



Sister Act

History-Making Sumter Siblings Head SC State Agencies



SISTERS, SYLVIA MURRAY AND VALARIE WILLIAMS PICTURED AT THE AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORY MONUMENT

By Perdita B. Spriggs

Sylvia Murray and Valarie Williams are making an indelible impression throughout South Carolina. As the only African-American sisters to simultaneously head two state agencies, Murray and Williams are proactively tackling and positively impacting key statewide issues – juvenile justice and affordable housing.

“I want to step outside the box and create long-term opportunities for juveniles in the justice system,” says Murray, nominated by Governor Nikki Haley and confirmed in March as the SC Department of Juvenile Justice (SCDJJ) director. “I know change is possible, and we need innovative options to help these youth succeed.”

Likewise, Williams, executive director of the SC State Housing Finance and Development Authority (SC Housing) since 2007, wants to “expand the affordable housing conversation. It’s so important that people understand our services and how we help the community,” she says.

Murray and Williams’s combined 40 plus-year career investment in state government provides them undeniable insight and knowledge of their respective Columbia-based agencies. They are expanding awareness and changing South Carolinians’ perceptions of the juvenile justice and affordable housing systems.

Living Beyond the Fence

Murray has the daunting task of overseeing custodial care and rehabilitation programs for hundreds of youth in SCDJJ’s 43 county offices statewide, under the watchful eye of 1,300 employees. She focuses on education and preventative community programs to deter students from future criminal offenses.

“Many people think thousands of SCDJJ kids are locked up, but we average 110 students behind the fence,” reveals Murray, who manages a \$122 million annual administrative budget. “There are approximately 3,900 juveniles under community supervision.”

Murray personally interacts with SCDJJ students

and their families, guiding programs that address individual and family needs and encourage children to make better life choices. SCDJJ's successful arbitration program discourages first-time offenders from becoming repeat offenders. Through the 10-week family solutions initiative, staff works to keep children in the home and doing well. SCDJJ's hands-on intensive supervision program assigns officers who monitor youth daily and collaborate with school officials and local businesses to secure afterschool opportunities.

"As the saying goes, 'Idle time is the devil's workshop,'" recalls Murray. "We offer these children constructive options to enhance their lives."

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—Valarie Williams

"My biggest challenge is communicating exactly how we help troubled youth," she says. "I invite state legislators, judges, and other community leaders to tour our facilities. We hope they will become ambassadors for SCDJJ."

Veteran SCDJJ teacher Anna Stoner commends Murray's efforts. "In her heart, she wants what's best for the kids," says Stoner. "She has put many things in place and [our] programs are growing more." One mother of a 17-year-old former juvenile in SCDJJ custody feels her son is now more respectful and chivalrous. "He is no longer argumentative and is always opening the door for me," she says. "He never did that before."

Changing the "Not in My Backyard" Mentality

Agency misconception is a common challenge the sisters share. Williams knows many opinions circulate about affordable housing.

"I want to dismantle affordable housing misnomers," she says. "I'm trying to change the perception that all affordable housing resembles the housing projects of the 1970s." Williams and U.S. Congressman Jeff Duncan recently toured a 56-unit complex in Greenwood, home to firefighters, nurses, and teachers. "We are working to



VALARIE M. WILLIAMS PRESENTS THE FIRST PLACE COLORING PRIZE IN THE SC HOUSING "WHAT MY HOME MEANS TO ME" COLORING AND ESSAY CONTEST TO PRAYER JOHNSON OF CHARLESTON, S.C.

expand program support at the local, state and federal levels," she says, "by showing that affordable housing occupants, and the entities who develop, own, and manage these developments, are making meaningful contributions to our state's economy everyday."

Professional colleague Marilyn Drayton feels Williams is naturally positioned to advance South Carolina's affordable housing platform. "Valarie understands how critically important housing is to the state's economic vitality," says the Florida-based Wells Fargo community development manager. "She identifies unique partnerships that elevate available and affordable housing for a cross section of incomes."

SC Housing assisted more than 26,000 households in 2014, feeding \$505 million into the Palmetto State's economy and \$35 million in tax revenue into local municipalities, while stimulating nearly 4,000 jobs for citizens across the state. The agency administers state and federal programs to enable homeowners to maintain and retain their homes, offer first-time homebuyers affordable home mortgage solutions, and ensure renters options for affordable, safe, and high quality housing. The South Carolina Homeownership and Employment Lending program (SC HELP) assists homeowners in danger of foreclosure due to extenuating financial hardship. Their single-family homebuyer program makes homeownership

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SYLVIA MURRAY CONGRATULATES ROTC STUDENT.

a reality by providing home mortgage solutions with interest rates aimed at ensuring affordable monthly mortgage payments and assisting with down payments.

“The affordable housing need is great, and so is my team’s resolve to address it,” says Williams, who oversees 150 employees and manages an annual operating budget of more than \$180 million. “Like roads and bridges, housing is a critical component of the state’s infrastructure that provides a platform for economic stability and growth. Every house built and each housing-related purchase supports our economy. At the end of the day, housing is about people and providing people the means to improve their lives.”

Defining A Legacy

Murray and Williams credit their close-knit family and humble Sumter upbringing for paving their history-making path. “Mom and Dad [Annie Mae and David Murray] are very proud parents,” says older sister Vanessa Abercrombie. “But even being where Sylvia and Valarie are [in their careers], family still comes first.”

Reflecting on their historical achievement, the sisters, who hold advanced degrees, are proud of each other’s accomplishments and live by the adage, “With great power comes great responsibility.” Williams readily admits, “We realize moments like this are fleeting. We treat our responsibility very seriously.” She added that a defining moment for her tenure as executive director came after reading an essay written by an 11-year old winner of the agency’s annual “What My Home Means To Me” contest. “The essay put into perspective my mission and reaffirmed the importance of the many ways I positively impact people’s lives, possibly for generations.”

Murray’s passion is evident through her desire to elevate SCDJJ to new heights. “I have a sincere love and appreciation for my work,” she says. “I want to create new programs, invigorate our staff, and expand our community

partners to really invest in our juveniles. I want what’s best for the child, regardless of background or ethnicity.”

Murray’s defining moment came when previous agency Director Margaret Barber promoted her to SCDJJ deputy director of administrative services and began grooming Murray for her current position. “Ms. Barber saw something in me that I didn’t see in myself,” she remembers. “She assigned me many projects to accomplish in record time, all to see how I performed under pressure and handled problems. As Eleanor Roosevelt says, ‘A woman is like a tea bag; you never know how strong it is until it’s in hot water.’ I found myself looking forward to additional tasks to see how I could master them all.”

Finding Life’s Balance

Murray and Williams approach their hectic professional lives with a calm sense of purpose and perspective. “Valarie is confident with a wonderful sense of humor, and Sylvia is authentic and gracious,” shares Abercrombie. “They both are clear and concise, and we can ALWAYS depend on each other.”

Murray enjoys reading, exercising, and singing in the First Nazareth Baptist Church mass choir. She’s also active with several professional organizations, including Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, Inc., and the Governor’s Juvenile Justice Advisory Committee.

Williams is a wife, mother, and active member of Brookland Baptist Church and Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc. She also sits on the Affordable Housing Advisory Council of the Federal Home Loan Bank of Atlanta.

The sisters unanimously agree persistence pays off. “Do whatever it takes to follow your life’s goal,” encourages Murray. Williams agrees, “Don’t ever let someone tell you what you can’t do. Be prepared and press on.” ■