

Ben Williams Champions the Arts Throughout a Storied Career

When Benjamin J. Williams was principal of Walker Elementary School in Fort Lauderdale, he made an indelible impression on one of his students.

“He would ask all of us how we were that day, giving us a hearty pat on the back, and he would grin and say with much enthusiasm, ‘FANTASTIC!’ I never forgot how dynamic he was,” recalls Gretchen Weihe Fasulo, who would grow up to become the music teacher at Sawgrass Elementary School and the 2006 Broward County Arts Teacher of the Year.

“Often, I myself will give my kids a resounding ‘FANTASTIC’ whenever they need it,” she says. “He was quite a prominent person in my young life and I have never forgotten his face, his voice or his words.”

Ben Williams receives the compliment warmly. “You never know when you’re touching the life of a student,” he says. It’s a safe bet that Williams has made a similar difference to thousands of youngsters in more than half a century as an educator. Even though he retired in 1994, his influence continues. Now in his second term as a member of the Broward County School Board, he serves as the board’s representative on the Broward Cultural Council.

Williams’ path has been remarkable in many ways. He graduated from high school at age 15, then earned a Bachelor’s Degree in Elementary Education at Florida A&M and a Master’s Degree from Indiana University. He spent his entire career in the Broward County School District, beginning as a teacher at Dillard Elementary School in 1955.

Years later, Williams became the first black teacher, first black intern principal, first black assistant principal



and the first black elementary school principal assigned to an all-white school in the Broward County School District. In 1975, he took another pioneering step when he introduced the first magnet school program in the Broward County School District and the first magnet school concept in the Southeastern United States at Walker Elementary School in Northwest Fort Lauderdale. The enrollment at Walker Elementary became 38 percent white and 62 percent black; 32 white students from a subdivision in Deerfield Beach enrolled and car-pooled to Walker.

Williams continued to advance the magnet school concept as principal of Parkway Middle School of Performing Arts and Technology and as principal at Dillard High (Performing Arts and Technology). The magnet school concept was modeled after the desegregation plan implemented by the Houston, Texas, school district. As a principal, Williams believed in developing positive attitudes for learning. He feels that the arts play a very important part in helping students develop a positive attitude about life – and if they have a positive attitude about life, they will become productive citizens.

“I was always interested in the arts – always,” he acknowledges. “My grandmother, mother, aunt and sister were great pianists; my uncles were great in voice. Something happened to me,” he jokes. “I never could play an instrument or sing. I just like the arts. So when I had the opportunity to represent the School board on the Broward Cultural Council, I was happy.” He believes it is imperative that the arts continue to be a part of the curriculum in every school.

Williams has taken a particular interest in the Cultural Council’s new Micro Credit Program, which offers funding and training to help individual local artists acquire business skills and loans. A series of workshops were held for local artists in June and July. What was most rewarding, he said, was that it was anticipated that about 40 artists would attend, but there were actually approximately 100 in attendance. The program gave the artists the opportunity to go through a series of experiences about art as a business.

Enthusiasm arises frequently in a conversation with Ben Williams. Whether he’s remembering the past, looking ahead to the future or focusing on the importance of the arts, he exhibits a seemingly unending sense of the positive.

“The arts can provide an opportunity for all of us to dream about a different world – to relate beyond what I am doing to make money; to relax and feel good,” he observes. “If an individual feels good about life itself – and arts play an important part in that – then he can be more productive. I feel good about that!” ★

– Leon M. Rubin