



## BERT KING AWARD FOR SERVICE



Each year the H. Naylor Fitzhugh Conference brings our community together for a cross-generational event that informs and empowers through the productive exchange of ideas and experiences. A deeper aim is to galvanize the courage to act on our convictions.

In that spirit, the conference is an occasion for honoring our pioneers and leaders for their professional excellence and exemplary contributions. Celebrating their achievements keeps our history alive and illuminates the path for succeeding generations.

At the 47th annual H. Naylor Fitzhugh Conference, we are proud to present the Bert King Award for Service to

# 2020

Les Williams Jr.  
(MBA 2005)

When **Les Williams Jr. (MBA 2005)** was an MBA student, he tried something new: He and his SA copresident posted a phone number on the HBS website, listing hours when prospective students could dial in with questions about applying to and attending the MBA program. “When people called in, they would say, ‘Oh my God, somebody picked up,’” he recalls. “I would respond, ‘Yes, let’s make this more transparent, because we need to break down any barriers that exist for people who think they can’t get into HBS.’”

Curiosity and the desire to connect with others is a force that has always driven Williams. As a child growing up in Alexandria, Virginia, his mother and father would take him to see the fighter jets at Andrews Air Force Base. When the planes blasted off, executing their improbable trajectories from horizontal to vertical in mere seconds, eight-year-old Les was blown away. *How does that work?*

It’s a question that pushed Williams to the Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology and on to a degree in mechanical engineering at the University of Virginia, where he helped organize a forum on race relations. “We managed to pack an auditorium on a Friday night in the spring of 1998,” he says, noting that the racial makeup was about 80 percent white and 20 percent black. “We made it clear that everyone was an important part of the discussion,” Williams adds. “Often folks are scared to ask questions because they’re afraid of being labeled a racist. But I think it’s important to not shut off another voice or to be scared of somebody who doesn’t look like you. So often we have much more in common than you’d think.”

That desire to connect and clarify guided Williams to HBS. In his first job after college, while working as an engineer at the Ford Motor Company, he found himself at a New Jersey dealership, explaining a technical issue involving the Ford Escape and Mazda Tribute to a field engineer and manager. The field engineer told Williams that his ability to understand complex engineering issues and communicate those details in a way that others could understand was unusual—and that he should capitalize on that talent by going to business school.

Williams cites a number of HBS faculty who influenced his trajectory. “Mike Roberto taught me the importance



of *not* talking—that so often we need to listen, assess, and be timely and thoughtful in what we say,” he recalls.

“Gail McGovern emphasized that money was only one of several factors to consider in charting a career path, and to never forget to place happiness and family first.” Nitin Nohria had a lasting impact on his managerial development as his Leadership and Corporate Accountability professor, Williams adds. And Bharat Anand’s course on corporate strategy continues to resonate: “He told us, ‘Know that every decision you make as an executive will have positive and negative repercussions. You won’t be able to solve for all of them, but realize the impact various outcomes will have, internally and externally.’ I’ve always thought about that—and now risk management is what I do for a living.”

Before coming to that field, however, Williams explored. In his first job out of HBS, he worked as a territory sales leader at IBM, covering a region in and around Atlanta, Georgia. One client, Carter’s, presented a challenge: The CIO of the children’s clothing company was so tired of meeting new IBM reps that he refused to respond to Williams. “Every Friday I drove an hour and ten minutes to their offices in Griffin, Georgia, with a box of doughnuts,” Williams says. After telling the security guard to help himself, he’d ask that the doughnuts be passed on to the IT department. On the third Friday, the security guard told Williams that the IT manager wanted to speak to him.

“We sat down and I was able to understand what they liked, and didn’t like, about IBM,” he says. “I took all of

those notes and worked on areas where there was room for improvement. From there I managed to get a meeting with the CIO, and a year later I was able to meet with the CFO and map out an even larger strategy for how IBM could help Carter's. That success had nothing to do with a spreadsheet and everything to do with people."

After three years at IBM, Williams began looking for new ways to test himself: "I wanted to use my network and my background to do something more entrepreneurial," he says. Although he left in the midst of the 2008 Financial Crisis, Williams knew there would never be an ideal time to try something different. Through a connection with **Eric Vayle (MBA 1993)** he learned about a provider of corporate real estate services called the Staubach Company, and joined the firm as a commercial real estate office broker, working on commission. "Here I am with my fancy engineering degree and Harvard MBA, and I'm rostering buildings to see who is there and how much square footage they have," he says. "I discovered I have more of an entrepreneurial bone in my body than I thought."

Williams worked at Staubach for nearly four years in Atlanta and Washington, DC, until the company (which had been acquired by Jones Lang Lasalle) started to feel a little too big. That prompted Williams to move on to Landon Butler & Company, a real estate investment firm founded by **Landon Butler (MBA 1968)**. "My main focus was marketing and investor relations, working with public employee plan sponsors," he says. "We had a lot of work with unions and state employee pension funds. It was small, about 15 people, and I loved it."

When the firm was acquired, Williams continued to seek smaller, entrepreneurial environments. He found it in LiveSafe, a mobile safety app startup where he worked in marketing and sales before joining Andres Franzetti and **Dante Disparte (PLDA 6, 2009)** as cofounder and chief revenue officer at Risk Cooperative, a strategy, risk, and insurance advisory firm headquartered in DC. "Clients of all sizes bring us in to look at everything from cyber resiliency to employee benefits to political

risk," says Williams. "It all goes back to Bharat Anand and being prepared to address the positive and negative ramifications of any situation."

Williams acknowledges that "insurance" doesn't sound like the most exciting field, at least on the surface. Yet it encompasses a universe of complexity and nuance—and is essential to the everyday workings of commerce. "If your business is an engine, fuel is the capital, and insurance is the oxygen," he says (sounding very much like a former Ford engineer). And sometimes, he adds, insurance's boring rep can be put to good use: "When I'm traveling, and the person next to me asks what I do, I say I'm an insurance broker if I don't feel like talking," he laughs. "But if I do, I tell them I'm a risk manager."

Chances are, Williams rarely uses the "insurance broker" line as an out. He is still very much the person who looks for opportunities to connect, listen, and explain. In addition to hosting a high school intern at Risk Cooperative through the Urban Alliance, he is a founding member of HOPE (Helping Others Prosper Economically) Investor Group, an informal organization of

African American men from the DC area who leverage their connections to invest in and mentor others.

"HBS has put me in environments where most black men have not been," Williams reflects. In that regard, he says, he feels a responsibility to use that experience and understanding to bring people together. In his work with HOPE, that may mean talking to black youth about their mistrust of the police and people who don't look like them. It could also mean talking to a white business partner about the controversy surrounding NFL player Colin Kaepernick's activism, and explaining the nuances behind his decision to kneel during the national anthem.

"I'm in a position where I can have a foot in each of two worlds," he continues. "I can mentor kids by letting them know they need to be prepared to deal with people who live outside their race and outside their neighborhood. And I can explain cultural subtleties that people who are not black may not understand." Making connections, in other words—and connecting others.

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The Bert King Award for Service is presented annually to recognize exemplary contributions to the community, recalling the life and legacy of **Bert King (MBA 1970)**.

The Bert King Foundation was established in 1996 to carry on the lifework of its namesake, who devoted his career to helping others fulfill their promise. A passionate advocate and groundbreaking mentor, Bert King was in the business of opening doors. He is remembered by countless business and community leaders for the pivotal difference he made in their lives and the universally powerful message he taught: When we are fortunate enough to attain success, serving as a resource—lifting as you climb—comes with the territory, and we must be prepared to fulfill that obligation.

How will you exercise your values in your career and throughout your life?

**Past recipients include:**

Heidi Brooks (MBA 2003)  
Rena Clark (MBA 1990)  
Clifford (Jamari) Darden (MBA 1969)  
Ann M. Fudge (MBA 1977)  
Carla Harris (MBA 1987)  
Dennis F. Hightower (MBA 1974)  
Shari Hubert (MBA 2000)  
Nancy Lane (PMD 29, 1975)  
Lillian Lincoln Lambert (MBA 1969)  
Ed Olebe (MBA 1999)  
Linda Oubre (MBA 1984)  
Kenneth A. Powell (MBA 1974)  
Quintin Primo (MBA 1979)  
W. Dwight Raiford (MBA 1978)  
John Rice (MBA 1992)

Argelia Rodriguez (MBA 1984)  
Michele Rogers (MBA 1986)  
Steven Rogers (MBA 1985)  
Ian Rowe (MBA 1993)  
David A. Thomas, H. Naylor Fitzhugh  
Professor of Business Administration  
Gregory A. White (MBA 1990)  
Leroy (Roy) Willis (MBA 1969)

**Civic Commitment Award, conferred 1997 to 2002**

James L. Heskett, UPS Foundation Professor  
of Business Logistics, Emeritus  
Catherine W. LeBlanc (MBA 1980)  
Edwin C. Reed (MBA 1979)  
Jonathan Weaver (MBA 1975)  
Benaree Pratt Wiley (MBA 1974)  
Deborah C. Wright (MBA 1984)

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