

Williams' career ran the gamut at Wash

Written by Tom Fruehling
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At the age of 62, Rick Williams is suddenly sensing the swiftness of life, when the years pass like weeks.

It doesn't seem so long ago that he was a skinny kid in high-top Chuck Taylor All-Stars, an all-state guard on the only Washington High School boys basketball team to win a state championship.

But that was 44 years ago.

And this past Friday, Williams was walking the hallways of Washington for the final time as an associate principal, his last day before retiring after 37 years as a coach and educator.

"This is bittersweet, it really is," he said. "It's not like I'm cheering 'Hallelujah' to be leaving.

"I'll miss it, I'm sure. I'll miss being around the young people. I've loved it, all of it."

To be sure, he'll be missed, too.

"I've said this, and I mean it," noted Dr. Ralph Plagman, who has been the principal at Washington for 33 years, "I can't think of anyone who has had a greater overall impact at this school than Rick Williams.

"He has a unique gift of communicating with young people, all young people. And believe me, it's a marvelous gift."

For his part, Williams says he learned a couple of things very early in his career that have stuck

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with him all these years.

Once he turned from his first love of baseball to basketball, he became a star. He was an All-Big Ten player at Iowa on mediocre teams in the early 1970s. Had he been drafted by any other NBA club than the talent-laden Boston Celtics, he might have been a pro.

For one season, he was the leading scorer for the Flint team in the CBA. But then the franchise went bankrupt.

"It's all about being at the right place at the right time," he says today. "If I'd been drafted by the Celtics a year later, I might have made the roster. But I've got no regrets.

"I decided to put basketball behind me, go forward and become a coach and a teacher."

He first taught physical education to disabled students at the Monroe Developmental Center and served as Washington's assistant sophomore basketball coach under veteran Joe Kenney.

"When I got into coaching," Williams says, "I didn't want to be one of those guys who forgot how they had become successful athletes. I remembered what it was like when I was a kid."

Living in the shadow of the Jane Boyd Community House in the Oak Hill/Jackson area of southeast Cedar Rapids, the oldest of 10 children raised by a single mother, he grew up poor but didn't realize it.

"I had a very happy childhood," he recalls. "Life was great. As long as there was some ball to play, it was perfect.

"From day one, I was very competitive. Everything I did, even throwing rocks at rabbits and

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squirrels, I wanted to win.”

And at Jane Boyd, the hub of activity for an ethnically diverse neighborhood, there were always games to play.

Williams even tried boxing for a bit.

“Until I got hit real good once, and that was enough of that.”

To this day, Williams credits legendary Warrior basketball coach Don King with making him a better basketball player. And, more importantly, a better person.

“In the summers, he had basketball camps, not in the gym but out in the parking lot. I think he saw I had some potential.”

And later, when Williams served as King’s head sophomore coach, he learned life lessons from him.

“He was a mentor to me, no question. He taught me to prioritize. The three most important things are family, religion and school, in that order, ahead of basketball.

“And that’s how I’ve tried to live my life.”

And from longtime teacher and coach Joe Kenney, he says he picked up a valuable tool for dealing with people.

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“Joe had what he called the 'sandwich theory' for relating to young people,” Williams explains. “He’d never start out with a negative. It was like two slices of bread. He’d begin by saying something positive. If he had deal with something negative, that would go in the middle. And he would end with something positive.”

As the benevolent enforcer of discipline at Washington for the past 17 years, Williams has always employed the same philosophy.

“I’ve seen Rick with millions of kids in the hallways over the years,” marvels Plagman, who recruited him for the associate principal position. “He’s a good listener. He’s a very kind person. But he’s firm and has high expectations for the students.

“He has an easy way with kids. They all like him and respect him. And he’s a real role model.”

According to junior softball player Kierra Poe, “Mr. Williams is a person we all look up to. He’s someone we can always talk to. And he’s somebody who always wants us to be our best.”

Williams says his desire to get the most out of his players, on and off the court, is what motivated him as a coach.

“I want young people to know that there can be rewards in life, but they aren’t given to you,” he explained. “You have to work hard the put yourself in the position to be successful. I’m a walking example of that.”

Says longtime community leader Bill Hood, who first got to know Williams when he was the executive director at Jane Boyd in the early '70s, “Rick Williams is one fine young man.

“He’s certainly been a role model for the young black men at Washington. But it’s more than that. He’s had a positive influence in the development of all young people ever since I’ve known him.”

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After teaching at McKinley Middle School and coaching there and at Washington, Williams was lured across town to Jefferson in 1990 to revitalize their boys basketball program.

In six years, the J-Hawks went to the state tournament four times and finished as high as third.

With a master's degree by that time, he was beckoned back to Washington as an administrator in 1997 and has been there since. He even had another stint as head basketball coach, when Plagman convinced him to fill a last-minute vacancy with the Warriors that lasted five years. Three of those teams went to the state tourney.

"My youngest son Kellen was on the team," Williams says, "and I thought it might be fun to coach him.

"We had some great teams. But the big reason I got out of coaching in the first place was that kids were almost expected to devote their whole summer to basketball. I was never comfortable with that. I didn't think a sport should take up all of their time.

"They have other things they should be doing. Kids need to go to the prom."

In retirement, Williams sees himself as becoming a full-time grandpa.

Divorced for several years, his son Steffan, 28, lives in Chicago and Kellen, 27, is moving to California.

Daughter Nikki, 38, and grandsons Jalen, 14, and Logan, 11, live in Philadelphia. Granddaughter Aniyah, 5, lives in Cedar Rapids.

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“It’s always been very important to me to be the best father I could be,” he says. “Now I have grandchildren that call me ‘Pop-Pop.’

“So, that’s what I plan on spending a lot of time doing. Being with my grandkids.”