

1931-2009: Isiah "Ike" Williams III was Jacksonville activist, newspaper publisher

Written by Jessie Lynne Kerr
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Isiah "Ike" Jesse Williams III, lawyer, historian, community activist and former publisher of the Jacksonville Advocate newspaper, died Nov. 25 in a local nursing home. He was 78 and had been diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease six years ago.

The family will greet friends from 4:30 to 6:30 p.m. Thursday at The Ritz Theatre and Lavilla Museum, 829 N. Davis St. The funeral will be at 11 a.m. Friday at St. Paul AME Church, 6910 New Kings Road. Burial will be in Jacksonville National Cemetery, 4088 Lannie Road.

"Ike was a great historian and the best journalist," said Gertrude Peele, a long-standing friend and state director of the National Council of Negro Women. "He loved Jacksonville and its people."

Mr. Williams graduated from Edward Waters College and Florida Memorial College before earning his juris doctorate degree at Florida A&M University. He also received a master's degree from Brooklyn (N.Y.) Law School and in the 1960s studied at the New School for Social Research and Xavier Institute of Labor Relations, both in New York City.

Mr. Williams stayed in New York City practicing law for 10 years. Active in the civil rights movement there, he was an attorney for the Black Panthers and became friends with Malcolm X and Adam Clayton Powell.

Returning to Jacksonville in the early 1970s, he continued his community activism, serving on numerous boards and commissions dealing with equal opportunity.

He provided positive stories about the African-American community when he founded the Jacksonville Advocate. He published the Advocate as a weekly newspaper for 30 years. Two years ago, his wife and two partners purchased the paper and renamed it The People's Advocate, publishing on a monthly schedule.

Mr. Williams also was a union organizer and helped form the Brotherhood of Black Firefighters.

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A life member of the NAACP, a Mason and a founding member of the National Business League, Mr. Williams also valued preserving the history of the African-American community. He was an early member of the Jacksonville Historic Landmarks Commission and organized the Joseph E. Lee Library-Museum, which used to be housed on East 17th Street, near where its namesake had lived.

Lee, Jacksonville's first black lawyer and the third in Florida, became the city's first black municipal judge in 1888.

Camilla Perkins Thompson, also a historian of Jacksonville's African-American community, said Mr. Williams was the instigator in organizing a local chapter of the Association for the Study of African-American Life and History, which still meets regularly here.

"Ike was long an advocate for studying our history," Thompson said. The contents of the Lee Library-Museum have been disbursed among the Jacksonville Public Library, the Ritz Theatre and LaVilla Museum and a library in St. Augustine, she said.

Mr. Williams was the recipient of countless awards during his life, the latest being the National Whitney M. Young Lifetime Achievement Award presented to him in November by the Jacksonville Urban League. He also was the recipient of Florida's Onyx Award in Communications in 2005.

He is survived by his wife of 10 years, Marilyn Wilkerson-Williams; a daughter, Helen Rogers of Fayetteville, N.C.; four sons, Rodney Williams and Isiah Williams IV, both of Jacksonville, Ira Marche of Dover, Del., and Mark Benson of Washington, D.C.; a sister, Pearl Davis of Jacksonville; a brother, Clark Edwards of Oakland, Calif.; and three grandchildren.

The family suggests memorial contributions to the Alzheimer's Association Central and North Florida Chapter, 378 Center Pointe Circle, Suite 1280, Altamonte Springs, FL 32701.