

Specifically, *can* this proposal be enacted? Some say “No.” The primary reason is that it is a nonpolitical proposal that must make it through a political process—in particular, passage by two successive Wisconsin legislatures and then approval by the voters. I appreciate the challenges, but I believe that it can be enacted.

Fundamentally, the proposal is a good idea. That still matters a great deal in this world. Part of this is that the proposal is ideologically neutral. And it maintains Wisconsin’s tradition of nonpartisan election of supreme court justices but reduces the frequency of often politically charged and costly elections. Both those outside the court, and those within, will have considerably less reason to act in ways that reduce confidence in the highest judicial tribunal of this great state.

But let me conclude by emphasizing another aspect of it. The proposal comes from the bar—people uniquely concerned with the Wisconsin

Supreme Court and judicial process more generally but who spend all their time in the real world. That gives me not just pride but hope. The hope is that many other practicing lawyers will recognize the great opportunity that four leaders of the bar and, subsequently, the state bar board of governors have presented to us. We *can* help, to answer the question with which I began.

And so we should. When I speak to graduating Marquette lawyers, I tell them that they will determine the course of the future, by their undertakings as members of the legal profession—the profession to which civil society turns to do its deals, to right its wrongs, and to protect its freedoms. This profession is old, it is honorable, and, for a time, it is ours. We in this generation of the profession find ourselves in a position to help bestow a great gift upon ourselves and our fellow Wisconsin citizens and to bequeath it to those who come after us. I hope that we will seize the opportunity. Thank you. ■

Phoebe W. Williams, L’81

Milwaukee Bar Association’s Lifetime Achievement Award

Phoebe W. Williams, L’81, associate professor emerita at Marquette Law School, received the Milwaukee Bar Association’s 2015 Lifetime Achievement Award, presented by Maxine A. White, L’85. Professor Williams delivered the following acceptance remarks.



Thank you, Chief Judge White, for that very warm and gracious introduction—and thank you to the directors and members of the Milwaukee Bar Association for recognizing the work that I have done. Receiving the MBA Lifetime Achievement Award is a very special achievement for me.

I have many people to thank for

contributing to the achievements you considered when deciding I am worthy of this award. I will mention only a few of them.

First, I must share with you how grateful I am for parents who were exemplars of the principles that hard work, serving others, and justice matter. As a child growing up in Memphis, Tennessee—which was at the time a very racially segregated society—I learned very early that sometimes laws and customs could be unjust and unfair. Nevertheless, Mom and Dad pursued their careers as educators with hope, enthusiasm, and optimism. They never mentioned to me that they received unequal pay, or were denied equal educational facilities, until I questioned them.

As an academic, I researched and wrote about the impact of the Supreme Court’s decision in *Brown* ▶▶

“*Your programs and mission suggest to me you share some of the same goals that black women’s professional organizations pursued over a hundred years ago. The motto of the black women’s club organization is ‘We should lift as we climb.’*”

v. Board of Education. When reflecting on that decision, I realized I was almost eight when the Court decided *Brown*. Dad explained the importance of the Court’s decision to me. We both hoped things would change. As an eight-year-old, I expected our circumstances would improve immediately. I expected that I could visit museums, libraries, and parks reserved for white citizens only. But “all deliberate speed” did not produce the response I expected.

As we waited—as courageous attorneys, like those encouraged by the MBA to pursue justice, litigated cases—my parents taught me the value of pursuing goals with perseverance and hope under all circumstances. They also taught me about the value of service. Mom shared her talents as a pianist with our churches, schools, and organizations for over seven decades. Today at 93, she still plays her keyboard for residents at her assisted living facility. Before his death, Dad served as a high school principal for 17 years. Members of the community displayed their appreciation for the service he offered their children by naming a park after him.

Now I am also grateful for the support I have received from friends and colleagues. A law school friendship led to my first opportunity to clerk at a law firm. Later I was hired by that firm.

While attending Marquette Law School as a student, a faculty member encouraged me to consider a career in legal education. Another faculty member submitted an article that I prepared with a firm partner to the *Marquette Law Review*, and I had my first legal publication.

After I joined the Marquette faculty, colleagues read drafts of articles I prepared; they reviewed exams. Administrators and staff provided research assistance. Over the years, the Marquette faculty, administration, and staff have become extensions of my family. Some of them are here today, and I want

to thank them for all they have done to make my journey as an academic so wonderful. I have had the best job imaginable. Also, while he is not here today, I do want to thank Joseph Kearney, who is dean of our law school. Whenever I approached Joe with ideas and projects, he enthusiastically supported me.

I am grateful to the students whom I have taught over the years. Their critiques and compliments helped me hone my skills. Many of them shared their professional goals with me. And I was happy that they gave me opportunities to help them achieve those goals. They endured my lengthy six-page, single-spaced exams with grace—a special thank you to former students who are with me today to share this honor.

My family has been especially supportive over the years. Due to illness, my husband is not able to join me today. However, I want you to know that he has supported me in many ways, always voicing confidence in my abilities.

Joining me today is my cousin, Montee Boulware. We have traveled the world together. There is nothing like having a lifelong playmate who reminds you to have fun and enjoy life.

Chief Judge White and I have enjoyed a friendship for over four decades that I truly treasure. I am especially grateful that she has always shared her strength of character with me by reminding me of my own.

And thank you again, members of the MBA. Your programs and mission suggest to me you share some of the same goals that black women’s professional organizations pursued over a hundred years ago. The motto of the black women’s club organization is “We should lift as we climb.”

Members of the MBA, you have certainly “lifted me” with this award.

Thank you. ■