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A Towering Success Story

By Richard W. Rahn

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Walter Williams, a pioneer among conservative economists

America is the story of people arising from adverse circumstances, achieving great success and helping others along the way. If you like stories about overcoming adversity - and who doesn't? - I have a suggestion for a last-minute Christmas stocking stuffer or a great gift to brighten the New Year for someone. It is the just-published autobiography "Up from the Projects" (Hoover Institution Press, 2010) by the influential and even revered economist Walter E. Williams.

Mr. Williams is perhaps best known for being a substitute host for Rush Limbaugh. He has been substituting for Mr. Limbaugh since 1992 because, he says, as a professor of economics, it gives him the biggest classroom in America. Most economists get relatively little radio and TV airtime - because they either are not understandable or are boring. Not Mr. Williams. He delivers his message to both his doctoral students and the public at large in a way that everyone can understand. Through his widely syndicated weekly column, he has done much to raise the economic literacy of many Americans.

How does a 6-foot, 5-inch black man born in inner-city Philadelphia well before the civil rights movement and raised by a single mother become one of the country's best-known conservative/free-market/libertarian economists, head of a leading academic economics department and an adviser to presidents? First, Mr. Williams was blessed to have a hardworking, very principled mother who instilled the value of education and excellence in her son despite their meager financial circumstances. Second, despite an unfocused and somewhat aimless youth, he married a woman who had great faith in his abilities and was there to support him during the tough times. Third, he was astute enough to see and grab opportunities others may have ignored, even though he freely admits that, at times, he was in way over his head. Fourth, he understood that hard work could result in a better life, and he was not afraid to do what he had to do to overcome his educational and other deficiencies. Fifth, he was not afraid to change his views when the empirical evidence disproved the prevailing liberal orthodoxy so widely held by his peers. Sixth, Mr. Williams has never been afraid to speak truth to power, despite the threats of others.

One of the pleasures in life is to meet people who have made real contributions and, as a result, made life better for their fellow humans. Occasionally, one of these exceptional people becomes a friend, and my three-decade-old friendship with Walter Williams is something I cherish. His autobiography is a fast, fun, uplifting read, but because Mr. Williams is essentially a modest man, many of his contributions to the economics profession are not given the depth they deserve. He was one of the most instrumental people in building George Mason University's economics department so that it is one of the finest in the world.

Mr. Williams' autobiography is something that will inspire almost everyone, particularly those young people who are in college or are thinking about going to college but are uncertain as to what they want to do. The book is about identifying opportunities and acting on them, even if you do not know where they might lead. It is about not deluding yourself that you know more than you do.

The real Walter Williams is someone you either love or hate - there is no middle ground. He has a magnificent and wildly politically incorrect sense of humor. He loves to puncture the hypocrisies and composites of both the political and academic class. In testifying before the U.S. Senate in 1981, Mr. Williams said: "You may win your way into office and retain that office essentially by promising some Americans that you will give them the fruits of another man's labor. You also may win office by promising one group of Americans that they will be given a right or privilege that will be denied other Americans." Oh, how true.

Mr. Williams is loved by those who understand the importance of tough love, which is why good students have flocked to his classes for years. Mr. Williams succeeded because he was given tough love. In his own words, "I've benefited from receiving virtually all of my education before it became fashionable for white people to like black people. The result: whatever grades I received were earned, as opposed to given. Teachers provided me an honest assessment of my learning. They weren't reluctant to tell me, 'Williams, that's plain nonsense.' Far too many blacks today don't receive honest assessments of their work or abilities due to a teacher's misguided efforts to compensate for our history of being discriminated against or fear of intimidation by students and accusations of racism." Obviously, such observations cause many in the liberal plantation to curse Walter Williams and falsely accuse him of being an Uncle Tom.

Friends who knew Mr. Williams long before I did have told me that he, by manner and dress, was viewed as a black radical during his earlier student days. He also freely confesses to having been a troublemaker when he was in the Army and elsewhere. But unlike others less wise, Mr. Williams grew to understand that he could do far more for both his black brothers and sisters and all other Americans by teaching them how free markets don't discriminate on the basis of race, religion or national origin, and hence lead to the greatest opportunity and prosperity for all.

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