

Biographical Description for The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Miriam DeCosta-Willis

PERSON

DeCosta-Willis, Miriam

Alternative Names: Miriam DeCosta-Willis;

Life Dates: November 1, 1934-January 7, 2021

Place of Birth: Florence, Alabama, USA

Residence: Memphis, TN

Occupations: Educator

Biographical Note

Educator Miriam DeCosta-Willis was born November 1, 1934 in Florence, Alabama to educators Beautine and Frank DeCosta. She grew up in the South but graduated from Westover School in Connecticut and received a B.A. degree, Phi Beta Kappa, from Wellesley College, as well as M.A. and Ph.D. degrees from the Johns Hopkins University.

In her forty-year career in education, she has taught at LeMoyne and Owen Colleges (later, at the merged institution for a decade), became the first Black faculty member at Memphis State University in 1966, chaired the Department of Romance Languages at Howard University, was named Commonwealth Professor of Spanish at George Mason University in 1989, and was Director of Graduate Studies in the Department of African American Studies at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, from which she retired in 1999.

An activist throughout her life, she organized a student protest at Wilkinson High School, joined her mother in the Montgomery Bus Boycott, was jailed in Memphis for participating in civil rights demonstrations, campaigned for Black political candidates, led a boycott of Memphis public schools, and joined protest marches in Washington when she lived there in the 1990s.

Co-founder of the Memphis Black Writers' Workshop, DeCosta-Willis has published eight books, including *Blacks in Hispanic Literature*, *Erotique Noire*, *The Memphis Diary of Ida B. Wells*, *Daughters of the Diaspora* and, recently, *Notable Black Memphians*. A columnist, lecturer, consultant, and visiting scholar, she was chair of the Tennessee Humanities Council, associate editor of *Sage: A Scholarly Journal of Black Women*, and editorial board member of the *Afro-Hispanic Review*.

In 1955, she married Russell Sugarmon, Jr., a civil rights attorney, and they had four children. Later, she married A. W. Willis, Jr., an attorney, businessman, and first Black elected to the Tennessee Legislature since Reconstruction.

Miriam DeCosta-Willis was interviewed by The HistoryMakers on July 31, 2003.

DeCosta-Willis passed away on January 7, 2021.

Related Entries

Westover School [STUDENTOf]

[from ? to ?]

Orangeburg-Wilkinson High School [STUDENTOf]

[from ? to ?]

Felton Laboratory Charter School [STUDENTOf]

[from ? to ?]

Thaddeus Stevens Observatory School [STUDENTOf]

[from ? to ?]

Alabama State Laboratory High School [STUDENTOf]

[from ? to ?]

Johns Hopkins University [STUDENTOf]

[from ? to ?]

Wellesley College [STUDENTOf]

[from ? to ?]

Memphis State University [EMPLOYEEOf]

[from 1993 to 1995]

Instructor

Howard University [EMPLOYEEOf]

[from 1970 to 1975]

Professor

LeMoyne-Owen College [EMPLOYEEOf]

[from 1979 to 1989]

George Mason University [EMPLOYEEOf]

[from 1989 to 1991]

University of Maryland, College Park [EMPLOYEEOf]

[from 2013 to 2015]

