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UPDATED

Legal Legend Sookie Williams is Retiring After Long DBR Career, What She Plans to do Next Might Surprise You

Julie Kay, *Daily Business Review*

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Sookie Williams, VP, Miami Legals, Daily Business Review, is retiring.

J. Albert Diaz

Sookie Williams was a young widow with a baby daughter when she moved to Miami in 1946 and went looking for a job at Miami International Airport. She already had considerable experience working at a "Rosie the riveter" factory in New Jersey and had even received a presidential citation for her work helping build the atomic bomb.

But this was Miami, and the answer Williams got from a man at the airport was, "Honey, you don't know you're in Florida. We don't take women."

After a string of jobs that included secretary, waitress at Wolfie's Deli, supermarket manager and bookkeeper for a Lincoln Road dress shop, Williams was offered a job at the fledgling Miami Review by her friend, then-owner Lee Ruwitch. She accepted.

Forty-two years later at 97, Williams retired Friday from the newspaper she helped build into a South Florida legal and real estate trade publication, well-known and respected by judges, lawyers, financiers and real estate brokers, and part of a New York publishing conglomerate, ALM Media Properties LLC.

For 34 years Williams was vice president of legals for Miami-Dade, running one of the most important departments of the DBR. She created The Courts pages, and made sure up-to-date court directories, emergency judge contact information, bench and bar notices, and all matters of importance to lawyers were published daily, at first in print and later in print and online. She also promoted the name of the Daily Business Review throughout the legal community and served as a liaison to the judiciary, court administration and bar associations.

Since 2007, Williams has been Miami-Dade vice president of legal and court relations and her work has been focused on the external legal community.

After a string of jobs she was forced into after losing two husbands, the single mother found her true calling at the DBR. The quintessential networker, Williams has been a fixture at major legal, judicial and bar events in Miami-Dade County since 1973—usually dressed in red with her signature red lipstick.

Williams didn't stop at promoting the DBR; she took it upon herself to help young lawyers launch successful careers and befriended many in the process, particularly female lawyers and judges. Among her best friends are former Miami-Dade Circuit Judge Sandy Karlan, Miami-Dade Circuit Judge Gill Freeman and Miami-Dade Clerk of Courts Harvey Ruvin.

It was a combination of her caring, her ability to keep secrets and her desire to see the legal system work as it was intended that made her so popular, say her friends in the legal community.

'Selflessness'

Karen Myatt, who runs a family law practice in Fort Lauderdale, recalls meeting Williams in 1989 as a young law student at the University of Miami. Myatt was recruited by former Review editor-in-chief Ed Wasserman to work at the DBR writing and soliciting columns from lawyers and judges. She went on to work for former DBR affiliate Court TV for seven years.

"She became a second mom to me," Myatt said of Williams. "We'd go to brunch once a month in Aventura. She remains a mentor and a friend."

Like many others, Myatt said she learned how to network by observing Williams in action. She noticed how lawyers and judges felt comfortable confiding in Williams because they trusted her to keep their secrets and believed she had the best interests of the court in mind.

"She really cares about the system and the people," Myatt said. "She's old-school. She knows how it's supposed to work, how lawyers and judges are supposed to work together to pursue justice to get their fair day in court. She's a true believer."

Myatt also picked up an invaluable trait from Williams: how to apply lipstick after a luncheon without attracting attention or using a mirror.

A staunch feminist before the word was invented, Williams was particularly concerned about how female lawyers were being treated in Miami. She got together with Mattie Belle Davis, the first female judge in Miami-Dade County and the first woman from Florida elected to the American Bar Foundation, to form the Florida Association of Women Lawyers, now the Florida Association for Women Lawyers.

"The women lawyers would be told by the men, 'Honey, just sit down,'" Williams recalls. "We felt the only way they could have strength was to band together."

But it wasn't just women that Williams helped. Ervin Gonzalez, a partner with Colson Hicks Eidson in Coral Gables, recalls meeting Williams as a "young puppy," and she encouraged him to get involved in leadership activities. He went on to become president of the Dade County Bar Association and the Dade County Trial Lawyers Association.

"She really implanted that thought in my head and said everyone should get involved," he said. "She is a big believer in spreading out your talents and helping others. She believes the greatest thing you can do is be of service to others. That's what defines her—selflessness."

'Enjoying The Ride'

The Dade County Bar Association created the DBR Sookie Williams Community Service Award to recognize exemplary service to the legal community of Miami-Dade County. She was also honored with a lifetime achievement award by FAWL and declared a legal legend by the 11th Judicial Circuit Historical Society.

DBR publisher Chris Mobley also counts Williams as a mentor. He came to the paper in 2000 knowing "next to nothing" about legal advertising. Williams patiently answered all his questions and introduced him to key members of the legal community. Which is not to say he always saw eye to eye with Williams, no shrinking violet.

"Sookie was not afraid to speak truth—her truth—to power," Mobley said. "We didn't always see eye to eye. But I soon learned to trust her wisdom. Sookie knows how much I appreciate all she has done for me over the last 14 years and all she has done for the DBR over the last 42 years. And if I know Sookie Williams, she will go right on doing what she can for the Miami-Dade legal community she so loves."

In fact, Williams said she plans to continue attending legal events, albeit not as a DBR representative.

"Having all these people know me and like me really means something to me," she said.

When asked what keeps her going strong, Williams cites her friends in the legal community, her twice-weekly ballroom dancing lessons, pilates, her daughter Bryna, grandchildren and great grandchildren.

"It's been a wonderful lifetime," she said. "I enjoyed the ride. I'm still enjoying the ride."

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