

# The BLACK C o M M e n t a t o r

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**Willis Edwards:  
An Activist's Activist  
Between The Lines  
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The passing of friend and activist, Willis Edwards, doesn't just allow us to laud his accomplishments and mourn his life, it's an opportunity to evaluate the meaning of life in the construct of an activist. Amidst his flaws and foibles, what people remember *most* about Willis was that he lived a *meaningful* life, not a life driven by fad and fashion, or trend and transitory existence.

Willis set the trend and created existence where there was no reality, just possibility. You see, Willis was a true activist and true activists create *their own space*. True activist play in a meaningful way in the shared realities of community, but in the end, they change the reality by moving the ball *forward*. In a day when we see a lot of motion (or commotion), it's important to understand what activists are and what activists do.

Ask the great Jim Brown, or any NFL running back. You can run from sideline to sideline, but if you never move the ball forward, you can't score and thus, make no progress. You can dribble the ball all day, but if you can't put the ball in the basket, all your motion was for naught. The great John Wooden once said, "All motion is not action, and all activity is not progress." I use these analogies for Willis because of just who he was and what he did. There wasn't a lot of "hype" to his activism. He just got it done. There wasn't a lot of motion to his activity, but he always was moving the ball forward. A real activist knows the value of time and energy. They waste neither.

Time chases us; we can't chase time. The real activist doesn't worry about time and how much time is left. They just use whatever time they have to make the greatest impact they can. Activists rarely waste time or (e)motion. Wasted motion is wasted energy. Activists save their energy, motion and emotion (we call it *passion* in activist circles) for the fight, and fight to their very last breath. That's what Willis Edwards did. He didn't have time for a lot of stupid stuff but was where he needed to be, when it counted - and was mostly there *before* you.

Activists don't just tell time, they know the time. Activists know the shifting winds of change and they navigate them. They don't wait for the winds to change, and then pick the winning side. Activists face change, then they help create it. They don't turn their backs on change, then try to chase it down after it passes them. Activists know that change is about timing and once the time has passed, generally so has the opportunity for change.

Nobody I knew had better timing than Willis. Willis was creative in his thinking. His advocacy wasn't always guided by conventional construct, but once he picked a side of an issue he was a factor and kept moving the ball forward. Willis wasn't an irrational actor; he was a very rational thinker. What was rational to Willis often seemed radical to everybody else, largely because it was "out of the box" thinking. Willis was "out of the box" two decades before it became lexicon for creative thinking in corporate America. We once called that ingenuity.

Willis didn't do things for attention, but he could get your attention. Willis understood what grabbed people's (and the press') attention. He and the late Melanie Lomax taught many of us activists in the 1980s that activism is about the issue, not the activist. With the right issue, you don't have to call the press, the press will call you. With the right activism, you don't have to chase the press - the press will chase you. And with the right advocacy, you don't have to chase the people, the people know what's right when they see it and they will follow what's right.

Willis was an activist's activist. He would tell you that he was going to do something when he wanted to make a point, and wait for you to disagree with it. Then he'd show you how he did it and why he did it. The point he was making was that activists *make things happen*; they don't wait for things to happen. Willis Edwards' accomplishments are too numerous to name, but two things come to mind when I think about the sophistication of Willis' advocacy.

The first was when the NAACP was trying to get a show nationally televised that portrayed African Americans in a positive light. The national office couldn't get the show green-lighted and wanted only a "prime time" slot. No progress was being made. Willis, as Hollywood/Beverly Hills Branch President, went behind the national office's efforts and negotiated a "tape-delayed" late night slot on television. People thought it was less than what the NAACP deserved. Willis' philosophy was simple; "Take what they'll give you, then work to get what you want." Willis got the *Image Awards* on prime time television in less than five years. Then the National Office took it over from the branch, but they did give Willis credit for making it happen.

The second was the election of former State Senator, Diane Watson, to Congress. Very few people *know* how that came about. When then Congressman, Julian Dixon, died unexpectedly in December of 2000, people were standing around talking about who would replace him. Willis told a close circle of us, "I already know." And he did. Diane Watson. The problem was that Ms. Watson was halfway around the world in Micronesia, where she had been appointed Ambassador in Bill Clinton's second term. She certainly could announce and most certainly couldn't campaign. Three weeks later, Willis had hundreds of signs printed saying, "Watson for Congress" and distributed them at the Kingdom Day parade. Once the special election was announced, all her signatures had been collected and all she had to do was show up. That was all Willis. That's where he earned his name, "The Fixer." Willis made that happen. I hope Diane Watson remembers that the rest of her life. Willis Edwards' activism, network and political sophistication made her a congressional Representative.

Even on his deathbed, he was doing the same thing for Los Angeles District Attorney candidate, Jackie Lacey. Making her candidacy happen while others were standing around trying to watch, or wait for, her failure. She didn't fail. Willis never stopped working. Real activist don't. They work until time's up. Until time chases `em down.

I will always remember Willis Edwards for the crazy, funny, sometimes bothersome and eccentric person that he was. But what I will remember him for most, is for the activist he was.

Good night, my brothaaaa. See you on the other side.

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