

## **Willie Mason Jones, Jr.**

### **Obituary**

Willie Mason Jones, Jr. of Cornelius, NC, was born on May, 22, 1952 in Richmond, VA, and was welcomed into the Kingdom of God on June 4, 2024, after a lifetime of service and struggle for justice and equality. Willie dedicated himself to fulfilling his life's purpose - making a difference in his community and in the world.

Willie was the third child of Matilda Dennis Jones and Willie Mason Jones, Sr. He grew up on a tobacco farm in the segregated South and attended a 2-room elementary school.

Recognizing their son's potential, Willie's parents agreed to allow him, at age 14, to attend an elite prep school in New Hampshire, as part of the A Better Chance (ABC) program. That decision changed the course of Willie's life.

Willie was an organizer and an activist beginning at the age of 12 when he helped to register voters in his small town. At the New Hampton School for Boys, Willie was a student leader and the first Black recipient of the 'Study-Sports-Spirit' award. Willie continued his activism at Brown University, where he co-founded the Organization of United African People and helped lead a successful building takeover to demand more African American faculty and more African American courses at Brown. Later, Willie became part of a national Black Student group. Brown was also where he met his future wife, Pam Jones (yes, she had the same last name!).

Graduating from Brown with a BA in sociology and a minor in urban planning, Willie deferred plans to attend the University of Virginia Law School, and moved to Washington DC to continue his activism – this time as a union organizer. There Willie became a city bus driver and a union steward. Willie and Pam then moved to Detroit, where Willie continued his union work, this time with the UAW, building Ford trucks. With the 1983 Great Recession, Willie was laid off. In 1984, Willie and Pam, along with their two children, Larissa and Derik, made the move to Boston. There Willie worked as an assistant to the Dean of the College of Engineering, excelling at recruiting Black students to the engineering field.

In 1985, an activist friend encouraged Willie to apply for a position at the Greater Boston Development Corporation, later called The Community Builders (TCB). This decision set in motion a 30+ year career and changed the course of Willie's life and the lives of his family.

Willie found his calling at TCB, rising from associate project manager to Senior Vice-President, co-leading TCB's real estate development and helping to expand TCB's work in New England to its current footprint across 30 metro areas in 15 states.

Willie's leadership and vision were instrumental in the production of over 5,000 units of affordable and mixed-use housing. His groundbreaking work led to his induction into the Affordable Housing Finance's Hall of Fame.

A sought-after figure in academia and community service, Willie lectured at graduate planning schools and taught graduate courses in real estate and urban planning before he had a graduate degree himself. Willie also served as a consultant to a number of cities trying to redevelop distressed communities.

In addition to his professional work, Willie was a community leader. He co-led a grassroots community coalition that exposed and fought against redlining Black communities. Through the efforts of the Greater Roxbury Neighborhood Authority, with Willie as board chair, banks were forced to change their policies and many Black families, including Willie's, were finally able to get access to banking services and mortgages. This led to Willie's appointment to the Consumer Advisory Council of the Federal Reserve Bank.

Two of Willie's greatest joys were being a husband and being a father. The love Willie and Pam shared led to over 50 years of faithful marriage and being best friends for life. Willie loved being a father to Larissa and Derik so much that that once they left home, he brought up the idea of adoption to Pam, who readily agreed. Demakis became part of the Jones family at the age of 12. Later, Willie wanted to be a grandfather so much that he researched how to adopt grandchildren! His dream was realized when Larissa gave birth to Leilani in 2008.

Notwithstanding Willie's many professional achievements, he was most proud of the impact that he had on the next generation of affordable housing professionals. Willie served as a mentor to literally hundreds of individuals both nationally and internationally.

Upon retirement in 2014, Willie and Pam moved to Cornelius where Willie earned a Master of Theological Studies from Hood Theological Seminary. In 2016, Willie was ordained and dove deeper into his ministry of affordable housing and community development, primarily assisting churches and nonprofit organizations in their affordable housing efforts throughout Mecklenburg County and beyond.

In 2018, Willie turned his efforts towards Smithville, the largest intact historically African American community in Mecklenburg County. As the inaugural Executive Director of the Smithville Community Coalition (SCC), the nonprofit organization leading the efforts to save Smithville from gentrification and displacement, Willie played a major role in developing the Smithville Revitalization Plan and securing much of the initial funding for the Plan.

Willie was honored for his efforts with the Mayor's Award of Excellence from the Town of Cornelius by Mayor Woody Washam in 2022. In May of 2024, Willie was recognized by Habitat for Humanity of the Charlotte Region with its Lifetime Achievement Award.

In addition to his work with Smithville, Willie was a board member with Unity in Community N. Mecklenburg, the Beloved Community Center in Greensboro, and Crossroads Corporation for Affordable Housing and Community Development in Charlotte. He was also a member of the Jazz Buzz, which nurtured his deep love of music.

Willie will be remembered for his love of family and friends, his commitment to social justice, his profound impact on everyone he met, his deep thinking, his sense of humor, and his

perseverance. He loved riding his bike, cooking, watching sports and The Godfather, watching movies and TV with Pam, listening to jazz and R&B, and playing bid whist.

He leaves to cherish his memory and carry on his legacy: his beloved wife of 50 years, Pam, of NC; his daughter, Larissa Jones of MA; sons, Derik Jones (Rarchelle Wheeler), of MD and Demakis Miller-Jones of MD; granddaughter, Leilani Riles of MA; his sisters, Martha Williamson and Carolyn Jones; brother, Anthony Jones (Crishaon Jones); “brother,” Ronald Anderson; sisters-in-law Marion Jones (all of VA); Patricia Jones of MA and Doreen Godare of NY; and Susan Jones of SC. Willie also leaves a host of cousins, nieces, nephews and other relatives, as well as hundreds of friends and his church families at Charles Street AME Church in Boston and Antioch Missionary Baptist Church in Charlotte. Willie was preceded in death by his parents, Matilda and Willie Jones, Sr., brother, Ronald Jones; and “sister,” Inez Parker.

Rest now, Willie! His God will no doubt tell him “well done, my good and faithful servant!”

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In lieu of flowers, the family encourages people to donate to one or more of the following organizations in memory of Willie:

**Beloved Community Center**

<https://belovedcommunitycenter.org/>

Mailing Address

PO Box 875 Greensboro, NC 27402

**Smithville Community Coalition**

<https://smithvillecommunitycoalition.org>

Mailing Address

PO BOX 1206

Cornelius, NC 28031

**Unity in Community North Mecklenburg**

<https://uic-nmeck.org/>

Mailing Address

99 Jackson St

PO Box 6, Davidson, NC 28036