

Biographical Description for The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Standish E. Willis

PERSON

Willis, Standish E., 1941-

Alternative Names: Standish E. Willis;

Life Dates: August 16, 1941-

Place of Birth: Chicago, Illinois, USA

Residence: Oak Park, IL

Work: Chicago, IL

Occupations: Civil Rights Lawyer

Biographical Note

Criminal defense attorney Standish E. Willis is quick to make enemies in his work, but only because he insists on doing the right thing. Born in Chicago on August 16, 1941, the ex-gang member-turned-lawyer simply followed his conscience in choosing to take on unpopular clients whose civil rights are violated.

Willis grew up on the West Side, a blue-collar neighborhood and haven for gangs. When he was twelve, Willis joined the Van Dyke street gang and two years later was the leader of the Gents street gang. He became a father at age seventeen. Six months after graduating from Crane High School in 1960, Willis shipped off to the U.S. Air Force and shaped up. When he returned four years later, he took a job as a bus driver and began attending Crane College. As a student, Willis grew politically active, leading the campaign to name the new West Side campus Malcolm X College and organizing clubs and a "Communi-versity" to promote African and African American History.

In 1968, Willis completed his A.A. and transferred to the University of Chicago. He received his B.A. in 1971 and earned an M.A. in economics from the University of Illinois, Chicago, before enrolling at Chicago-Kent College of Law. He received his law degree in 1983 and joined People Law Office, a civil rights law firm.

In his career as an attorney, Willis has been an active crusader against police violence. He organized the African American Defense Committee Against Police Violence and later came full circle when he signed on to represent former street gang leader Aaron Patterson, who was convicted of a double murder in 1989. Willis took the case because Patterson claimed Chicago police beat a confession out of him, and Willis has made no

apologies for offering counsel to such an unpopular figure.

In 1984, the Standish E. Willis Community Service Award was established to recognize a student for outstanding leadership and community involvement. Willis has been the recipient of several other awards for his service to civil rights and the community. Willis resides in Oak Park, Illinois. He has five children.

Related Entries

William E. Gladstone Elementary School [STUDENTOF]

[from ? to ?]

Cregier High School [STUDENTOF]

[from ? to ?]

Richard T. Crane Medical Preparatory High School [STUDENTOF]

[from ? to ?]

HS diploma

University of Chicago [STUDENTOF]

[from ? to ?]

BA - Economic history & African American History

University of Illinois at Chicago [STUDENTOF]

[from ? to ?]

MA - Economics

Chicago-Kent College of Law [STUDENTOF]

[from ? to ?]

J.D.

Malcolm X College [STUDENTOF]

[from ? to ?]

Associate's degree

People's Law Office [EMPLOYEEOF]

[from 1983 to 1990]

Lawyer

Delete [EMPLOYEEOF]

[from 19830701 to ?]

Law Offices of Standish E. Willis

National Conference of Black Lawyers (NCBL) [MEMBEROF]

[from ? to ?]

Black Student Association [MEMBEROF]

[from ? to ?]

President

Black Law Students Association [MEMBEROF]

[from ? to ?]

Lawyers for Washington [MEMBEROF]

[from 1986 to 1987]