

From Humble Beginnings to Making History

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Born in College Station, Texas, on December 21, 1936, Eleanor Joyce Williams was one of six children born to sharecroppers. Her parents moved the family to Vancouver, Washington, during World War II when they secured employment as riveters at Kaiser Shipyard. After the war, the family returned to College Station where her mother opened the first commercial laundry in town and her father worked in construction. Both of her parents died unexpectedly in the early 1950s.

Eleanor attended Lincoln High School and graduated in 1955 as class valedictorian and received a four year academic scholarship to Prairie View A&M University in Prairie View, Texas. She stayed at the university only one semester. As she explained, “I got married and started having my kids too fast.” She married Tollie Williams, Jr., in 1955 and had 7 children.

Eleanor and her family moved to Anchorage, Alaska, in 1963 where her sister had a janitorial contract with the FAA regional headquarters in Anchorage, Alaska. After three months working on the FAA cleaning crew, Williams took another job at a hospital cafeteria before attending free classes at a local community college to further her education. After stenography and secretarial training, Williams applied to the FAA and obtained a job as a GS-4 clerk stenographer on March 15, 1965.

In the next few years, she slowly moved up the pay scale. She worked for the flight standards and personnel offices. While in personnel she helped process the paperwork to hire new air traffic controllers. Seeing an opportunity for more interesting work and higher pay, she applied for one of the positions. Williams later said she wanted a higher paying position because “the babysitter was costing an arm and a leg.” She completed the controller entrance exam and began training at the Anchorage Flight Service Station in 1968. She received certification in 1971. In 1976, she helped establish an Anchorage chapter of the National Federation of Business and Professional Women. Not until 1980 did she find out she was the first black female air traffic controller.



Williams subsequently trained controllers in Anchorage. She then became a supervisor in San Juan, Puerto Rico; a supervisor back in Anchorage; an airspace analyst in Atlanta and at headquarters in Washington, DC; area manager at the Kansas City ARTCC; a section supervisor in the central region; an 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 representative. She served as a Women in Management Delegate to the Soviet Union with People to People International in 1990.

In 1995, Congress saluted her during Black History Month. Representative Louis Stokes said, in part, that she was “not only a role model to colleagues, but also the employees she supervises . . . her passion for excellence and ability to reach any goal inspires those around her to strive for the stars.” He continued, “Eleanor is someone of whom the African-American community, women, and indeed Americans everywhere should be proud.”

Before retiring in 1997 with 32 years of federal service, Williams held an executive management position for the regional administrator of the Great Lakes Region. Looking back on her distinguished career, Williams told ATO News in 2007, “It was a good career and total life change for me.” In retirement, she liked spending time with her 23 grandchildren and 17 great grandchildren and singing in her Baptist church choir and at nursing homes. She started the Brazos County (Texas) Faith United Coalition, which worked with young people, The State of Texas honored her with a youth advocate award, and she was inducted into the Black Aviation Hall of Fame in 2001.

Looking back, she told ATO News that she always 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.”

Eleanor Williams died on April 22, 2011 at the age of 73. During her life she inspired many to reach for their goals and became one of FAA’s goodwill ambassadors, teaching young women and men about being an air traffic controller.

For additional information on Eleanor Williams, please see <https://employees.faa.gov/org/linebusiness/ato/news/features/story/index.cfm?newsId=35608> and <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/CREC-1995-02-08/pdf/CREC-1995-02-08-pt1-PgE298.pdf>.