

Changing Things



Phoebe Williams remembers her father coming home from his job as a schoolteacher in an unusually happy mood on May 17, 1954, the day the U.S. Supreme Court issued the historic *Brown v. Board of Education* decision on school segregation. Williams was eight years old and living in thoroughly segregated Memphis, Tennessee.

for the Better, Step by Step

“When Dad announced the Supreme Court stated that segregated schools were unlawful, I expected immediate improvements,” she wrote in an essay published 55 years later. She was firmly aware, even at that age, that white people were getting privileges and opportunities that black people weren’t getting. She asked her father if she now would be able to go to the white kids’ school or if white kids would come to her school.

“I wanted and expected change immediately,” she recalled.

She didn’t get it, of course, and neither did Memphis or the rest of America. But ultimately, change, at once sweeping yet incomplete, occurred across the United States. The *Brown* decision became a landmark for helping identify all that changed and all that didn’t in the following decades.

And change became a pivotal element in the life of Phoebe Williams, a woman who to this day wants and expects change for the better—and immediately would be nice. Williams, a Marquette lawyer herself and a member of the Marquette Law School faculty since 1985, has been an initiator of change, a participant in change, a witness to change—and a witness to the frustration of hopes for change.

If you want to understand this gentle yet demanding agent of change, a woman who has become a key figure in the life and character of Marquette Law School, you need to look at a few pages from the chapters of her life story.

Chapter 1: Memphis, then and now

In *Law Touched Our Hearts: A Generation Remembers Brown v. Board of Education* (2009), a collection of essays by law professors born between 1936 and 1954, Williams’s contribution described the realities of the segregated city of her childhood. Not only schools and public buses, but also restaurants, parks, the zoo, public bathrooms, and so on—all treated black people as inferior, often in the most demeaning ways.

But if the schools Williams attended didn’t have a lot of the things that the white kids’ schools had, the emphasis of her parents and grandparents made education a dominant factor in Williams’s life. She says she knew that she would graduate from college “because I didn’t think my parents were going to give me any other choice.”

Her hopes for change in Memphis while she was a child were dashed. The white power structure was entrenched, powerful, and strongly opposed to change. By the time Williams graduated from high school in the 1960s, the change she expected to result from the *Brown* decision had barely happened.

But change did come to Memphis, where Williams’s mother and other family members still live. Now, she says, “it’s a very, very different place.” African Americans hold a range of powerful positions in the city, and integration of public places and services has long been the norm. But there is still much more change needed. “Some of the same issues of poverty, crime, and lack still occur in areas ▶▶

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of the city,” she says. “It’s evident that social problems still fall along racial lines.”

Chapter 2: From Memphis to Milwaukee

As part of an historic tide of African Americans, an uncle of Williams moved from Memphis to Chicago and then to Milwaukee in the 1950s. He got a job at A. O. Smith, the then-giant manufacturing complex on the city’s north side. Other family members joined him, several of them also taking positions at the factory.

In that era, Milwaukee’s black community was small and confined to a specific area just north of downtown. But it was growing quickly.

Realities for African Americans in Milwaukee have changed greatly in the nearly half century since Williams followed family members to the city. “Those types of jobs are gone,” she says of the factory work her relatives did. “Milwaukee now has people who want to be middle class but don’t have jobs or education for it. . . . It creates a lot of frustration and despair.”

Williams has been part of efforts to change things for the better, including past service on the city’s Fire and Police Commission and involvement in community groups and causes.

Chapter 3: Marquette University

Williams’s destination in Milwaukee was not a factory. It was Marquette University. She became one of the few African Americans on the campus at that time, and it was a big adjustment. A decade ago, a U.S. Supreme Court decision on affirmative action referred to the value of having a “critical mass” of students of different racial and ethnic groups at a university. “I can appreciate what the Supreme Court meant about the value of critical mass,” Williams says.

With strong support from family members, she succeeded in adjusting to the academic demands of Marquette and in getting to know people from much different backgrounds. “I got to Marquette and found that there were ethnicities among white people,” she says with

a laugh. Beyond racial issues, she also had to adjust to winter (“a major challenge”) and the firm rules Marquette had at that time for female students (for example, slacks were allowed only in extreme weather). But she appreciates not only the quality of the education she received but also the exposure she got to new experiences and people.

The realities of being an African-American student at Marquette have improved substantially since that era, Williams says, although there is “absolutely still room for improvement.” She has been an advocate for that, serving on various university task forces and committees over the years.

Chapter 4: Marquette Law School

In the 1970s, Williams read the best-selling personal-development book *Passages* by Gail Sheehy. At the time, Williams was managing a Social Security branch office in Milwaukee. The book helped catalyze her desire for something more, for a major change.

“I decided that law school would be that major change,” she says. She was accepted at Marquette Law School. As in her undergraduate days, she was one of the few black students: there were three in her class. And there were no minority faculty members. But Williams’s determination to overcome challenges carried her through. “Mentally, I could not embrace the thought of failing,” she says. Williams graduated in 1981.

She practiced at a Milwaukee firm, representing management in labor and employment matters for four years, before making another change—she joined the Law School faculty in 1985.

Both the Law School itself and the situation of minority students in the school have changed for the better over the years, Williams says. The school has more diversity both among the students and in the faculty and staff, although, she says, plenty of room for improvement remains.

As for the Law School more broadly, Williams says that teaching techniques have changed substantially, with less emphasis now on putting students on the spot in a class to

present material and more emphasis on legal theory and the application of legal concepts to practical situations.

The Law School has, of course, moved into Eckstein Hall and taken on a much-expanded role in the life of Milwaukee and Wisconsin with its public policy efforts. Williams has been a strong supporter of those efforts. She says that Eckstein Hall has become a place where civil discourse addressing major issues is promoted and practiced. The public comes to the Law School in a way that never happened before.

“There’s an energy here that to me is exciting and inspiring,” Williams says, adding that Marquette Law School “has evolved into the place I hoped it would become.”

Chapter 5: Change and the law

Williams has an unusual legal distinction: Her maternal grandfather was a named party in a Supreme Court case, *Brotherhood of Railroad Trainmen v. Howard*, a 1952 decision that barred an all-white union from taking action under its contract to keep African Americans from doing the same work.

“As a young child, I was always fascinated by the law and what the law could do,” Williams says. “I was also made to appreciate the role law could play in the operation of racial discrimination.”

The segregation that shaped Williams’s life as a child was sanctioned by the law at the time. Yet much of the change for the better that has occurred in her lifetime was propelled by the law. And at the root of some of the biggest factors behind America’s racial problems lie things that the law cannot control.

Put those three facts together, and you can see how Williams has come to have a deep involvement with the law as a career and passion, even as she has a strong sense of its limits.

She recalls a white doctor in Memphis during her childhood years who went against social convention and started serving black people on the same basis as white people. Within a short time, his patients were all black—white people fled his practice. That was something the law could not stop. Similar forces today, on a larger scale, shape realities in places such as Milwaukee, where discrimination in housing is illegal, of course, but housing patterns remain largely segregated. “No law can stop certain social processes from occurring,” she says. “The inequality continues.”

That’s why, beyond her role as a lawyer, Williams is an advocate for efforts that build relationships across racial, ethnic, and class lines and efforts to expose people to other cultures. “There’s a role for religion,” she adds—and that is an area where change has also been a part of Williams’s life. Her childhood included Lutheran schools, she has been a practicing Catholic and Methodist, and she currently is a member of a Baptist church. She says that faith has been a source of strength when she has needed to meet challenges and obstacles.

Chapter 6: Change accomplished by great humanitarians

Williams was the Law School’s representative in planning Marquette’s Mission Week in February 2013. “It was an awesome experience,” she says. Marquette brought to the campus most of the winners of the Opus Prize, a \$1 million annual award launched in 2004 and presented for faith-based humanitarian work around the world.

Mission Week brought Williams into contact with people of extraordinary accomplishment, people whose work is benefiting tens of thousands of other people in some of the world’s most impoverished places. Williams’s work included arranging “On the Issues with Mike Gousha” sessions in Eckstein Hall with Father Rick Frechette, C.P., who leads efforts to help large numbers of children in Haiti, and Marguerite “Maggy” Barankitse, whose Maison Shalom in Burundi (Africa) assists families; both are previous winners of the Opus Prize.

“Just to have that type of courage—you don’t see that type of courage very often,” Williams said. “They were inspiring beyond measure.” Her involvement with the Opus Prize winners led Williams to consider what more she can do. She doesn’t know yet where that will lead her, but she says she knows she needs to do more.

Williams wanted change immediately as a child. She has learned how to be part of pushing productively to make things better but not to expect problems to be solved so fast. “When I reflect on how long I waited for the 1954 *Brown* decision to make a difference in my life, I can appreciate the frustration of those who still wait and hope,” Williams says.

She still waits and hopes. She still has frustrations. But as a professor, as a lawyer, as an advocate, and as an African-American woman, she also still pushes for change for the better. ■