he was one of her best friends, a guy whom she liked and respected and who made her laugh.

“So I would marry him all over again,” she says.

#### **CHURCH OF CHRIST**

He’s a deacon at Central Church of Christ and a Sunday School teacher, and also teaches a biblical financial principles class.

"I really like to talk to people about their finances and how to use your finances, simple things like credits should precede debits, which is biblical," Williams says. "I'm somewhat surprised how little people know just about basic budgeting."

A lot of the family's free time is spent taking the kids to various activities. Their daughter is a competitive dancer - taking after her mother, who danced with the Montgomery Ballet in Alabama. Their son plays football, basketball, soccer and golf.

Nicole Williams also has a law degree and served as chairman of the Arkansas Board of Review through Gov. Mike Beebe's first term. She declined a second appointment in favor of staying at home with the kids.

Darrin Williams' path to the speaker's podium may have officially started at Central High, when then-Gov. Bill Clinton asked him to sit on a school consolidation committee. He also clerked during two summers at the Rose Law Firm, where Hillary Clinton worked.

"I'll never forget in 1989 or '90, I had the opportunity to introduce Gov. Clinton at a reception at the Governor's Mansion," Williams recalls. "I remember him saying, 'I want you to go off to Vanderbilt and go to law school, but don't forget to come back to Arkansas and make a difference.'"

Williams did come back to Arkansas, but his D.C. detour lasted several years. He worked in the U.S. Senate and for the Securities and Exchange Commission while also volunteering for the Democratic National Committee and for the Clinton administration. He came back to Arkansas to work for Attorney General Mark Pryor as his chief of staff from 1999 to 2002, which meant a lot of time spent working with lawmakers on the attorney general's legislative package.

"That just reinforced my desire to run for office," he says.

#### ENTERING POLITICS

The Williams family lives in downtown Little Rock's Quapaw Quarter, not too far from where he grew up near Barton Coliseum. After he left the attorney general's office he entered private practice, and once that firm - now Carney Williams Bates Pulliam and Bowman - was established, he finally made his first run for office in 2008 against Charles King, a past chairman of the Democratic Party's black caucus.

"I had 140 different people volunteer on my campaign and we knocked on almost every door in the district. It was kind of my father's example of working hard - we worked hard, we left no stone unturned."

He won that race and has been unopposed for re-election since.

"How I approach legislation is I really try to build a consensus on whatever the idea is," he says. "I think the important thing for a leader is the ability to build and force consensus."

That's still his plan as speaker-elect, and he thinks his colleagues in the House will honor that reputation.

"You only have your word out here," he says. "Once you develop a reputation of not being a person who keeps your word, then you don't have any credibility."

Williams believes one advantage he has coming into his speakership is that the usual wheeling and dealing to get votes simply didn't happen this time around.

"I'm a speaker who comes in with no obligations, because I've not promised anybody any position," he says. "I have freedom to pick people who care about the people's business and have interest and expertise in an area for chairmanships. That's an opportunity maybe other speakers didn't have."

Though how members voted in the speaker's election isn't revealed, the 54-46 outcome does match the numbers of Democrats and Republicans in the House. At a time when, he acknowledges, the state's politics is becoming more partisan, Williams says he has encouraged his colleagues to avoid what he calls "Washington-style politics."

"That is something I'm going to try to work very hard to try and leave behind and put people's business above partisan politics," he says. "That's not the tradition of our state."

SELF PORTRAIT Darrin Williams

DATE AND PLACE OF BIRTH May 19, 1968, Danville

THE AUTHORITY FIGURE IN MY HOME IS Me. We're a good team. I'm the bad cop, she's the good cop.

MY FAVORITE DISH IS Cheesecake Factory has a dish called spicy cashew chicken. I plan trips around Cheesecake Factory.

MY MUSIC PREFERENCES INCLUDE I am a big fan of '70s R&B - the O'Jays, the Commodores - but toward my generation, I'm a big fan of New Edition.

MY FEARS INCLUDE I'm not crazy about heights, not a big fan of roller coasters. I was on a date in law school and she loved roller coasters; I wasn't about to say no, so I rode that roller coaster.

MY FAVORITE DESTINATIONS INCLUDE Hilton Head, S.C., where my in-laws have a place. Another is Martha's Vineyard. We're a beach family; we like the beach.

FOR FUN, I READ A business book, honestly. I like biographies, books about people. The Big Short by Michael Lewis about the collapse of the housing market; Mentor Leader by Tony Dungy.

MY GREATEST ACCOMPLISHMENTS I have two really cool kids.

IF I COULD PLAY A PRO SPORT IT WOULD BE Probably golf ... but I tell you what, I was a pretty good baseball player.

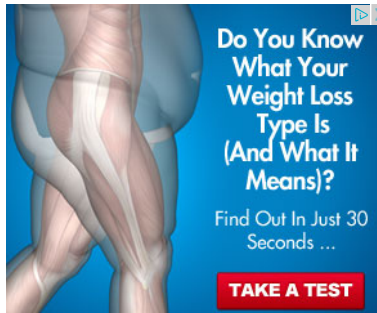
ONE WORD TO SUM ME UP Hopefully, I would say Christian.

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