

Robert Williams' Story

On a warm summer evening, a young officer with the New Orleans Police Department answers an urgent dispatch crackling over his police radio: armed men are fleeing the location of a robbery. With sirens blaring, Rob Williams, a nine-and-a-half year veteran of the force, races to the scene in time to cut off the escaping criminals, level his weapon, and disarm the men.

To most, Williams would have appeared to be just another highly dedicated police officer, taking charge of a dangerous situation. But there was a difference. Rob was gravely ill with an aggressive cancer, one that would claim his life soon thereafter, at the age of 41. Indeed, when fellow officers heard over the radio that Rob had made the collar in the armed robbery case, they were stunned. "Isn't Rob Williams in the hospital?" they asked with disbelief.

Williams was the kind of police officer who was always on the job. It didn't matter what hour of the day or night it was, or whether he was officially on the clock.

In his almost 10 years in the NOPD's 8th District, the gritty and hyperactive French Quarter, Rob was a policeman with a reputation for tireless service. His patience and familiarity with the neighborhood inhabitants and their kids fostered lasting relationships of trust and respect. Thankful residents helped Williams keep the streets safe by providing information leading to many criminal arrests.

The French Quarter held a special place for officer Williams, but not only as the area he patrolled every day. In 1999, the tall, handsome officer met his future wife, who was sightseeing on Bourbon Street while visiting from New York. In February 2002 the two were married, eager to start their life together in Rob's beloved native city.

Within a month of their marriage, however, Rob suffered a break to his collarbone. After testing, he received a diagnosis of multiple myeloma, a cancer that generally strikes African American men in their 60s. The prognosis was grim: the illness was in its third and most severe stage, and had already spread to eighty percent of his body. Without radiation, chemotherapy or a bone marrow transplant, doctors at Tulane informed Rob he would die in a matter of weeks. Williams began

treatment at once, subsequently undergoing a bone marrow graft from his only sibling, his brother, Eric. Rob Williams was 35.

The next six years were marked by both hope and despair, a roller coaster of life with cancer. With almost super-human determination, Rob continued on the police force as he and Debbie worked together to defend his life. At the same time, the two became dedicated advocates for improved insurance and healthcare for all officers on the New Orleans Police Force. They hoped to spare other policemen in need the hardships they faced due to grossly inadequate medical protection.

Rob and Debbie's diligence was rewarded when the city's policies were amended to include catastrophic coverage for all subscribers. Later, after years of treatments with mounting medical bills and expenses reaching the maximum one million dollars covered, Rob and Debbie again petitioned the city and insurance company, and the plan's cap was boosted to two million dollars.

Rob's dedication to the force remained constant throughout his illness, and tales of his integrity and perseverance abound. As Lieutenant Eddie Selby, who oversaw Rob in the French Quarter, puts it, "What stood out in my mind was his tenacity to fight this and to be at work. Rob would come to work with head shaved. He could have certainly stayed out, but instead was coming back weak and pale wanting to do police work, as opposed to people who twist an ankle and are out for week," he says.

When Rob underwent his first bone marrow transplant, he refused to take off more than the minimum his doctors would allow. In recognition of his exceptional devotion, Rob was presented the Cannatella Above and Beyond Award in 2003. During Hurricane Katrina, when his cancer began again to rapidly progress, Rob was ordered to leave by his superiors because of concerns for his health. Rob refused to abandon the city in its hour of need and remained for the entire hurricane and its aftermath.

After a valiant fight, Rob succumbed to complications from myeloma in December 2007.

The Robert Williams Memorial Fund

1055 St. Charles Avenue
New Orleans, Louisiana 70130



A living tribute
honoring an extraordinary life
of service to his community...

And a legacy that impacts each officer and
city employee in New Orleans.

Robert Williams made a difference each
day for his city, and he makes a difference
to every person who serves New Orleans.