

PENNSYLVANIA
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**The Man
Who Would
Be D.A.**
Seth Williams has his
eyes on the prize

**THE TOP
YOUNG LAWYERS
IN PENNSYLVANIA**

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Marina Volin starts
over in America

Tops In His Field
The dirt on lawyer-farmer
Jonathan Spadt

To Hell and Back
Iraq vet Patrick Murphy returns

LAW & POLITICS

and the publishers of

Philadelphia
magazine

Seth Williams got 46 percent of the votes in a primary against an incumbent considered untouchable. He vows to do better next time

The MAD Be D.A.

Who
Would

By Michael Park
Photography by Larry Marcus

You could say R. Seth Williams' career as a lawyer, politician and shaker of institutions was well under way by the time he was in kindergarten.

"He was 5 years old, and he was having a disagreement with me about something — his favorite hat was his Phillies baseball cap with the 'P' on it, and he had that on — and he looked right up at me and said, 'You know, Mommy, kids have rights too,'" laughs Imelda Williams, Seth's mother. "And I said, 'That boy is going to be in the courtroom.' He was like that from day one."

Thirty-three years later, Imelda Williams' little anti-authoritarian is still not afraid to take on difficult battles: On May 17, the personal injury lawyer at Zarwin Baunn DeVito Kaplan Schaefer & Toddy, a former Philadelphia assistant district attorney with no political experience, was on the ballot in the Democratic primary for district attorney. He was challenging his former boss, Lynne Abraham, who has held the office since 1991 and was considered as nearly entrenched as Manhattan District Attorney Robert M. Morgenthau or Chicago Mayor Richard M. Daley — in other words, unassailable. But by claiming he can better prosecute

crimes in the city and by picking up key endorsements from the Fraternal Order of Police and the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Williams had given himself a fighting chance. He didn't win — the margin of defeat on May 18 was 46 to 54 percent — but that, in a way, was a victory.

"He made an excellent showing, for this first round," says Thad Mathis, a professor at Temple University's School of Social Administration and an observer of Philadelphia politics. "It was a much stronger showing than I'd expected, and I think he ran an effective campaign ... his platform that new leadership was needed resonated well."

The way Rufus Seth Williams' parents met heralded the rebellious streak in the man who would be D.A. Rufus Ollie and Imelda Williams met in the late '40s, when she was a college student at what is now Texas Southern University in Houston, Texas, and he was her art professor and 10 years her senior. When the dean of women students took her aside and forbade her from continuing to date Rufus, Imelda refused.

"I said, 'I'm going to marry him,'" she says. "I was 18 years



Williams spent 10 years as an assistant district attorney before running for the top job.

old. My teacher couldn't tell me what to do. She made me angry."

After a short stop in North Carolina, they returned to Rufus' native city, Philadelphia, where they adopted Seth and raised him in the middle-class Cobbs Creek neighborhood of West Philadelphia, an upbringing that he almost reflexively uses to explain his interest

in law and politics. His father, a former track star at Penn State (and whose February 2001 funeral Abraham attended), was impeccably proper, generous and upstanding, and was by all accounts Seth's best friend and biggest influence. After Williams and his wife, Sonita, bought a house in a neighborhood close to his childhood home in 1995, his parents moved into the house next door.

"Everyone in my neighborhood loved him [my father]," Williams says. "I only heard him curse once — about class sizes."

Rufus Williams' motto — almost a mantra — was that anyone who didn't try to fix a problem forfeited his right to complain about it. It's a saying Williams took to heart at an early age.

A precocious 5-year-old, Williams had the opportunity to start first grade early. His parents declined.

"We felt he would be a follower at the age of 5 among 6-year-olds," Imelda Williams says. "We didn't want him to be a follower." She needn't have worried.

"He used to make deals with me all the time as a kid," Imelda Williams says. "He was so independent. I'd lay clothes out for him at night, and when you saw him the next morning he'd have changed that and worn what he picked out himself."

The Williamses started their only child in the kindergarten at Friends Central, a mostly white local school where he soaked up Quaker values that stressed tolerance, inclusion and understanding. "Everybody is your friend, and the light of God is in everyone and everything," Williams says.

When he was 11, he attended an international summer-school program in Copenhagen, Denmark, that was touted as a model for achieving world peace (they played dodgeball). He got a chance to meet children from such places as Ghana, Israel, Iran, Romania and El Salvador. "The kid from Spain had the bunk next to me, and I thought, 'He likes to pop his bubble-gun just like I do!'" Williams says.

Another year, he took part in a student-exchange program with an Italian student. He still keeps in touch with the Guidetti family.

But after sixth grade, he left the Quaker school for the local parochial school. It was 1978 and Williams says he had hit the age where he wanted to spend more time with his neighborhood friends and adopt hipper, more streetwise ways. His mother says other factors may have played a part.

"I think it had a little to do with his social life," she says. "You know, it's a racial thing, a little black boy with a lot of little white girls — there was an attitude of 'Go to school with my children, but don't marry my children.'"

His adjustment to the mostly black parochial school wasn't easy. "I went from being the only black kid in class to the new school, where I was like the white boy," Williams says.

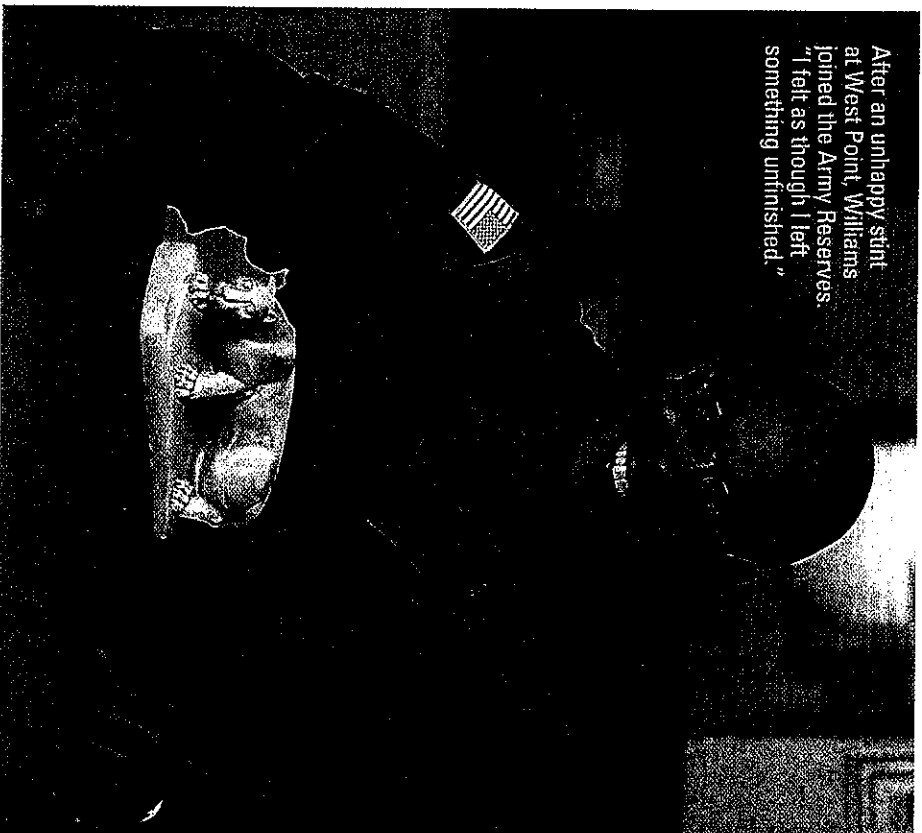
His stay at the parochial school was short. Williams was destined, it seemed, to go to Philadelphia's Central High School, a magnet school that has traditionally churned out the city's leaders and foremost citizens. He was in the school's last all-male class, along with John Barber, a financial expert who befriended Williams their freshman year, when both were on the football and track teams and spent a lot of time commuting from their homes in West Philly. Williams had already begun modeling himself on black groundbreakers in law and politics — Thurgood Marshall, Philadelphia Mayor W. Wilson Goode, Atlanta Mayor Andrew Young.

"He was the kind of guy who had a plan even back then," Barber remembers. "He wanted to be involved in politics and was quick to get involved in student government. He always told me he was going to be mayor and I'd be his city comptroller."

On the football field, Williams wasn't the most naturally talented player, but he made up for it with a never-surrender attitude and a knack for leadership.

"He wasn't a starter, but he had the mentality of a starter," says Barber, who was a starting running back. "To me he was like the coach on the side of the field. Whenever I came back from the field, he'd tell me to break this way, pass this way — if he thought I didn't know what I was doing, he'd let me know. Then this one game I remember him getting in the game, and the whole stadium cheered because they'd never seen him play quarterback. He was a little embarrassed by it and in the same sense, he was waving to his friends like it was a big sendoff. 'Yes, I'm here. They

After an unhappy stint at West Point, Williams joined the Army Reserves. "I felt as though I left something unfinished."



finally let me into the game.'"

It almost goes without saying that by the time he graduated, in 1985, Williams had been student-government president and was voted the class politician in the yearbook.

But Williams was soon to suffer a serious setback.

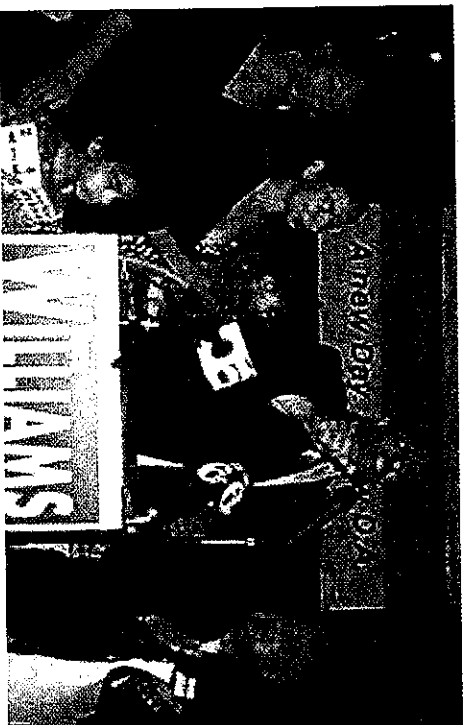
He'd been accepted to the United States Military Academy at West Point, whose rigorous first, or "plebe," year is notorious for breaking down even the most stubbornly rebellious spirits. Like the other new students, Williams was worn down by the strict rules of behavior that dictated everything from what newspapers plebes were to read to how many times they were to chew their food before swallowing.

"He didn't cut the cake right, he didn't do this or that right, he got a whole lot of little write-ups. It was so depressing up there with the gray suits, the gray buildings and gray atmosphere," Imelda Williams says. "Our first phone bill from him was \$333, he was calling us so much — and they weren't allowed to use the

phones. Can you imagine how many times he must have snuck out and broken the rules?"

But he was also appalled and disheartened by the often cruel hazing the upperclassmen inflicted. He reported one incident that he said bordered on racism, but found himself trapped in a bureaucratic nightmare that came down to his word against a senior's. The administration told him it could do little when he returned to the academy after Christmas break. He requested an honorable discharge, which was granted. The institution had beaten him.

"He felt he'd been turned back," Barber says. "Knowing the kind of guy he is, that didn't sit well with him. For him to come



Williams announces his candidacy with his family by his side. From left: daughter Alyssia, daughter Hope, wife Sonita, son Taylor and mother Imelda.

from, accomplishing his goals — promoting equal justice and equal opportunity."

"He learned to separate the fools from the jackasses," Imelda Williams says. "I told him, 'You learned how people really think, how they feel.'"

He'd already plotted his next move. Williams had arranged to attend Penn State — where his father, in 1941, had created turmoil when he broke a tradition of segregation and became one of the first black men allowed into the campus barbershop. Williams returned from West Point on a Friday and began attending classes at Penn State's satellite campus on Monday, and the main campus soon after. Naturally, he gravitated toward student government, spending one spring break leading a six-day march on Harrisburg that convinced the university system to divest all its holdings in apartheid-ridden South Africa. He became the first black president of student government at Penn State since 1955.

When he began attending Georgetown University Law Center in 1989, he gave up campus politicking to focus intently on his law studies. He also reinvigorated his involvement with the Catholic Church and got involved with organizations that fought for more affordable housing in Washington, D.C.

One incident at Georgetown still leaves a sour taste in his mouth. Nearing graduation, Williams was uncertain where to live or what to do, so he sought the advice of a professor.

"He told me to go back to Philly and become a public defend-

er, because, as a black man, I knew how the criminal mind works," Williams says. "How messed up is that?"

Williams did the opposite. In 1992 he joined the Philadelphia D.A.'s office, where he worked his way up from the municipal court unit through the juvenile-court unit (where he met his wife, a social worker) and then major trials. He also had a stint teaching criminal justice at Penn State Abington.

"You had to do triage, basically, to tell which cases were serious and which could be disposed of," Williams says. "From growing up in West Philly and riding to school every day, you see all types of stuff."

In 1996, he prosecuted his most memorable case. That summer, 18-year-old Christian Saladino was beaten into a coma with a baseball bat in a northeast Philly neighborhood fight between Italians and Latinos that increased racial tensions in the city. Williams won aggravated assault convictions against the attackers and became fast friends with the Saladino family while visiting northeast Philadelphia to ease racial tensions. His multicultural education proved critical. Saladino later died. In a separate trial, the attackers were found not guilty of murder, but they still served out their sentences for the assault.

Williams took it upon himself to be the morale officer for the D.A.'s office. "He planned pizza parties and all that," Imelda Williams says. "He'd tell me those people are under a lot of tension for a little bit of money."

Meanwhile, Williams joined the Army Reserves in 1998 to serve in the JAG Corps, where he holds the rank of captain and spends his weekend a month, two weeks a year, counseling soldiers about their legal issues before they head out to Iraq. "I felt as though I kind of left something unfinished with West Point," he says. "So when I got the chance, I got my commission."

In 2000, Williams helped create and headed up the Repeat Offenders Unit (ROU) in the D.A.'s office, which identified and targeted career criminals. By this time, he'd also identified what he says is a fundamental flaw in the way the office prosecutes crimes — throwing unseasoned rookie assistant district attorneys into cases unprepared; not allowing the same attorney to stay with a single case from beginning to end; and not keeping a geographic consistency to the cases a prosecutor handles, meaning he or she could easily miss important crime patterns.

"You cannot learn organizations and causes if you're not assigned geographically — it's the classic inability to see the forest for the trees," says Bryan Lentz, a former assistant D.A. now with Villeri & Lentz, who managed Williams' campaign. "In the time I was there, I can't tell you how many cases I had that ended up being related."

After two and a half years as head of the ROU — and more than a thousand prosecutions during his decade in the D.A.'s office — Williams left to become a litigator at Zarwin Baum.

For now, Williams is content with his private practice and his work at St. Cyprian Catholic Church (he calls the church carnival he coordinates there the best thing he's ever done, besides marrying his wife and raising Hope, 6, Taylor, 2, and Alyssia, 18). But a ward map is still prominently displayed in his office, and he can recite lines from his campaign or statistics about the state of the D.A.'s office at the drop of a hat. He doesn't talk about if he's going to be the next D.A.; he talks about when. After all, he once left something else unfinished. And he made up for that. ♣