

## Words Bring Williams, Booklovers Together Candid Discussion Lets NE Residents See Mayor 'Being Real'

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D.C. Mayor Anthony A. Williams is used to tough questions from frustrated citizens at neighborhood meetings, but yesterday he faced a different constituency -- an informal gathering of Northeast Washington booklovers.

Never mind that Williams (D) made everyone wait about 10 minutes in a small room in the Edgewood Terrace apartment complex because he was running late, and never mind that he was a bit overdressed -- light gray suit and bow tie. By the time they closed their books following the one-hour session, those in the discussion group gave the mayor high marks for leading them through a frank, quietly emotional exchange about fatherhood, family traditions and the importance of art and faith.

Gerald Allen, 20, said he was impressed. "He was being real," Allen said.

Williams, paperback in hand, sat down with about 15 men and women at Edgewood Terrace to talk about E. Ethelbert Miller's "Fathering Words: The Making of an African American Writer." The book, the Washington author's account of how he struggled to find his poetic voice and how he coped with the deaths of his brother and father, was selected by officials at the D.C. Public Library as the centerpiece of a citywide reading campaign designed to promote literacy.

The second annual "D.C. We Read" project, modeled after mass read-ins in Chicago, Seattle and other cities, featured a dozen library-sponsored events and discussions, some including the author, throughout May.

But only yesterday's gathering, on the campaign's final day, featured Williams. Some in the group, made up of youth and adult students enrolled in General Educational Development and computer courses at Edgewood Terrace, were skeptical that Williams would make the words on the page come to life.

Robert S. Hill, 21, said he had expected the mayor "to be all preppy," a criticism that has dogged Williams from people in the District's neighborhoods. But it took only a few minutes for Hill and others in the group to change their minds.



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As part of the city's "D.C. We Read" program, Mayor Anthony A. Williams and Edgewood Terrace residents discuss "Fathering Words: The Making of an African American Writer" by Washington writer E. Ethelbert Miller. (Gerald Martineau -- The Washington Post)

Williams rarely glanced down during the session, making eye contact across the room and engaging those in the back, just like a hard-boiled high school teacher who spotted people avoiding the discussion. He talked candidly about his relationship with his own father, a World War II veteran who worked for years at the Post Office to provide for the family and "never took one day off sick leave."

Williams, who was adopted, said he thought now about how his father could have opened up a bit more and been more expressive. "All the things people criticize me for -- definitely all true of him," said Williams, as chuckles broke out.

"He got to actually touch base with the people that he's supposed to represent," said Hill at the end of the gathering, attended by officials with the Community Preservation and Development Corp., which runs the complex. As the mayor shook hands on his way out, Hill handed him a letter that detailed his recent troubles with the Department of Motor Vehicles. "He told me he would look into it and get back to me," Hill said.

Williams appeared shortly after 12:30 p.m. with not a handler in sight and sat down in a chair facing the students. He wanted to know everyone's name, asking of one man who said his name was William, "Do people call you William or Bill?"

After asking people's first impressions of the book, the mayor drew their attention to the second paragraph on Page 7, and read part of it aloud. "Black boys need black fathers," Williams read, beginning a long conversation about fatherhood in the African American community.

At one point, Williams asked the group, "What happened to the fathers?" One woman said they went astray, and a young man seated near Williams said they were scared by the responsibility. The mayor asked how many had good relationships with their fathers, and about three hands went up.

Afterward, the mayor said he was happy with how it went. "We all talk at one another," he said. "This is a good way to talk with one another."

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