

# Scholar

## A Business With Heart

Nonprofit Management Issue

**Common Dreams  
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Nathaniel Williams  
(MBA '08)

# A Business With Heart

By Leslie Quander Wooldridge, Writer

Dr. Nathaniel Williams (MBA '08) was 12 years old when he decided he wanted to become a CEO. As a ward of the New York City foster care system, Williams' childhood was full of dreams—and little else. The future nonprofit leader vowed to someday be a success and make a difference. Now, as a businessman, author, motivational speaker and radio show host, Williams touches the lives of thousands.

**R**eceiving the rare gift of a bicycle was a defining moment in Dr. Nathaniel “Nat” Williams’ life. Having been shuttled from home to home since the death of his mother, the young Williams was unused to material riches.

“For the moment I was happy,” recalls the 2009 Outstanding Alumni Award winner, sitting in an office lined with plaques and mementos. “But then I realized that if I wasn’t careful, that would be the way my life would be.” That is, he’d be waiting on handouts and short-term happiness.

Williams wanted more for himself and for the nine of his 11 brothers and sisters also in foster care. Today, Williams is the founder and CEO of HumanWorks Affiliates Inc., a cluster of human

service organizations in Bethlehem, Pa. HumanWorks provides youth group homes, foster care, educational training and residential care for adults with disabilities, among other services.

“The agency has really grown,” he says, noting that he started in 1993 with a budget of about \$400,000—a far cry from today’s operating budget of more than \$10 million.

Some of the organizations under the HumanWorks Affiliates umbrella are nonprofits, while others are for-profit, but they all work together harmoniously.

“We tend to think that nonprofits are so different from for-profits,” Williams says. “But, governance-type issues aside, they’re pretty similar.” One example: “You don’t have to fundraise per se in a for-profit, but

you do have to raise venture capital," he notes. "My people make the transition back and forth between the two worlds very comfortably."

### **A Hands-on Chief**

Williams usually arrives at his 9,000-square-foot facility by 6 a.m. He runs the organization according to his "3 Ps." Tasks must be completed promptly, the environment must be pristine and the staff must follow particular methods. Each organization has its own leaders, and Williams grants them broad decision-making authority so he can use his own time efficiently and effectively.

He usually reads e-mails in the early morning and then has meetings throughout the workday—which usually lasts

about 12 hours. And Williams, who oversees residential homes, trainings and about 200 employees, often squeezes site visits into his afternoons.

"Children are in our facilities because their family situations don't allow them to be home," he notes. "If this experience is not one that's enriching for them, or empowering for them, or therapeutic for them, the price tag to society is enormous. It's so important that we monitor what that experience is like."

And so he demands excellent service. Williams drives to each home regularly for detailed in-person inspections and conversation with residents and staff.

HumanWorks Controller Diane Seri sees her boss as a "phenomenal" leader. "If something's going on, he heads



right out and handles it—often himself. It’s amazing that he takes time for that,” she says, noting that Williams has exacting standards for each of the facilities—down to the smallest of details, including refrigerator contents and yard maintenance. “It has to be right,” she says finally. “You would have it right at home.”

Williams notes that the loss of his mother at age 5 had a profound impact. “That left 12 children, including me, without a mom,” he says. “There wasn’t a family member who was willing to take us all in.”

Now his facilities are safe spaces for clients. Young adults typically stay about 12 months before aging out of the system or going to live with relatives. Disabled adults often stay for life.

(like many of the organization’s young charges) and made a surprising confession. He’d been considering suicide, he said, but the CEO’s conversation and having his brother close by had changed his mind.

It’s at this point that Williams stops talking. He gets choked up when recounting the story. “It’s an investment in the future,” he says a few seconds later. “You just don’t know how you will affect someone else’s life.”

With so much to share, Williams has been busy since earning his Strayer University degree. He has published four self-help books, including this year’s “The Affordability Factor: The 4Cs of Change.” In January 2009, he began a weekly Web-based radio show, the “Navigating Your Life Show.” The show aims to empower, enlighten and

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### Time Is a Treasure

Though his workdays are busy, and he spends some evenings teaching at a local Strayer University campus, Williams’ home life is a priority. The married father of seven children—including five under the age of 5, as well as one with autism—feels blessed by his family. “I am a CEO,” he says. “But I’m also a father.”

For that reason, he arrives home most weekdays by 6 or 7 p.m. When asked how he balances his time, Williams has one answer: “You just have to realize that you can’t do it all.”

He values his staff at all levels, including employees who care for clients and those working in offices. “It’s really a team effort. It’s larger than me,” he says.

And while Williams connects with his staff and clients, they enrich his life. He tells the story of one teen, a foster child, who stayed in a group home about eight years ago. Williams talked to the teen during site visits and decided to bring the teen’s brother into the facility. As an adult, that young man followed up with Williams

encourage listeners of all ages and walks of life. Williams also maintains a busy schedule lecturing and presenting motivational workshops.

“A lot of the work I’ve done as an adult has been because of my early experiences,” he explains. Now his organization employs hundreds of people. He’s waiting for his newest book to be published.

“It’s really nice to be able to give back,” he says simply. “It’s been a really good year.” ○

