

Charles Williams Memorial Way Unveiling

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Delivered By: Indianapolis City-County Council President Vop Osili

EXCERPT

I am deeply honored and very blessed to be with you on this truly special day, to join you at precisely this point in both time and space – hours after the start of the 53rd Indiana Black Expo Summer Celebration, mere weeks before the 20th anniversary of Charles’ passing, steps from all the action and activity that he championed, on this stretch of city street now memorialized in his name. I don’t know if what I’m experiencing is what people mean when they say of a departed loved one, “may his name be a blessing,” but that’s what the name Charles Williams is for me today, and every day. And Charles Williams Memorial Way is an opportunity to share that blessing with all those who pass this way.

There is, I believe, a deep synchronicity between the naming of this memorial way and what Reverend Williams accomplished with Indiana Black Expo. Commemorative naming is, first and foremost, a method of elevating the memorialized person’s visibility to the broader community. It’s a way of taking up some space. Of celebrating where we are, where we’ve been, and where we’re going. All of which, of course, Reverend Williams empowered Black people to do through Indiana Black Expo. His vision for Indiana and the world beyond was one in which Black people are visible – and not only visible, but celebrated. His leadership of Expo

encouraged all of us to take up space, to make ourselves visible in our local communities, to see our Blackness as cause for celebration.

Commemorative street naming also reflects how deeply an individual's contributions are woven into the culture of a community. This past fall, a section of Indiana Avenue was named Madam CJ Walker Memorial Way – in no small part because Madam Walker's contributions to this community are *indivisible* from Indiana Avenue itself. Charles Williams Memorial Way reflects an acknowledgement that his contributions are indivisible from the cultural fabric of Indianapolis; that so much of what happens here now is because he *was* here, *before*.

When I was reflecting on what I wanted to say today, the first thought I had was, "I can't believe it's already been 20 years since he passed." My second thought was, "I can't believe he only lived to be 56." How many of us could live twice as long and still not achieve half as much? Leaders like Charles Williams are much too few and far between, and most of us cannot hope to follow in his footsteps. But, starting today, each of us can follow his path.