

Longtime West Aurora educator Williams dies



Donna Williams. | Photo courtesy of Clayton Muhammad

By Stephanie Lulay slulay@stmedianetwork.com

June 18, 2014 4:32PM

AURORA — Longtime West Aurora teacher and community servant Donna Williams died Tuesday morning following a battle with non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, family confirmed.

A lifelong Auroran, Williams, 75, taught at Nicholson Elementary School in the West Aurora School District for 34 years and was principal for five years at the Quad County Urban League's alternative school for East and West Aurora middle school students.

Williams was the last surviving founder of the Aurora Actionnaires, a women's group that worked to help African-American students, and served as one of Main Baptist Church's most senior leaders.

At church, Williams was a trustee emeritus, minister of music for many years and a "teacher, mentor and model of Christian love, service and action," Main Baptist Pastor Julian Spencer said Wednesday.

On Sunday, Williams was the first one to arrive at church at 6:30 a.m., helped with all three services and worked as a staff member at Main Baptist most days each week.

"She was an amazing church leader. Her understanding and capacity to grow and participate in church was not bounded by the old-time way versus contemporary ministry," Spencer said. "She was able to successfully (reach people) in both ways."

Avis Miller grew up next to Williams on Grand Boulevard on the city's Near East Side. Miller's aunt, Caroline Johnson, was also a founding member of the Aurora Actionnaires with Martha Hickling. Using the motto "We act, we care, we serve," the trio founded the group in 1975 with 17 other concerned women to address the needs of students, the elderly and less fortunate. Chief among the group's efforts was ensuring that African-American students in Aurora had access to a college education by fundraising for scholarships.

David Williams said his mother embodied the spirit of the Bible verse Romans 12:8, which references a person's strengths and gifts: "If it is giving, then give generously." Williams was the most selfless person, her son said.

"She was the gift of giving. It was always about helping somebody else," David Williams said. "She wanted her life's work to be helping people."

Growing up, Miller, 66, then one of eight Patterson children, grew close to Donna Williams, an only child.

"She kind of adopted me as her little sister," Miller said.

As the two grew to have their own children, they remained close, sharing family dinners.

"She was always there for me and for my children," Miller said. "I was a single mom and I recall she would take (my girls) over to her house on Sundays."

Whether a meal or help with church uniforms and shoes for Miller's three girls, "Donna made sure we got it," Miller said.

Williams was very active in the community, serving as treasurer for the Aurora Civic Center Authority Board, a board member of the Community Foundation of the Fox River Valley, and previously serving on the Aurora Historical Society and the Aurora YWCA boards.

She was a graduate of East Aurora High School and Northern Illinois University, where she earned both bachelor's and master's degrees in education. In 1961, Williams became a charter member of the Alpha Kappa Alpha sorority at the NIU campus, according to her son.

In 2013, the Aurora African American Heritage Advisory Board honored Williams with the group's Nia Award for her work in education.

Williams is survived by David Williams, her only child, and four grandchildren.

A wake is planned for 4 to 8 p.m. June 26 at Main Baptist Church, 808 E. Galena Blvd. in Aurora. The funeral is planned at St. John African Methodist Episcopal Church on June 27, with visitation starting at 10 a.m. and worship at 11 a.m.

In 2013, Donna Williams established the Lucas Family Fund to support her philanthropic efforts in honor of her family with the Community Foundation of the Fox River Valley.

Gifts can be sent to the family at 2140 Walcott Road, Number 103, Aurora, IL, 60504.