



## Walter Henry Williams Sr.

ROCHESTER, NY – January 19, 2024

Walter “Walt” Henry Williams Sr. was born on October 14, 1934 at Genesee Hospital in Rochester, New York to parents Arthur Williams Sr. and Lucy (Merriweather) Williams of Rochester, New York. He was the sixth of ten children. The Williams family were long-time members of Mt. Olivet Baptist Church.

He grew up in Leroy, New York, where he attended elementary school through middle school. In 1949, the family relocated to Rochester, New York, where he attended James Madison High School and graduated in 1953. He went on to attend Saint Augustine’s University in Raleigh, North Carolina where he received his Bachelor of Arts in 1958. He later attended State University of New York Brockport where he received a Master of Science in Education in 1981.

In 1980, he married Gwendolyn (Shellman) Williams and they went on to raise five children, Szeremetta, Alisa, Jemel, Christine, and JoVaughn. Along with his oldest son Walter Jr., Walt relished fatherhood and was especially proud of his children’s accomplishments.

Walt became a dedicated member of Faith Temple Apostolic Church in 1979 where he became a trusted deacon. He was the founder of the church’s recreation committee and also coached the basketball and baseball church leagues. He later returned to his home church, Mt. Olivet Baptist Church and frequently visited Zion Dominion Global Ministries where his family are members.

Walt always excelled in sports. At age 15, he played professional baseball for the Rochester American Giants, a team in the Negro League Minors. He had just completed his freshman year at Madison High School when he was discovered by Giants manager, Rocky Simmons in 1949. Because he was so young, Walt needed permission from his parents to ride with the elder Giants to places like Elmira, Buffalo, and Geneva for games. He played second base and was so little, they referred to him as ‘Wee Willie’. But his talent and passion for the game overshadowed his size.

One of Walt’s fondest memories from his baseball days was his brief encounter with the legendary Jackie Robinson. During a visit to Rochester, Robinson visited the local YMCA to encourage youth who loved the game of baseball. It was then that Robinson put his hand on Walt’s shoulder and told him to “keep up the good work”. Walt always cherished that memory and used it to inspire him to power his efforts even beyond sports.

In 1970, he found his dream job when he was able to combine his love of sports and teaching with a position as a physical education teacher at Madison High School. That year he also became the coach for the boys varsity basketball team. This was monumental because Walt became the first African American high school coach in Rochester. He also made history as the first African American coach to win the city’s acclaimed Section V Class AAA championship in 1977 led by his standout players Ed (deceased) and Dave Binion, Rickey “secret weapon” Harris, Ed “Racky” Sessler and Greg Gissendaner. Walt remained with Madison High School until 1978.

He went on to work as a camp director and site coordinator at Rochester Housing Authority and ultimately taught physical education at Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., School Number 9 until he retired in 1996. Never quite able to stay idle, Walt worked part-time at the Rochester Public Library downtown as a security guard for several years.

Growing up as one of ten, Walt always valued the meaning of family. His devotion as a father was evident. He was a loving and devoted dad who always provided for his family. His kind and quiet spirit touched the lives of everyone he met. Whether it was imparting invaluable life lessons, golfing, fishing or sitting with family and friends cheering on the Buffalo Bills, he had an innate ability to make everyone around him feel loved and comfortable. He prioritized the well-being of his loved ones above all else and took immense pride in being an active and engaged dad and grandfather.

One of his proudest dad moments was celebrating his son Jemel “Mel” who won the Section V basketball championship in 2000 and in 2001 with Aquinas Institute. As a result, they made history as one of the few father-and-son duos to win Section V championships. Walt considered this to be a full-circle moment.

Much like his sports idol Jackie Robinson, Walt was a change agent who opened doors for other African American coaches in the City of Rochester. Many consider him a living legend who was able to use sports as a means to unite people, teach values, and inspire hope and pride for the betterment of his community. But for those who love him, he will always be remembered as a steadfast pillar of support in times of triumph and in times of despair. He was an anchor that kept us grounded in a world that can sometimes feel chaotic. His presence was significant and he will be sorely missed as a father, grandfather, brother, uncle, friend, coach, and man of faith. We will always remember him for creating cherished memories that will be treasured for generations.

On January 19, 2024, the Lord called Walter home while he was surrounded by his loved ones. He is predeceased by his parents, Arthur and Lucy Williams, brothers; Arthur Jr., John, Charles “Chucky”, James, Roger, Robert “Bobby” Williams and sister, Gloria (Williams) Lesure. He is survived by sisters, Betty Wyatt and Joanne "Joanique" Davis.

He leaves to cherish his memory: his former wife, Gwendolyn, three sons, Walter Jr. of Sanford, Florida, Jemel (Simone), and JoVaughn, three daughters, Szeremetta “Metta”, Alisa “Tanky”, and Christine “Crissy” (Anthony) Owens. Thirteen grandchildren, Aveaun, Nile, Jamiah, Paige, Kaya, Presaeus, Jurzii, Amari’ona, Elle, Landon, Nyla, Langston, and A’Myla, as well as a host of nieces, nephews, church family and friends.

Friends may call Saturday, February 3 from 10:00 AM – 12:00 PM at Mt. Olivet Baptist Church, 141 Adams Street, Rochester, NY. The Funeral Service to Celebrate his life will immediately follow at 12 Noon. Interment Mt. Hope Cemetery.