

From Janitor to First Certified African American Female FAA Controller

Meet BCF member Eleanor Williams! The first job she had at an FAA building was to clean the place. The mother of seven had just moved to Anchorage from her birthplace in Texas and her sister had a janitorial contract for the regional office. From that humble beginning in 1963, she launched a career that made her the first African-American woman certified air traffic controller and the first African-American woman to manage an Air Route Traffic Control Center.



Before her path breaking success in the controller ranks, Williams spent a few years as an FAA secretary. Even getting to that point took major effort. After three months of janitorial service, Williams got a job in a hospital cafeteria. With an eye on better pay and family benefits, she attended free classes for stenography and secretarial work at Anchorage Community College and joined the FAA on March 15, 1965.

In the next few years, the former straight-A student moved slowly up the pay scale, working for Flight Standards and personnel. She was doing prep work to bring on air traffic controllers when she spotted a better opportunity there. "I needed to make more money," Williams said. "The baby sitter was costing me an arm and a leg."

She passed the controller entrance exam and started training at the Anchorage Flight Service Station in 1968, in what she would later learn was an historic first. With two female supervisors and five African-American men at the Anchorage center, Williams did not know until 1980 that she had broken a barrier. A woman doing graduate work discovered the fact and called to tell her.

Early in her career, Williams was already known for competence and compassion — and as a leader. LaVerne Reid, New England Region Airports Division manager, first met Williams in 1970 when Reid, a pregnant young mother, was considering air traffic control.



Williams with former Transportation Secretary Rodney Slater. Photo: Courtesy of Eleanor Williams

manager at Kansas City ARTCC; section supervisor in the central region; assistant air traffic manager in Kansas City; and then in 1994, manager of Cleveland ARTCC, which became the busiest center in the country while she headed it. Along the way, she was also a PATCO union rep.

"Having blazed a trail and cut trees, I was following in her path," Reid said. "She was balancing work and family and sharing those ideas. She had demonstrated success in a field that was predominantly male." Williams told Reid to seriously consider her commitment to work because conflicts with family would be rough. Reid decided to wait a couple of years before jumping in, and the two women worked together for almost five years. In 1976, they formed an Anchorage chapter of the National Federation of Business and Professional Women.

"Over time, Williams was promoted to training controllers in Anchorage; supervisor in San Juan, Puerto Rico; supervisor back in Anchorage; airspace analyst in Atlanta and at headquarters in Washington, D.C.; area

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Before retiring in 1997, Williams held an executive management position for the regional administrator of the Great Lakes Region. BCF honored her at the Fly-Sister-Fly Empowerment Breakfast in Houston, TX in August 2007. One of her daughters, Dana Williams-Robinson, is an FAA controller at Houston Hobby Tower.

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