



## T. Williams

Early Urban Coalition was forum to deal with issues of race, poverty, violence; learn from past to face today's challenges

An interview on Minnesota public policy

*April 09, 2021*

On April 9, 2021, the Civic Caucus interviewed Minneapolis community leader T Williams about lessons to be learned from the past, as we struggle with issues of race, violence and

poverty today. He goes back to the street violence in North Minneapolis in the 1960s and discusses the founding in 1968 of the Urban Coalition of Minneapolis to deal with those issues.

Williams explores why the Urban Coalition's model of people from the community meeting directly with business CEOs led to networking and the availability of resources for the creation of a number of other organizations with similar goals. He laments the lack of a similar forum today and believes we rarely look to the past for lessons learned and potential solutions that could help with current challenges.

Williams has served in a number of positions during his career, including executive director of the Phyllis Wheatley Community Center, Minnesota's first Ombudsman for Corrections, Minneapolis School Board member, instructor of college courses and independent consultant. See a full biography of Williams following the discussion section.

## Notes of the Discussion

(Remarks, questions and responses are edited.)

**00:00** - **Opening Remarks** - T Williams.

I arrived in Minnesota in 1965, when I was recruited to work at Unity Settlement House in Minneapolis, which no longer exists. I got my graduate degree in social work at the University of Pennsylvania, paid for by Chicago's Cook County Welfare Department, since I was a social worker there.

A few months later, in October 1965, I was recruited to be the executive director of the Phyllis Wheatley Settlement House (now known as the **Phyllis Wheatley Community Center**) in North Minneapolis.

**In 1966, there was violence on Plymouth Avenue in North Minneapolis** that led to the founding of an organization called **The Way Community Center**, located in North Minneapolis. **In 1967, a similar disturbance took place, but it was much larger.** There are similarities and differences from where we were then and where we are now.

**I'm now working on an oral history project on the startup of the Urban Coalition of Minneapolis.** Ten of the Coalition's founders were still alive when I started the project. The project will be presented as a book manuscript to the Minnesota Historical Society. The November 2015 police killing of Jamar Clark, a 24-year-old Black man, by the Minneapolis police got me moving on the project.

I went to a meeting of a Black Lives Matter chapter and saw that the group consisted of almost all young people. They need to reach out and get other people involved to have as many voices at the table as possible.

---

*[Y]oung people...need to reach out*

*and get other people involved*

*to have as many voices at the table as possible.*

---

**13:10 - Williams: What is there about what happened almost 50 years ago when I started this that still holds true today?** We need to take a look back at what was done in the late 1960s, following the street violence in North Minneapolis. I'm not interested in trying to relive the violence itself.

In 1966, the response to the street violence was focused on jobs for young people so they wouldn't be out in the streets. The response to the greater street violence in 1967 was different.

(Click the link below to view Williams' slides corresponding to his following remarks about the Urban Coalition of Minneapolis.)

[Community Forum Presentation](#)

**16:13 - National Response**

**Williams:** Following passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964 and the Voting Rights Act in 1965 and following urban street violence around the country, President Lyndon Johnson convened a group of civic, business, civil rights, religious, nonprofit and public officials in Washington, D.C., to address the urban crisis. Johnson urged these leaders to return to their communities and form urban coalitions inclusive of the people and organizations directly affected to develop solutions to race and poverty.

**18:22 - Local Response.**

**Williams:** There were urban riots around the country from 1965 to 1970. The National Urban Coalition had been formed to deal with issues of race and poverty. Art Naftalin, who was mayor of Minneapolis from 1961 to 1969, was agitating among people with resources to do something.

John Cowles, Jr., publisher of the *Minneapolis Tribune* and the *Minneapolis Star* newspapers, talked to other business leaders, among them, Atherton Bean of International Milling Company (now International Multifoods), Earl Ewald of Northern States Power (NSP) and Dean McNeal of the Pillsbury Company. The five Dayton brothers, who owned Dayton Hudson Corporation-not much got done in Minneapolis without their stamp on it-wanted to do something. Donald Dayton became one of the founding members of the Urban Coalition, but all five brothers supported the concept of an urban coalition.

Naftalin steered the business people to **Larry Harris**, a former social worker at a North Side settlement house, who later led Hennepin County's anti-poverty agency and served as a long-time lobbyist for the Minneapolis Public Schools. The business people, who had formed a steering committee, wanted Harris to do a feasibility study on forming an urban coalition in Minneapolis. Larry asked me to partner with him on the study, while I remained director of the Phyllis Wheatley Settlement House.

Larry and I got an upfront commitment from the steering committee to do something and to have us figure out what the group should do. We recommended creation of an urban coalition in Minneapolis and told the committee that the business community needed to be highly visible in the coalition, because our community didn't know them. When the **Urban Coalition was formed in 1968**, Steve Keating of Honeywell was the first board president, Larry Harris became the interim director and Harry Davis was soon selected to become its first executive director.

---

*We recommended creation of an urban coalition*

*in Minneapolis and...[said] the business community needed to be highly visible in the coalition.*

---

**24:54** - The Minneapolis Urban Coalition was formed in 1968.

**Williams:** The Coalition started with 60 people on the board of directors. We were creating a network that ordinary people could plug into. Board meetings became forums and work was done in task forces. A welfare mother could be seated next to the CEO of Honeywell at a board meeting. We warned the business people to be prepared to be vilified at board meetings. People wouldn't be shy about talking to them. Activists like Black power advocate Matt Eubanks and Indigenous rights advocate **Clyde Bellecourt** would take over board meetings.

**27:20** - Street Riots / Urban Coalition Legacies.

**Williams:** Various organizations grew out of the street violence and the Urban Coalition. The **Way Community Center** grew out of the street violence in 1966. With music as a focus, it was created as a space in the neighborhood devoted to cultivating racial pride among Black youth.

**Protest is essential. It's a form of conflict and conflict drives change.** Sometimes we expect more out of protestors than they're capable of doing. Don't expect them to offer solutions and implement them. But never allow conflict to go by without doing something of value. Conflict creates opportunities, if we're able to take advantage of them.

---

***Protest is essential.***

***It's a form of conflict and conflict drives change.***

---

**Violence/ Urban Coalition legacies:** The Opportunities Industrialization Centers (OICs), job training programs, grew out of the violence. So did **Pilot City Regional Center** (now NorthPoint Health & Wellness Center), founded in 1968 as a one-stop shop for health care, employment assistance, housing services, food assistance, educational programs and more to address the needs residents of the North Side identified.

I helped Control Data find a business site in North Minneapolis during that time. The Urban Coalition helped the American Indian Movement (AIM) get established in 1968. The Greater Minneapolis Housing Corporation (GMHC), the Metropolitan Economic Development Association (MEDA), the Legal Rights Center and Operation De Novo all grew out of the Urban Coalition. Joe Selvaggio, a Catholic priest serving on the Coalition board, met people with resources on the board and then founded Project for Pride in Living (PPL).

Various religious institutions were represented on the Urban Coalition board and, in response, the American Lutheran Church launched several new program initiatives: Committee on Inner City Ministries (CICM - 1968); Project Summer Hope (1970); and Minority Scholarship and Grants Program (1970).

All these responses to the crisis came about because of the strategic location of people within those institutions who were open to change.

---

***Know the difference between the capacity to confront and the capacity to implement, and respect it.***

---

### **36:15 - Lessons learned from the Urban Coalition experience:**

- It's critical to have different kinds of people with different ideas around the table.
- Those people should collectively come up with solutions.
- Build bridges across racial, cultural and socio-economic divides.
- Understand protest and try to learn from it.
- Confrontation can be a useful tool.
- Use existing resources, which were more readily available then than now, because of the Great Society program.
- Networking is important, like the opportunities provided by the Urban Coalition for people to get to know each other across racial and economic lines. That doesn't exist today.
- People in the community need access to people with resources and people who know something.
- Patience is a necessity. Change can be a slow and tedious process.
- Know the difference between the capacity to confront and the capacity to implement and respect it.

**40:29 - Williams: The Attica prison riot in 1971 had an impact on Minnesota prisons.** When I came to Minnesota, I saw it as a can-do type of state on social justice and innovation. People talked to one another.

Wendell Anderson was governor at the time and his commissioner of corrections was from California. The commissioner had the idea of **creating an Ombudsman for Corrections, who would be independent of the system but would have the authority to investigate complaints in the state's prison system.**

After obtaining a grant from the Justice Department, the ombudsman position was created by executive authority of the governor. Anderson named me as the first ombudsman and I had to find a way to make it work.

I had to create networks, because we needed to have someone get a bill through the Legislature. Control Data allowed one of their vice presidents to work for me full-time. We realized we needed more staff to get things done.

I had won a Bush Foundation Leadership Fellowship in 1970, when Humphrey Doermann was head of the Foundation. Private foundations don't like to fund public institutions, but I convinced Doermann to give us a grant of \$135,000 in 1973.

We got a bill through the Legislature in 1973, creating and funding the Ombudsman for Corrections office, which stayed in place for 30 years. It was discontinued during Governor Tim Pawlenty's administration and stayed that way for 16 years, until a few other people and I were able to convince the Legislature to recreate it in 2019.

**49:15 - Williams: Don't forget what we've done in the past and how we can connect it with today.** We need to learn from the past, but not enough people are doing that. We must think about how we can learn from where we've been to help us learn about where we go from here.

## Discussion

**50:33 - What was the role of the Minneapolis Public Schools during the early years of the Urban Coalition?** (Lyn Carlson)

**Williams:** Minneapolis Schools Superintendent John B. Davis was a board member of the Coalition.

There was a requirement that the president of the Urban Coalition board had to come from one of the founding corporations and had to be the CEO or someone who reported directly to the CEO. Lots of things were done through the networks formed through the Coalition, not always through formal projects of the organization.

One example of things that grew out of the Urban Coalition network was companies doing internal examinations of what their hires looked like and then changing their recruitment and hiring practices.

**1:00:36 - What was the time commitment of the corporate executives who were part of the Urban Coalition?** (Janis Clay for Paul Gilje)

**Williams:** Coalition board meetings were held all around the city-in school auditoriums and other places that could seat more than 50 people. Today, business leaders are not as willing to commit their time, but we need their body of knowledge, not just their money. There's a greater reluctance now to take risks.

---

*Today, business leaders are not as willing*

*to commit their time, but we need their body of knowledge, not just their money.*

---

During the early days of the Coalition, CEOs and other business leaders had never been in an environment where people questioned or criticized them. Sometimes people were just testing them.

**1:06:16** - The 1967 events led to the Jewish community leaving the North Side. A backlash to the street violence led to the 1968 election of Minneapolis Police Officer Charles Stenvig as mayor. The North Side never fully recovered from that period. One of the lessons about protests is that they may help gain visibility for an issue, but they also may drive away some people. (Comment by Lee Munnich)

**Williams:** There will always be someone who takes issue with protests and protestors. I was always looking for an opportunity to take on issues raised by protests. I could say the same thing as **Spike Moss**, but it would be more acceptable, because of the way I said it.

I'm hoping there are some people out there with the same ideas as the protestors, but they can connect better with people. You can use different language and accomplish the same thing. Then people are excited to work with you. Those whose voices are lower and softer must stay connected with those whose voices are louder. There's more than enough for all of us to do out here if we're not interested in claiming credit. We need to work as a team and care about what gets done.

**1:14:38** - The record of educating disadvantaged youth in Minneapolis seems far more serious today, compared to the 1960s. You've said education leaders by themselves can't do the job; it's a community job. Can you assess the problem and what action needs to be taken today? (Dana Schroeder)

**Williams:** I served one term on the Minneapolis School Board, from 2007 to 2011. I thought board members didn't know how to get things done. The challenge was that I needed to learn about the system before laying out my plans for changing the system.

Kids come to school with or without a body of knowledge from their preschool years. And what if a child is coming from an unstable home, where people in the household only talk in directives? We must deal differently with kids not ready to learn when they get to school from how we deal with kids from stable homes who are ready to learn when they get there.

**1:18:46** - You said we don't invest enough in our education system. Is money the answer? (Dana Schroeder)

I don't mean just money, but rather we don't invest enough time and we expect the schools to solve problems they don't have the tools for, such as housing, food and clothing. I don't know if we know what we want from our schools. I wanted to have a demonstration project at one school and assess what they had there and look at what was available in the community. We could bring these two together and understand whose role is what.

If we could deliver the kids clothed, well-fed and in good mental health, then we could have tremendous expectations from them in terms of teaching and learning.

**1:21:28 - Your work in the mid-1960s was very practical: to address inequality issues. I confess to having had profound ignorance on issues of race-myself and others-and on police issues. People are now getting issues of institutional and individual racism out there, but we're not having the practical discussions about how to lift people out of poverty.** (Comment by Paul Ostrow)

**Williams:** We're not focusing enough time on what we can do together. We need to look at the national scene and see what we can do politically. There are now efforts to demonize people by what they look like and what they believe. There's been a tremendous expansion in communication. A person can instantly demonize someone with the click of a button. That divides us and prevents us from coalescing together to get things done. In the 1960s, people had to come together and see each other to communicate.

**1:25:20 - How important were the Minneapolis papers at that time?** (Pat Davies)

**Williams:** The *Star* and *Tribune* were different newspapers then. You could access them. You could call them and get somebody to talk to. Try now to get a hold of the editor and you can't. They're too important for me to talk to.

And when new reporters came on board, they came out into the community and met some people. When the papers bring people in, they ought to research the history of the community. They must go back at least 50 years to look at what was going on then, compared to today.

**127:42 - When I was chair of the Education Committee in the Minnesota House, I heard a lot about the social issues facing schools from school districts like Osseo, Brooklyn Center, Minneapolis and Robbinsdale. I heard from superintendents about mobility among students. Housing stability plays such an important role in terms of stability in education.** (Comment by Lyn Carlson)

**Williams:** It's not fully a school problem. You must coordinate the housing with education. It comes down to leadership. It must come in the form of a movement with enough people committed to resolving a particular issue. For example, something might happen with the police because of the crisis of George Floyd's death.

**1:30:33** - In the 1960s and 1970s, there was a community sensitivity to solving problems, with people working together informally and formally. We have Geoffrey Canada's work with the **Harlem Children's Zone** in New York City and the **Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative (DNSI)** work in Boston. In Minneapolis and Saint Paul, we have reverted to a disciplinary approach, not seeing the commonality across silos. How do we break those silos and that fragmenting? (Tom Abeles)

## Conclusion

**1:33:04** - **Williams:** We always think what we're experiencing now is the worst it's ever been. The thing that bothers me most is how reluctant we are to look at where we've been before and learn from that. There's a quickness to dismiss ideas because they didn't come from you or they're not a part of your generation's ideas.

---

*The thing that bothers me most is how reluctant we are  
to look at where we've been before and learn from that.*

---

We don't pay enough attention to building strong institutions. We have too many people who do not believe in the missions of their institutions. They're working to tear them down. They leave a tough job for their successors. We must build up our institutions. They hold up our community.

**History still matters.** (Comment by Paul Ostrow)

**Williams:** Yes, it does.

## Biography

**Theartrice ("T") Williams**, MSW, is an independent consultant; former executive director of Phyllis Wheatley Community Center and, more recently, former interim executive director; former Minneapolis School Board member; former senior research associate at Rainbow Research, Inc.; and former Minnesota Ombudsman for Corrections. Williams has taught courses at the University of Minnesota's Humphrey School of Public Affairs and at Augsburg College.

Williams specializes in questions of social and distributive justice, with particular emphasis on community economic development and education issues affecting minority populations. He has been the principal investigator on Rainbow Research evaluations of several local community-based organizations and has conducted program and organizational

assessments at the national level. For six years, Williams was evaluation consultant and technical assistance provider to 10 local community-based organizations funded by the Minnesota Health Department's Eliminating Health Disparities Initiative.

Williams' recognitions and awards include The Bush Foundation Leadership Fellows award; Outstanding Achievement Award, Minnesota Chapter, National Association of Social Workers; Outstanding Service in Criminal Justice Award, National Association of Blacks in Criminal Justice; Lutheran Social Service of Minnesota Service Award; Outstanding Alumni Award, University of Pennsylvania School of Social Work.

Williams holds a B.A. degree from the University of Illinois and an M.S.W. degree from the University of Pennsylvania and has done graduate work at the University of Illinois, University of Chicago, DePaul University Law School and Northwestern University.

## Present

Tom Abeles, John Adams, Helen Baer, Tom Beech, Lyndon Carlson, Janis Clay (chair), Pat Davies, Randy Johnson, Lee Munnich, Paul Ostrow, Dana Schroeder (associate director), Clarence Shallbetter, T Williams.