IN MEMORIUM

RHEA HUGHSTON WILLIAMS

Rhea Hughston Williams, Associate Professor Emeritus of Health Education and past Director of the University Interscholastic League (UIL), died August 1, 1993, at Austin, Texas. Williams joined the UIL as State Athletic Director in 1948 and became Director in 1968. He retired from that position in 1977 to become Director of the UIL Foundation. A nationally recognized leader of educational sport, Williams oversaw the racial integration of UIL sports, as well as the expansion of girls' sports and academic programs. According to one longtime colleague, he was a strong, principled person who had “probably the greatest integrity of any person I have ever known.”

Rhea Hughston Williams was born at English, Texas, October 31, 1911, son of Thomas Irvin Williams and Irene Marshall Williams. He attended elementary school at Avery, Texas, and graduated from Clarksville, Texas, high school as Salutatorian in 1928. While in high school he competed in baseball, football, and track, and was a four-year letterman in all three. As a result of his athletic and academic success, Gerald Mann of Southern Methodist University (SMU) recruited him to play football. He received an academic scholarship to SMU, where he played football only one season. Williams lettered three years in basketball and baseball, serving as captain of both teams. He received All Southwest Conference honors in both sports, and also won All America honors in baseball. He graduated in 1933 with a B.S. degree in Finance and Education.

Following graduation Williams played professional baseball with the Monroe, Louisiana, team of the Cotton State League, and the Little Rock, Arkansas, team of the Southern League. During the winter of 1932-1933 he worked for the Brown Paper Company of Monroe, Louisiana, and played for the company’s basketball team. In 1933 he became principal and head coach at the high school in Avery, Texas. In 1936 he took a similar position at the Franklin, Texas, high school.

During the summers, Williams continued his education at Southern Methodist University. He completed his M.S. degree in Education in 1937 and accepted a position as Chairman of the Department of Health and Physical Education at Pan American College in Edinburgh, Texas. Also in 1937, he married Charlene Nelson, a teacher and fellow graduate student at SMU. They had one child, Gretchen.
After only one year, Williams became Director of Health and Physical Education at Southwestern University, Georgetown, Texas. He remained there until 1942, when he joined the United States Naval Aviation Corps as a Lieutenant (junior grade). He retired in 1946 as a Lieutenant Commander in the U. S. Naval Reserve. During those years he also attended graduate school. In 1947 he completed his Ph.D. degree in Educational Administration, with a minor in Physical and Health Education, at the University of Texas at Austin, while working part time at the UIL. Immediately following his graduation, Williams assumed his last full-time teaching position, Professor of Health, Physical Education and Recreation at North Texas State College in Denton, Texas.

In 1948, the Williams family moved to Austin, their home for the remainder of his life. He became State Athletic Director of the UIL, an organization he served for the next forty-five years. After twenty years as Athletic Director, he became Director. During his tenure as Athletic Director, the League grew to the extent that half of all high school students in Texas participated in some level of its programs. This growth was a result of Williams’ leadership in racial integration, gender equity, and increased academic competition.

Williams’ influence was especially strong in the area of school integration. It took a great deal of diplomacy and effort over a five year period to complete the process, but Williams took a strong stand for equality. As he later recalled: “We couldn’t force schools to integrate, but we could force them to play integrated schools.” The manner in which the League handled this issue won praise from school leaders and the media. The first step orchestrated by Williams was having the League’s Legislative Council delete the words “Whites only” from their constitution, making all League activities open to any public school in Texas. One reporter stated that this action was a “kindly, humane, exemplary development which would go far in easing the desegregation transition.” Soon after, the UIL negotiated a merger with the formerly all black Prairie View Interscholastic League. This successful merger completed the integration of public school athletics in Texas.

When Williams joined the League, girls participated only in tennis; when he retired, they participated in most of the same sports as boys except football. His biggest battle was over women’s basketball, long opposed by national physical education organizations. With encouragement from school administrators, the league began women’s basketball in 1950. Under Williams’ direction the program grew to include volleyball, softball, swimming, golf, and track and field. His commitment to girls' athletics placed Texas far ahead of many other states. The
League had little difficulty accommodating all the programs necessitated by the passage of Title IX of the Educational Amendments of 1972, that prohibited gender discrimination in educational programs. Although the UIL could not force schools to offer girls’ sports, the League had the programs in place. With the passage of Title IX, schools that lagged behind in gender equity rushed to participate.

When he moved from Athletic Director to League Director in 1968, Williams headed a drive to greatly expand the program of academic competition. Williams felt many students’ outstanding accomplishments in Texas went unnoticed because of the great emphasis on football. He took special pride in the academic programs that he developed to help offset this inequity. Throughout these years, Williams won admiration for his high ethics and his belief in strict academic requirements for participation in all League activities.

While continuing his work with the league, Williams also held the positions of Assistant Professor (1949-1958) and Associate Professor (1959-1977) in the Department of Kinesiology and Health Education at The University of Texas at Austin. Upon retirement in 1977, he received the distinction of being named Associate Professor Emeritus. Williams taught various sports, athletics, and health education courses to undergraduate students and was widely sought after as a guest lecturer in Texas state universities. He lectured to physical education majors of virtually every major university in the state of Texas and in many other states. His knowledge about high school athletics was highly sought after in all programs in which high school coaches were prepared. Perhaps his greatest scholarly impact upon high school athletics was the multitude of professional articles, sometimes ten to fifteen annually, that he published in coaching journals and high school newsletters and bulletins throughout the state of Texas and many other states. Through these articles, which were read by high school teachers, coaches, and university professors who prepared teachers of physical education and coaches, Williams raised the issues of ethics, sportsmanship, health, and safety in high school athletics. He was a visionary in recognizing as early as the 1960's the coming problems and negative impact of professional athletics, television, and student-athlete tensions, and he wrote about them profusely in these bulletins. His articles covered every aspect of athletics: preparing coaches, financing athletic programs, booster clubs and fan impact, rules and regulations, and facilities. Williams was always a watchdog to protect amateurism and maintain a healthful, wholesome learning environment for young boys and girls participating in sports.
In addition to his publications and teaching, he served as a Consultant to the President's Committee on Physical Fitness and to the Texas Youth Council, and he served on the Governor's Council on Physical Fitness, as Texas Chairman of the President’s Council on Lifetime Sports, and as President and Board Member of the Cen-Tex Chapter of the American Red Cross. Through his prolific publication record, teaching, lectures, and consultancies, Rhea Williams had a huge impact on high school athletics in this state for thirty-five years.

On a professional level, he was a member of the NCAA Football Rules Committee and Vice President of Board, National Federation of State High School Associations. He was also active in the American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance (AAHPERD), Texas Association for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance (TAHPERD), and Phi Delta Kappa. He served as Vice President of TAHPERD.

Among his many honors were the TAHPERD Honor Award, Phi Delta Kappa Service Award, Who's Who in American Education, Who's Who in the Southwest in Education, Award of Merit from National Coaches Association, Texas High School Football Hall of Fame, and National Athletic Directors and Coaches Award of Merit.

Despite his busy career, Williams was active in the University United Methodist Church as well as in a variety of civic and professional organizations. He served as an officer of almost every group to which he belonged. At the church he was Chair of the Administrative Board, Chair of the finance committee for building Heinsohn Hall, and President of the Hickman Bible Class. He was President of the University Area Kiwanis, Chair for Boys and Girls Work and Vocational Guidance for International Kiwanis, and Lieutenant Governor of the Texas-Oklahoma Kiwanis District. Other civic activities and offices included President of the Travis County Chapter of the American Cancer Society, President of the Capital Area Boy Scouts of America, Director of the Austin Chapter of the United Cerebral Palsy Association, President of the Citizens Juvenile Board of Travis County, President of the Texas Safety Association, and member of the Masons.

In 1977 Williams retired from the UIL and from teaching, becoming Associate Professor Emeritus of Kinesiology and Health Education at the University. However, he continued to serve as Director of the Interscholastic League Foundation, which awards scholarships to four hundred boys and girls who compete in the UIL athletic and literary programs that he helped to develop.

During his retirement, Williams and his wife enjoyed traveling abroad, for which reason he had taken early retirement. He also remained active in church and civic organizations as well as the
Retired Faculty and Staff organization at The University of Texas at Austin. Following a private burial, a memorial service was held at the University United Methodist Church in Austin. Williams is survived by his wife Charlene, daughter Gretchen Williams Woffard, son-in-law Danny Woffard of La Porte, grandson Rhea Hughston Shelly and granddaughter-in-law Ellen Shelly of Austin, and sister and brother-in-law Lucille and Otho Blount of Odessa.

Robert M. Berdahl, President
The University of Texas at Austin

H. Paul Kelley, Secretary
The General Faculty

The Memorial Resolution was prepared by a Special Committee consisting of Professors Mary Lou LeCompte (Chair) and Waneen W. Spirduso.