

# Balancing Act

**Paul and Erma Williams “met cute” in the Illinois Senate chambers; four decades later, they’re a leading political power couple**

by Hal Conick



Erma and Paul Williams

It was 1979, past midnight in the Illinois Senate chambers, when an unexpected sound rang out over the senate floor. A young lobbyist named **Paul Williams, MA '79 PAA**, had fallen asleep, snoring loudly and disturbing the senators below.

The senators sent a young page, **Erma Brooks, '79 PAA**, to wake him. Upon opening his eyes, Paul saw Erma—he was startled and somewhat embarrassed, but he also felt bold, beguiled by Erma. “I’ve been seeing you around campus,” he remembers saying, “and I wanted to ask you out. What do you think?” Erma was taken aback—“Who is this sleeping man asking me out?” But she said yes, then spent months getting to know Paul. Soon, she realized that he was the person for her.

Within two years, Paul and Erma Williams were married. At the time, they were the only young, black, single professionals in Springfield, and they had found each other amid Paul’s impromptu nap. When others black leaders in Illinois politics heard that Paul and Erma would be getting married, they were ecstatic. “Everyone loved Erma,” Paul says now.

Harold Washington—then an Illinois state senator who would soon become Chicago’s first black mayor—was a mentor to Paul and Erma, as both worked for him at different points in their careers. Washington encouraged the

couple to continue their education, leading Paul to earn his law degree and Erma her doctorate in education. After Washington heard that they’d soon be married, he took Paul aside and told him that if he ever hurt her, there’d be payback. Remembering the conversation, Paul chuckles.

Paul and Erma have been a power couple in Illinois politics and lobbying ever since. In 1986, Paul was elected to the Illinois House of Representatives, where he served for six years. He helped establish the Chicago Housing Authority Police Force, as well as an independent Cook County Public Defender’s Office and the law that created judicial sub-circuits in Cook County. When he retired, he founded his law and lobbying firm, Paul L. Williams and Associates. All the while, Erma had her own career, working as a special assistant for education to Harold Washington, serving in various executive positions in the University of Illinois at Chicago’s chancellor’s office, and working for years as associate to the president for the board of trustees and governmental affairs at Chicago State University.

Now, 41 years after Paul and Erma met in Springfield, they work together at Paul’s Chicago firm. Erma retired from Chicago State University in early 2012 and joined the firm as Paul’s vice president.

## Opposites attract

Paul and Erma have seemingly opposing strengths: Paul is a self-described “bull in a china shop” known for his ability to have conversations about tough issues. Erma is a quietly convincing people person and expert logistician who knows how to be kind, blunt and keep people honest, Paul says. Erma keeps Paul focused; before she joined his firm, Paul says that he was burning out mentally, “running around like a chicken with no head.”

“I’m as good as you can get on the issues, but I’m no good at doing just basic stuff,” Paul says. “Getting a dinner together causes me extraordinary anxiety.”

Erma took on the work that was causing Paul stress—being a people person, keeping people accountable—and allowed him to do the work he does best. That’s in her personality, they both agree. Plus, some people who would never talk to Paul will talk to Erma, he says—his personality is simply too strong for some. She balances the firm.

Each have their preferred issues, too. Paul says that he’s worked on everything over his lobbying career—gas, gay marriage, public education—and still works with controversial clients, such as tobacco manufacturer Altria Group (formerly Philip Morris). Erma prefers to stay away from tobacco clients and other “hard issues,” as Paul calls them, working mostly on government and higher education issues.

“I’m the guy you bring in when you need a heavy hitting, hard sell,” Paul says. “I’m an in-your-face guy”

“And I’m not,” Erma says.

Both say that UIS has played a special role in their development. The Illinois Legislative Staff Intern Program changed Paul’s life, he says now, giving him memories and relationships that have lasted a lifetime. Erma feels grateful to the University for being so welcoming; she remembers sitting in the library and feeling encouraged by professors to learn, study and grow as a person. Both of their daughters have gone on to attend school at a University of Illinois campus.

## Together

When Erma first joined Paul’s firm in 2012, there was an adjustment period—being together all the time was new and occasionally grating. To prevent them from driving each other crazy, Erma suggested that they work separately when they could, she at the house and Paul at the office. But whether or not they’re physically in the same location, Paul attributes his longevity to Erma joining the firm. Plus, he’s found that people like him work better as part of a couple. “She actually humanized me,” Paul says.

And in an industry like lobbying—where the goal is to get in front of the right people—humanity can be helpful. Lobbying works face-to-face, in handshakes and whispers. Paul and Erma can’t promise that they’ll be able to change a politician’s mind on an issue, but between the two, they have enough connections to get in front of people in high places and make their case.

By coming together, Paul and Erma say that their bond has created a special firm. “We’ve managed to create an entity that is knowledgeable, efficient and known for its follow-through,” Paul says, pausing, “and to some extent, human.”

# Fashionista

Holly Kent on the facts underlying fashion

I was motivated to develop a course on fashion history in part because, as a culture, we devalue fashion a great deal. One of the first exercises we do in the class is to look at the word “fashion.” I ask the students: when they normally see that word, what comes to mind? And, without exception, the reaction is negative. “Superficial,” “silly,” “frivolous.” Why do we think about fashion that way? It’s defined as something negative, I think on balance, in our culture. Traditionally it is associated with women. And it’s associated with gay men and trans people. It’s significant when we see something that has historically meant a lot to marginalized groups being devalued.

The class starts in the colonial era, and we trace a lot of changes over time. Women’s fashions change, radically, in every different era. Men’s fashions change, too, but are not as sustained and dramatic.

When you’re an upper-middle-class woman in the 19th century and you’re wearing a tight corset and the hem of your skirt hits the ground, you’re not going to have the same freedom and mobility as someone who’s not dressed that way.

We get to the era of the flapper. Women are wearing shift dresses and skirts are hitting the knee. Totally liberating—people in the 1920s certainly wanted to see it that way. However, if more of your body is on public display, more of your body is subject to public scrutiny. We see (the rise of) dieting culture. A severe emphasis on thinness as a desired goal becomes culturally dominant.

There’s a difference between clothing and fashion. We wear clothing because it’s cold outside, it’s hot outside, it’s windy, we need to cover ourselves. Fashion can be a great sign of creativity, in terms of: what are you putting on your body? why are you doing that? what’s the silhouette like? what’s the color like? And something we talk a lot about in the class is identity. With what you choose to wear, you’re sending a message.

We’re not immune to the forces of history ourselves. We always like to believe the narrative that we have unlimited opportunity to make choices. But we’re also part of a broader society where there’s a lot of pressure to conform to certain expectations that have a lot to do with race, with gender, with class, with region. That impacts how we dress as well.

—Mary Timmins

Edited and condensed from an interview conducted with Associate Professor of History Holly Kent on May 5. Kent is shown here with recreations of 19th century dresses at Springfield’s Abraham Lincoln Presidential Museum.

# Lesson Plans

