

Growing up Revolutionary: An interview with John Williams, son of Mabel and Robert F. Williams

by Wanda Sabir

"Robert Franklin Williams: Self-Defense, Self-Respect and Self-Determination" as told by Mabel Williams is a new audio CD that chronicles crucial moments in the life of an unsung hero, the late Robert F. Williams, former NAACP president in Monroe, North Carolina, author of several books, one of the more popular, "Negroes with Guns," which talks about his advocacy of self-defense and armed struggle at a time with the South was not governed by the rule of law.

Williams is an international celebrity whose story will hopefully gain a larger audience now that this entertaining and informative story has been documented. The CD release party is this Friday, May 20, 7 p.m., at the First Unitarian Church of Oakland, 685 14th St., at Castro. Both Mabel and John Williams, the wife and son of Robert F. Williams, will be present along with Amiri Baraka, poet and playwright, Destiny Arts and the Howard Wiley Trio. A \$5-\$25 donation is requested. The audio CD and 84-page resource guide will be available for purchase. For more information, visit <http://www.freedomarchives.org/RFW.htm>.

When I spoke to Mabel Williams a year ago, she talked about her political awakening through her relationship with Robert F. Williams, her husband - talk about the power of love as a tool of transformation. The young woman who up to that point had taken for granted the unequal society she'd come to regard as normal probably couldn't have even imagined herself armed, her gun trained on the uniformed officer who had his gun trained on her husband. At that point it was, "If he shoots Robert, I'm shooting him."

Such is the stuff of fables, yet in this case the story is true.

John, the Williams' younger son, now 55, said in an interview late Tuesday that it wasn't so much the violence directed at him that was frightening when at a young age he saw unspeakable brutality, but rather the violence directed at his parents that worried him the most.

"I was fortunate that my father was the caliber of man who believed that it was important to allow his children to live out the values he taught us. And so, at a young age -8, 9 years old - I was involved with the Civil Rights Movement. The Freedom Riders came down to Monroe, North Carolina, and I was involved with the sit-ins and all the demonstrations, even prior to the Freedom Riders getting there.

"Though I was much younger than the youth involved, my dad was head of the NAACP. Obviously, I was privileged and privy to a lot of movement kinds of activity, so that was a real blessing. From that, one of the things I believe as a principle is that we need to do more of that with young people today.



In Havana, Cuba, in 1963, Robert Franklin Williams examines his FBI Wanted poster.



Robert and Mabel Williams. The most cursory search on the internet turns up a wealth of information on these amazing and widely revered revolutionaries. Rosa Parks, speaking at Robert Williams' funeral in 1996, said about this close friend of Malcolm X that those who marched with Martin Luther King Jr. in Alabama admired Williams "for his courage and his commitment to freedom. The work that he did should go down in history and never be forgotten."



Robert and Mabel Williams in later years

"So often, we as Black people tend to think once we have achieved a degree of economic success, we shield our children and don't allow them to go through the hardships or even know these hardships. That is a grave error on our part. We just need to allow children to be involved in the struggle. This is one way to maintain some (level) of continuity."

I asked him if he was afraid of the people in Monroe, whose relations with his father, according to the archived records captured so brilliantly and succinctly on the newly released audio CD (AK Press), were contentious to say the least when the Williams' had to flee.

"The people in Monroe weren't happy about Black people asserting their autonomy, demanding equal access and refusing to participate in a system of government which refused to recognize the civil rights of all Americans. It was physically dangerous."

"I can remember many occasions as a child having fear, often times not for myself, but for my dad and my mom. I knew that my dad especially was a target. They attempted to kill him on several occasions, so I was very much aware of the dangers in this respect.

"But I saw the courage of my father and my mother - their insisting on continuing the struggle despite the potential consequences. That in and of itself was a lesson for me to learn about the meaning of courage. It was not the absence of fear, but doing the right thing in the presence of fear."

If you were 9, how old was your brother, Robert Jr.," I asked.

John replied, "He was two years older."

Interested in the residual psychological effects, if any lingered in his life, I commented:

"I just wonder about the trauma of the Civil Rights Movement, particularly for children and the adults also. One never hears about how they processed that. It was a war. Now we have terms like post-traumatic stress disease. I'm sure some of those same elements were present in the lives of those who were using their bodies as shields to protest the way things were at that particular time, so I'm wondering what did you do with that trauma, what did you do with that fear?"

"I guess one fortunate thing," John answered, "by the time I was 11, we did have to leave. One fortunate thing about that whole experience was like decompressing. (We) were taken out of the fire. It was the difference between night and day, the attitude in Cuba towards race relations."

"When we got off the plane it was a sunny day. It was warm. It felt so good getting off the plane and being in Cuba. On the way from the airport, one of the things that caught my eye - my brother and I commented on it - were the swimming pools. We were from North Carolina, two boys from a poor community meant we hadn't seen a whole lot of pools.

"It was amazing to see all these pools in the hotels and these kids out there playing. There were always Black and white kids playing. In Monroe, one of the major struggles was that Black kids in our town had to swim in mud holes, even though there were taxpayer dollars supporting swimming pools we could not use.

"The last demonstration before we had to go into exile was over a swimming pool, over Black folks having the right - a taxpayer's right - to a public swimming pool. To see all these (Cuban) kids having such great fun, yelling and playing, just enjoying themselves, was a great contrast. In a lot of ways that was a simple, though it was my first encounter in Cuba, it was symbolic of what was to come in terms of race relations and being able to go to school in Cuba, not having to have those same kinds of fears and worries we had in (Monroe), people coming by our home with weapons threatening to kill my father. It was a welcome change, to say the least.

"To be able to leave the country and live in a place that was no longer a hostile environment probably helped me tremendously," John concluded.

Soon after a protest against Monroe, North Carolina, city officials, the Williams family had to flee the country. The four headed for Cuba, where the boys attended boarding school. Three years later they were sent to China, where they spent five years. John and Robert Jr. finished high school there before returning to the United States with their family.

John described his return to this country in the late '60s early '70s as a cultural shock. He'd gotten used to being around young people whose values were different from those of young Americans. The students in China were "serious, focused" and committed to "serving the people." The boys, John and Robert Jr., and their peers didn't date and applied the motto: "Fear no sacrifice until you attain victory."



Langston Hughes wrote this poem for Robert F. Williams as a New Year's greeting and published it in "The Panther and the Lash" (1967). Nina Simone set it to music and recorded it [mp3] on "Nuff Said" (1968).

When they returned, 19 and 21, and entered college, though they hadn't been raised in the American system and had to work hard to catch up in certain academic areas, this discipline helped the Williams' sons make the honor roll each term and achieve their academic goals. This difference could also be traced to an international perspective absent among the American youth, a perspective which allowed John to see how all human struggles for decency and human rights were one.

"Obviously, when we were in North Carolina, which is something people don't seem to realize when they think about the Civil Rights Movement, when they look at it in retrospect, is that everyone who was Black was (supportive) when that was not the case. We also had to concern ourselves with Black folks who were cross with us because they felt we were jeopardizing their good positions with white folks.

"As children we'd often have multiple fights because of (our peers') parents talk about my father being a 'trouble maker.' Because he was a 'trouble maker' who made them lose their jobs or experience more 'trouble,' we had to fight battles not against the racist government, unfortunately against our own community who didn't like (what Robert F. Williams stood for)."

John received degrees in Chinese studies and law; his idea was to use his legal knowledge to defend and liberate the many political prisoners incarcerated during the Black Power Movement. However, the state of Indiana had other ideas and would not grant him a law degree. Nonetheless, John continued to develop and participate in community based diversion and reentry programs which were geared toward keeping African American men out of prison.

At 9 years old John was active in the Catholic church, he was an altar boy and even considered becoming a priest, until the pastor of his church was transferred and the new priest arrived, "a right wing conservative (who) hated the Black folk. So obviously my membership in that church didn't last," John stated with a chuckle. Later on, however, when John returned to Michigan from Indiana, he recognized the power of the Black church and wanted to be near this seat of power.

"I really need to be able to approach church people and know how to talk on a level church people can relate to, so I said to myself, I need to put a little time into studying some of the sayings of Jesus. I'd recognized Jesus as a great revolutionary who walked the earth, who looked out for the brothers. I said, hey, I can relate to Jesus on that level. Plus I wanted to get a couple of really nice quotes I could use to motivate Christian folks to get involved socially to become politically and socially active.

"I started to study the Bible with that in mind and got drawn in. The more I read, the more intrigued I became as I learned about Jesus and what made him tick, his philosophy. Before I knew it, I'd read the whole Bible and came to the realization what was needed in terms of our struggle - that it could not be achieved by solely waging war in the natural realm, that it needed to also be addressed in the spiritual realm. For me it was a natural progression. When you do all you can do in the natural realm and it's still not enough, where do you go?"

"What was disheartening to me was seeing brothers and sisters I knew who'd spent their entire lives to fight to improve life for our people on their deathbeds, (feeling) like their lives hadn't accomplished anything, that there was just this end. Having an understanding of spirituality I believe helps people struggle, do the best they can and not face death with all of these regrets."

Armed with the gospel, John decided to use this spiritual tool to wage war.

"For the first time, I knew there was a God and the reason He'd put me on the earth," he said. "I didn't have a sense of that prior to inviting Christ into my life and having for the first time an experience where God communicated with me; that just blew my mind. It was so radical; it do have that kind of effect on my life, so I changed."

His family was highly skeptical, especially his late father and elder brother, Robert Jr. But eventually his family noted his serious commitment to his beliefs and all supported him in it.

Twenty years later, John is pastor of Cass Park Baptist Church, in a poor community in Southwest Detroit. He describes his work as "outreach ministry," where the church runs a neighborhood recreation house that serves poor African Americans, Appalachian whites and, I presume, Native Americans and a large population of Hispanic immigrants.

John said that ultimately the struggle is not based on race, rather on principle, and everyone has a role to play.

"Individuals can make a difference. We need to think collectively and look out for the good of the whole. We need to truly love God's people. It doesn't matter what your philosophy is; it doesn't matter what kind of political philosophy (one has). If you really at the end of the day don't love the people when the chips are down, you're not going to do what's prudent.

"It's that genuine love of the people that's so critical and fundamental. You have to genuinely love and care for the people to make personal sacrifices and understand when struggle comes the individual effort is critical, and you can't fight and make other people do (what's right).

"Struggle is important," he said. "It requires sacrifice," something he knows first hand when one looks at the work of his father Robert Williams and his mother Mabel Williams who took up the banner of liberation for Black people here in America and disenfranchised people throughout the colonized Western world.

"Everyone has a role to play no matter their role in life; they can make a contribution. The cause is to understand that fundamentally there is evil - evil exists in the world. The conflict that goes on is not just between the rich and the poor, the haves and the have nots, but it is also between spiritual forces and wicked forces that desire to actually destroy the people, the people of God, God's creation. It's really important to recognize the conflict in the natural realm is nothing more than an expression of what's going on in the spirit realm."

John stated that we should continue to unite with people who share our point of view on crucial issues to forge "united fronts," because "ultimately we're all in the same boat when it comes to the forces of evil. It's our challenge to allow good to reign on the inside of us, and we do that by being in the right relationship with our creator, who in turn demands that we be in the right relationship with our brothers and sisters - people made in the same image we are. Struggle is bigger than national boundaries, borders."

When I asked John if he'd always felt this way, or if the struggle had ever been a "black-white" thing, he said that for as long as he could remember it was always bigger, even though it played out in the United States on that stage and the immediate, pressing, in your face wrongs, fatalities and struggles were around race. The simple fact was that from as far back as he could recall, he'd always had white people in his life who were "good people," such as the priest who lived among the poor, ministered to the poor, the Freedom Riders from the North. From this he learned early on that the quality of a person is not based solely on the color of their skin, he stated with a laugh, as he reminded himself of the many fights he'd had with Black kids whose parents opposed the movement.

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