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Remarks for Shelia Williams Memorial Service, delivered on November 21, 1990

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REMARKS FOR SHELIA WILLIAMS MEMORIAL SERVICENOVEMBER 21, 1990

The winds of death blow constantly over the living, taking lives seemingly at random as leaves fall from a tree. We are never accustomed to dying, but just as we expect the last leaves to fall in late autumn storms, so we accept death as a final event after a long time of living. A sudden gust came and took Shelia Williams, just like a tornado leveling a tree in full leaf, or uprooting a flower in full bloom. Her family was not ready for that. We were not ready for that. The force of life and death so often takes us by surprise, so often finds us unprepared. When the young are struck down it is more poignant, the grief is deeper and sharper because it is unexpected; hope is diminished by the loss of talent, and beauty stolen from the future. We, both young and old, who live still, ask why? And there is no honest answer. We can explain a physical malfunction caused by this or that, but that does not satisfy. We can say that God wills it, but that is presumptuous and doesn't relieve the pain. What then are we to do?

Shelia was a member of a family. I doubt if her mother or father or even sisters will ever be free of that pit of sorrow that seems to settle in the lower stomach and makes you feel sick sometimes. Shelia was a member of a community. At Grand Valley we were part of her community. We are sad, and to a degree in shock, because she was taken so quickly, so irretrievably. We are a little angry, too. We knew what she had to offer because we know what she offered us when she was here. And in dwelling on that we will find

our consolation.

Life is what we know, and the last years of Shelia's life were lived mostly amongst us. We know that she had special qualities. I was so impressed by her common sense. She was a wise person, so unusual for someone in her early twenties. I doubt she was aware of that quality in herself because wisdom comes naturally and often undetected by the people who possess it. Reflecting on her time with us, I believe she made a difference for good because of her opinions and actions on matters of importance to our campus.

Shelia was a courageous person. The courage showed in her self confidence. Young people usually have questions about themselves and the future. But if she had them, they were part of her development. They were not undermining. Her straight thinking gave her confidence in her ideas and in herself. She must come from good roots because she had strength of convictions, not stridently, but firmly set forth. She liked her popularity, but she was not afraid to be unpopular when her thinking required it.

Shelia was a friendly, competent achiever. I know friendly people who don't achieve much. I know competent people who fail to achieve because they are unfriendly. She moved amongst us in her friendly manner, persuasive and smart. When she received the Excellence in Leadership Award, it was only natural that she should win that honor at Grand Valley.

Shelia was a sensitive, insightful person. Listen to her words written this past October:

"Let the History Books Read....

When my time on earth comes to an end

Let the History Books read....

Let them speak of my Faith, My belief in a God unseen

Let them read of my humbleness, Of my mighty roar

Let them know of my kind deeds

And the burden one must tow,

But most of all let them spread the love I've shared."

This is an epitaph all of us could cherish. What a testimony to faith, protest, humility, and all infused with love. At such a young age to write about the end and about belief so eloquently, makes one ask, Did she have a premonition?, though I know of no evidence that she did. Yes, Shelia was a special person.

At a time in America's history when young people of African American origin are especially urged to seek and succeed in colleges and universities, Shelia's life is a beacon. She lights the way for all of you here and for those still to come. But her qualities transcend race. Her life is a beacon for Hispanic students, Native American students, Asian American, and white students. If all students can catch her vision, they will achieve their professional goals, they will find inner strength and confidence, and they will solve community problems with kindness and justice.

The winds of death have carried Shelia Williams away. So that her memory will withstand the gusts that come for all of us, we

will plant a tree in our arboretum, asking her Delta Sigma Theta Sorority sisters to select the tree from the approved list, and suggest words for the identifying plaque. By placing a memorial to Shelia on our campus, we can keep her values and her spirit moving over us like a zephyr on a pleasant spring evening.

August 15, 1965

November 11, 1990

*In Loving Memory
Of*



Sheila Yvonne Williams

Saturday, November 17, 1990
2.00 p.m.

Service To Be Held At
MT. HEBRON MISSIONARY BAPTIST CHURCH
20740 Reimanville
Ferndale, Michigan 48220

Rev. Sampson Matthews
Officiating