

Roxie Williams Testimony

There may be some families that are not close and the younger generation has no knowledge of the many contributions that others in the family make or have made as time goes on. That would not be my family. There may be some fathers that are not present in their homes, Kings in their community and fathers who do not contribute to the development and education of their children. That was not my Dad. Matthew Williams was a loving father, a wonderful, committed husband, a strong Alpha male in our family and a gentle giant that touched the lives of all the families connected to ours. He served his country; he served his community and was a servant to his family. On October 22, 1978, eleven days after my 11th birthday my father was laid to rest at the Burr Oaks Cemetery. Just like it was yesterday I will never forget the Man and all the event that happened up to that final moment of rest.

At 11 years old I played a major role in every aspect of helping my mother deal with the sudden death of her mate, the many people pulling at her for this and that and the major decision having to be made in such a short period of time. If ever you have prepared for a death of a love one, you can understand the fears, uncertainty and craziness a widow would go through trying to be strong for the family, addressing her children with the reality of death of their father and the unknown of what the rest of her life would now be like for her as a woman, widow and mother. My mother had a mental breakdown and my paternal and maternal grandmothers rose to the occasion and simply took charge. I lost my mother and father all in the same moment of time. I knew I must live up to the high expectations of my father to pull my mom and the rest of this family through.

I stand before you today saying at 11 yrs old I knew this was the only moment in time that my life would make a difference and my dad would be counting on my brother and I to contribute to the greater good and make my he and my mother proud. Like many times before we were children familiar with being responsible at a young age and taking the things our parent taught us and applying it. This moment was the most difficult because neither was there to direct, protect or guide us. A moment we had not experienced before. As a military man he ran our home with the some of the same principles. My brother very shy became my best friend and protector. I became the Lion roaring and protecting my mother as my dad would have and keeping all the hyenas away from the pride until my mother could recover.

Like any family facing the sudden death of a loved one, money was a huge issue. The parents had paid up the bills, there was not much in the savings and the insurance policy was there but at the worst time ever they wanted to play dumb games with my mother who was so emotionally vulnerable it was unreal. My father's mother, said irregardless of whether they decided to pay or not, her son was going to be buried in a King's manner for the King he was. My mother's mother dealt with the funeral home and the insurance policy hoping they would be better able to get the policy paid out to release the financial burden on the family. My brother kept watch over my mother and the house. I kept all the family foolishness at bay and worked side-by-side with my Grandma Pearl to prepare

the obituary and funeral program, pick daddy's clothes, provide underwear and socks etc, to pick flowers and most important had the final decision with my mother on the casket selection. The bill for all of this was enormous. Nobody complained. While my mother fret about my selection of a casket fit for a dignitary and the top of the line accommodations for the family and repast nobody said they did not feel he was worth it.

The greatest decision we faced as a family was where my father would be laid to his final rest. Our family had plots at three cemeteries. One where my maternal grandmother purchased that would allow my father, mother brother and I to be buried together. Another for my father as a Veteran to be buried with his fellow mates and Burr Oaks, where my paternal great grandmother, grandmother and my father could be all buried side-by-side because they had been pre-purchased. My mother (selflessly) selected Burr Oaks because both she and my father were only children and she felt nothing would be more honorable than for he and his mother to be together in death as they were in life. Everyone agreed and Burr Oaks was selected. I can remember the longest ride of my life through three communities he grew up in, made an impact on and dedicated his life too. I can still hear the 21 gun salute. I can still hear the James Earl Jones voice of the preacher speaking the last words over my daddy. I can still feel what I felt as I threw the last rose over the wooden casket, wanting to just jump down in with daddy and have them lower me too. I remember my mother trying to hold in her sigh and tears as she blew a kiss to her fallen lover, husband, friend, provider and protector. She grabbed our hands so hard and said out Loud, Matthew is the Man I will never forget. As she bellowed that last utterance she grabbed us and quickly we all walked away as I watched the grave men pour dirt. I sat in the back of that Limo sobbing terribly on my mother crying how I wanted my dad and could not live without him. We made it through, had the repast and life silently went on for me.

The trauma of it all did not hit me until after that day. I stopped talking. Many thought I was a mute, I refused to speak again. Therapy and 2 years later I chose to allow the sound of my voice and the brilliance of my spirit to be heard and felt again. My mother, as a way of showing she understood my pain said we would do something as a family to be sure Matthew Williams would always be remembered. My grandmothers and mother pooled their monies together to by a very expensive headstone for my dad and stated that words I spoke last would be the words written on the headstone and daddy and I would again have something special for me to tell me kids and my kids, kids of how much we loved each other. My mother struggling as a nurse in ER at Cook County Hospital and a student at University of Illinois kept her financial end of the bargain to purchase this head stone. We were not middle class without daddy we were poor and it was the first time I had ever seen my mother struggle so hard to provide for my brother and I. She was determined to keep her commitment to keep us in Catholic School as he asked and sacrificed so deeply to make life normal for us. Our whole family and extended family, along with neighbors came together to help my mom. Relationships my father built carried us through some very, very hard times. My brother and I were afraid to loose our mother in the struggle, we got jobs to work and help out every way we could.

I would go with mommy every month to put new flowers on daddy's grave site. We would leave there and go to his mom's house on Sunday to continue to eat and laugh and talk together. We went to visit the grave after I graduated grammar school. Getting ready for Easter went to grandma Pearl's home to alter my dress only to find Grand ma Pearl Billips dead coming out of the bathtub from a massive heart attack. Here we go again. This was a little easier for my mother because Grandma Pearl after dealing with daddy's death made sure my mother knew exactly what she wanted and had everything paid for in advance. Elegant as a Pearl we put my grandmother to rest at Burr Oaks as well. A funeral laid out for a Queen and a resting place next to her only son our family was better able to survive this moment. It was easy for momma and I to go and visit them both for the next two years at the same place.

Over the years we stop going regularly to the grave site. Work, school and responsibilities we just could not find the time. When I graduated from Whitney Young I remember catching the bus and sitting out talking to my dad and granny for hours every once in a while. I took younger family members and friends from the neighborhood who still remembered my daddy over to see the beautiful headstone we had custom made for he and granny and took them for my family tour of the other family members on my grandfather's side buried in Burr Oaks. After college I stop going. It was in 1993 after my only son was born I went to the cemetery wanting to talk to my father and tell him how I had become a productive in so many ways and how I was going to be a wife soon and a mother of his first grandchild. This was a time I first realized that something wen terribly wrong at this place. I went were I had always gone to see my father and the headstone was gone and it was just grass there. I freaked out. I went to the office pregnant and hysterical. The man in the office told me to calm down and asked what the problem was. I gave him my father's name and he looked it up in the computer and walked me over to where the location was. There was no headstone for my father only my grandmother. He then told me I might be mistaken. Although there was a record of him there was not headstone there. I could not believe the words this man was saying. I explained the history and how sure I was he was there. The guy told me to perhaps go back and check my records again. My mother is so well organized. She never throws things important away. I dug through her death records and found the blue card with my father's cemetery location. Got the receipt for his mother's and his headstone and copied it to show they were there.

When I returned and asked for the guy I spoke with they told me he was on vacation. When I explained what happened the lady told me not to worry about it she would look into the incident and give me a call. I refused to leave until she gave me an answer of where my father's headstone was. She said it must be a mistake because although they had a record for my grandmother they did not have a record for my dad. My whole heart sank. Being with child my fiancé' at the time told me to think about the baby and not loose my head or the baby over this matter. Not having extra money with a new baby on the way to get a lawyer or take this matter on myself I felt helpless to advocate for my father's remains, headstone or dignity. Determined not to drop this I went back and got into another argument with the lady and was told if I did not get off of their property she would be forced to call the police on me. She said I was mistaken my father might not

have been buried there and could have been moved, but whatever the case I would have to wait until they looked into the matter and got back with me. Today it is 16 years later and I wait for that return call to come.

Today is my day of real hope. A day I again stand here to champion for my family and the honor of my father Matthew James Williams. Am I hurt almost 31 years later? You believe me when I tell you this hurts to the core of my heart. No one should think to make light of it. I have a feeling about this whole Burr Oaks mess that can not be described. I am and remain confused, how can something like this even happen to a family. What? They say sorry we lost your loved one and everyone is supposed to suck it up, walk away with no real explanation or reason for this kind of tragedy to even have existed in the first place. Recover. How do we recover? To this day from the pain echoed by me my family has cremated the remains of other family members (my mother's mother) although we don't believe in cremation. This has been done to eliminate the hurt, or being raped again by a process that appears to take advantage of families at their most vulnerable time. What do I tell the younger generation about our family tree and their grandfather and maybe great grandfather? Thank God my parents raised a decent woman to know how to channel anger appropriately because this only leaves me mad as hell. To now we went without things to see our family buried with dignity. To know the financial sacrifices made when policies are not in place. Where is the betcha because for years I could not understand how the only remains of my father could simply vanish in a cemetery and no one notify you, say one word or be made to explain. It was just a matter to be forgotten.