

“Never Let Them See You Sweat!”

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The first job Eleanor Williams had at an FAA building was to clean the place. The mother of seven had just moved to Anchorage from her birthplace in Texas and her sister had a janitorial contract for the regional office.



Williams in front of Kansas City Center, where she was an assistant manager. Photo: Courtesy of Eleanor Williams

From that humble beginning in 1963, she launched a career that made her the first African-American woman certified air traffic controller and the first African-American woman to manage an Air Route Traffic Control Center.

Before her pathbreaking success in the controller ranks, Williams spent a few years as an FAA secretary. Even getting to that point took major effort.

After three months of janitorial service, Williams got a job in a hospital cafeteria. With an eye on better pay and family benefits, she attended free classes for stenography and secretarial work at Anchorage Community College and joined the FAA on March 15, 1965.

“It was a good career and total life change for me,” Williams said in a recent interview with ATO Online.

In the next few years, the former straight-A student moved slowly up the pay scale, working for Flight Standards and personnel. She was doing prep work to bring on air traffic controllers when she spotted a better opportunity there.



Congressman Louis Stokes presents Williams with a copy of a salute to her from the Congressional Record in 1995. Photo: Courtesy of Eleanor Williams

“I needed to make more money,” Williams said. “The baby sitter was costing me an arm and a leg.”

She passed the controller entrance exam and started training at the Anchorage Flight Service Station in 1968, in what she would later learn was an historic first. With two female supervisors and five African-American men at the Anchorage center, Williams did not know until 1980 that she had broken a barrier. A woman doing graduate work discovered the fact and called to tell her.



Williams with former Transportation Secretary Rodney Slater. Photo: Courtesy of Eleanor Williams

Williams' unlikely background, her race and gender, attracted attention. With no military or aviation experience, some questioned whether she was up to the job. "I have never in my life had a problem with learning anything," she told critics. "Just like the military trained you, the FAA can train me."

A one-hour test before she was certified in 1971 put those concerns to rest forever.

"It had everything in it," she recalled. "I had airplanes that weren't reporting to me, I had airplanes with no radio."

With two supervisors, two area managers and every controller not working a sector watching her every move, she kept up.

"At the very end an airplane came over at 20,000 feet," Williams said. "I had three airplanes in a holding pattern. This military pilot came on saying he was low on fuel and needed to get in right now. I cleared him to descend. They figured I had to violate someone's airspace but I didn't. I knew air traffic control."

Williams was born in College Station, Texas, on Dec. 21, 1936, to sharecroppers. She was one of six Toliver children. During World War II, the family moved to Vancouver, Wash., and her parents were riveters at Kaiser Shipyard. Returning to College Station after the war, her mother opened the first commercial laundry in town, and her father started making good money in construction, Williams said.

Both parents died unexpectedly in the early 1950s, and Williams went to Prairie View A&M in Texas and won a full scholarship. Unfortunately, she did not stay long. "I got married and started having my kids too fast," Williams said.

She splits her time now between taking care of grandchildren in Alaska and a cousin in Texas.

Early in her career, Williams was already known for competence and compassion — and as a leader. LaVerne Reid, retired FAA New England Region Airports Division manager, first met Williams in 1970 when Reid, a pregnant young mother, was considering air traffic control.



Eleanor Williams with Laverne Reid

"Having blazed a trail and cut trees, I was following in her path," Reid said. "She was balancing work and family and sharing those ideas. She had demonstrated success in a field that was predominantly male." Williams told Reid to seriously consider her commitment to work because conflicts with family would be rough. Reid decided to wait a couple of years before jumping in, and the two women worked together for almost five years. In 1976, they formed an Anchorage chapter of the National Federation of Business and Professional Women.

"I have known her in many settings," Reid said. "She has never lost her cool, she is always in control of her emotions. She has always treated people with respect."

Over time, Williams was promoted to training controllers in Anchorage; supervisor in San Juan, Puerto Rico;

supervisor back in Anchorage; airspace analyst in Atlanta and at headquarters in Washington, D.C.; area manager at Kansas City ARTCC; section supervisor in the central region; assistant air traffic manager in Kansas City; and then in 1994, manager of Cleveland ARTCC, which became the busiest center in the country while she headed it. Along the way, she was also a PATCO union rep.

Before retiring in 1997, Williams held an executive management position for the regional administrator of the Great Lakes Region. One of her daughters, Dana Williams-Robinson, is an FAA controller at Houston Hobby Tower.

Sam Moore, a command center controller, described Williams as a mentor. He first met her in 1987 in Kansas City and thought she was in training there. The new area manager laughed at his ignorance.

“Eleanor’s a very strong woman,” Moore said. “It was probably very difficult for her. She had a goal and she didn’t let anyone interfere with that.”

Looking back, Williams remembered the words of one her first instructors, a black man: “Eleanor, you can’t let them run you out of here.” After that, she said, “It was pretty much like, bring it on. Never let ‘em see you cry and never let ‘em see you sweat.”

LaVerne Reid credits Williams with attracting untold numbers of people to the FAA. Reid said Williams loved the agency and always went out of her way to talk to school children about the work.

“She’s our own little ambassador of good will,” Reid said.

Williams was inducted into the Black Aviation Hall of Fame in 2001 and was recognized several times with awards as an FAA employee.

In retirement, Williams likes to sing in her Baptist church choir and at nursing homes. She started Brazos County (Texas) Faith United Coalition, which works with young people, and was given a youth advocate award by the state of Texas.

“I always acknowledge God in everything I do,” Williams said. “He has directed my path all the way through.”

One of the ironies of her stellar air traffic control career is how spontaneously it started.

“When I was a secretary I thought I was going to work a couple years and come back and raise my kids,” Williams said. “When I retired, I felt like I had given way more than I had set out to give when I started.”

Unfortunately Eleanor Williams passed in 2011. Her presence is missed by all.

Her mantra of “Never Let Them See You Sweat!” is wise advise for all of us.

In her memory - The Bessie Coleman – Eleanor Williams Dreams Take Flight Breakfast has been established by the [National Black Coalition of Federal Aviation Employees \(NBCFAE\)](#) and the [Bessie Coleman Aerospace Legacy \(BCAL\)](#).
