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# STREETVIBES \$1

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## Demanding Justice for Immigrants

### Large rally backs reform legislation

By SAMANTHA GROARK  
CONTRIBUTING WRITER



Current U.S. immigration law sometimes splits families.  
Photo by Aimie Willhoite.

More than 1,500 immigrants and activists gathered Jan. 16 at the Hartwell Community Center, chanting, "Si se puede!" and "Yes we can!" The rally was part of a nationally organized campaign supporting an immigration-reform bill in Congress.

The Archdiocese of Cincinnati, United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) Local 75, Su Casa, AMOS project and the Cincinnati Interfaith Workers helped organize bus transportation for immigrants in various neighborhoods and provided child-care services during the rally.

The rally was coordinated with nationwide demonstrations led by Reform Immigration for America to gather support for the Comprehensive Immigration Reform for America's Security and Prosperity Act of 2009. U.S. Rep. Luis Gutierrez (D-Ill) introduced the bill along with members of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus and more than 90 House Democrats in December.

In a press release, Gutierrez said, "This bill is not complicated. ... It keeps families together, but understands we must secure our borders. It keeps people working, but understands the needs of our economy. It gives a pathway to

citizenship, but understands that immigrants must learn English, pay taxes and contribute to their communities."

The immigration-reform movement is in a critical phase because it is now up to the Senate to produce a similar bill, according to Ohio Secretary of State Jennifer Brunner, who is running for the Senate.

"This legislation is important and it will take courage on everyone's part," Brunner told the crowd. "That is why we are here. This is about families, legal or not, tax payers and employers working for a better America."

U.S. Sen. Charles Schumer (D-NY), the Chairman of the Senate Immigration Subcommittee, is tasked with creating a bipartisan bill that would likely include curbing illegal immigration, focusing on family reunification as a key value of the immigration system and initiating the registration of undocumented immigrants as a path toward U.S. citizenship. This path toward citizenship would require a criminal background check, a good employment record and fluency in the English language.

Esther Lopez, director of the Civil Rights and Community Action Department of the UFCW, spoke over the crowd's chanting.

"Today Ohio, like the rest of the United

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## Homecoming of Reggie Williams

### Stop AIDS remembers hometown AIDS activist

By LARRY GROSS  
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

*"I have had a wonderful life – I can't say that enough. If I had to die tomorrow, it would be just fine, as I have lived. You have to have lived to be able to accept your own death. I've had a lot of love and support from my family, my lovers, my friends. I have been lucky enough to have been surrounded by wonderful people and have tried to circumvent those who have not been." — Reggie Williams, 1987*

Eleven years after his death, Reggie Williams, one of this country's first and leading AIDS activists, is coming home.

Stop AIDS will host the Reggie Williams Exhibit from Feb. 7 through March 7, during Black History Month, to raise awareness of HIV in Cincinnati's African-American and gay communities.

The Cincinnati exhibit completes a three-city tour. The first was in Los Angeles in 2001, then in San Francisco in 2002-03. Williams lived in all three cities.

"People can expect a very colorful exhibit of the lifetime of Reggie Williams," says Wolfgang Schreiber, who's bringing the exhibit here. "We're going to have several computers where people can watch videos, but it's mainly photographs that give you an impression of who he was.

"He described himself as the little black boy from the projects, and I want to share what he

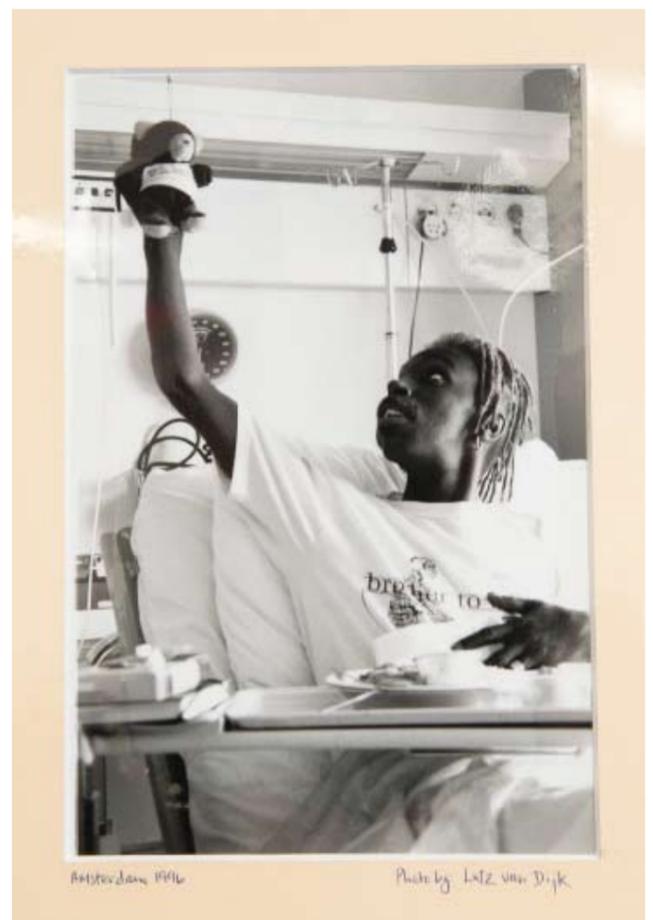
had achieved."

Schreiber is paying homage to his friend and to his late lover, who had AIDS.

Originally from Germany, Schreiber moved to Amsterdam in the early 1980s. He met Williams there in 1992. Williams was in Amsterdam for an AIDS conference, and Schreiber knew immediately that there was a connection.

"There was a group in Amsterdam called Strange Fruit, for immigrant gays and lesbians, and I had always been wanting to go, so I went," Schreiber says. "I'd been dancing my ass off, and he was sitting at the bar when we smiled at each other. I thought maybe he was looking at somebody else."

This encounter eventually led Williams to live in Europe after leaving Cincinnati and spending time in Los Angeles and San Francisco.



Reggie Williams was an AIDS activist until his death in 1999. Photo by Andrew Anderson.

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# Homecoming of Reggie Williams



Wolfgang Schreiber, friend and partner of Reggie Williams organized the exhibit in his memory. Photo by Andrew Anderson.

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## 'A whole new world'

*"I am the second oldest of her nine children. Most of all of us have different fathers. I did not know the identity of my father until I was 16 years old. But my mother always stressed to us that, because we were all born from the same womb, we were all brothers and sisters."—1996*

Williams was born April 29, 1951, at the Cincinnati General Hospital; now known as the University of Cincinnati Medical Center.

Born to Jean Carpenter Williams, Williams spent the first nine years of his life living in Washington Terrace, a large housing project in Walnut Hills. Built after the Great Depression, it was a predominantly black district.

At the age of 6 or 7, Williams felt attracted to boys and liked to do things that were un-boyish – like trying to cook or playing with his sister's dolls. He liked to comb his mother's hair.

"He was very close to his mother," Schreiber says. "She passed away in 1990. She had cancer. They would talk on the phone everyday. He had lost one brother, got shot in L.A., so she had already lost one son. At first, he hesitated telling her about having HIV, but he was honest to her, open to her."

In regard to Williams's sexual preference, Schreiber says, "If you read all he wrote about growing up in Cincinnati in the '50s and '60s, he never had a coming out because in the hood, he was special. Everyone knew that."

In his teens, Williams and some of his friends would spend time downtown in a gay bar called "223," named after the street address. In some of his writings, Williams says at this bar he "stepped into a whole new world," and he came to terms with his sexuality.

Williams graduated from Withrow High School in 1969. Within a few years after graduation, Williams and his partner at the time, Alphonso Freeman, moved from Cincinnati to begin a new life in Los Angeles.

## Ignoring the ban

*"(AIDS) education programs need to be targeted to the black, gay and bisexual communities. We hope that will help them to do what they need to do to save their lives."—1990*

After Williams and his partner moved to Los Angeles, he spent the next 10 years working as a radiology technician at a hospital, but he had dreams of becoming a model or actor. Playgirl featured him as one of the "Guys Next Door" in its June 1979 edition.

Williams separated from Freeman when he met Tim Isbell. The two of them moved to San Francisco in 1981 – the same year an unknown disease was being diagnosed in gay men. In 1986, at the age of 35, Williams tested positive for HIV.

"He talked about having panic attacks," Schreiber says, recalling when Williams would speak about first hearing the news. "Working in the hospital, he had seen the first AIDS cases, so he knew what could happen."

Wanting to get involved in the fight against AIDS, in 1988 Williams became one of the co-founders of the National Task Force on AIDS Prevention, the first nationwide organization advocating for black gay men. He served as its executive director. In 1989, along with five men, he started the San Francisco Gay Men of Color Consortium, supporting HIV treatment and early intervention.

Williams was very open about his illness and became a leading spokesperson on AIDS awareness. He was featured in several articles, including two in the *Wall Street Journal* written by Marilyn Chase. In 1992, he was one of four HIV-positive African-American gay men featured in the film *No Regret* produced by Marion Riggs.

In July 1992, Williams, still living in San Francisco, attended the International Conference on AIDS in Amsterdam, where he met Schreiber.

"When I met Reggie, I had just come back from San Francisco," Schreiber says. "My sister, who lived there, had passed away. I told him I had just recently been in San Francisco. He asked, 'Vacation?' And I said, 'No, a funeral.' In a way, the tone was serious right away."

The AIDS conference had been moved from Harvard to Amsterdam that year because of a law passed by Congress in 1987 that banned HIV-positive persons from entering the United States. Breaking this law could mean ending up in jail but Williams, who moved to Amsterdam in 1994, and Schreiber, who is also HIV-positive, continued to travel to and from the United States.

"I never cared about the travel ban," Schreiber says, "I just traveled. When my sister passed, I just went, 'You know?' I always thought this was so discriminating – it's nonsense, because if I get

# Homecoming of Reggie Williams

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engaged with anybody, I'm going to have safe sex anyway. It never kept me out of the U.S. I just ignored it."

President Obama lifted the travel ban effective Jan. 4 this year.

## A Dutch housewife

*"I live my life as a Dutch housewife with a German lover. Who would have thought two years ago, while I was attending the International AIDS Conference in Amsterdam, that I would someday soon be living here?" —1995*

Because of his declining health, Williams retired from his position as executive director of the National Task Force on AIDS Prevention in February 1994, moving to Amsterdam two months later.

"One of his dreams was to live in Europe," Schreiber says. "In a way, when you look back at it, it was meant to be. I had this American connection; he had this dream to live in Europe."

Legally immigrating as Schreiber's life partner, he could also get health insurance through Schreiber's plan.

"This has been in Holland since the 1980s," Schreiber says. "Same-sex relationships were just the same as the other. It made it all so easy."

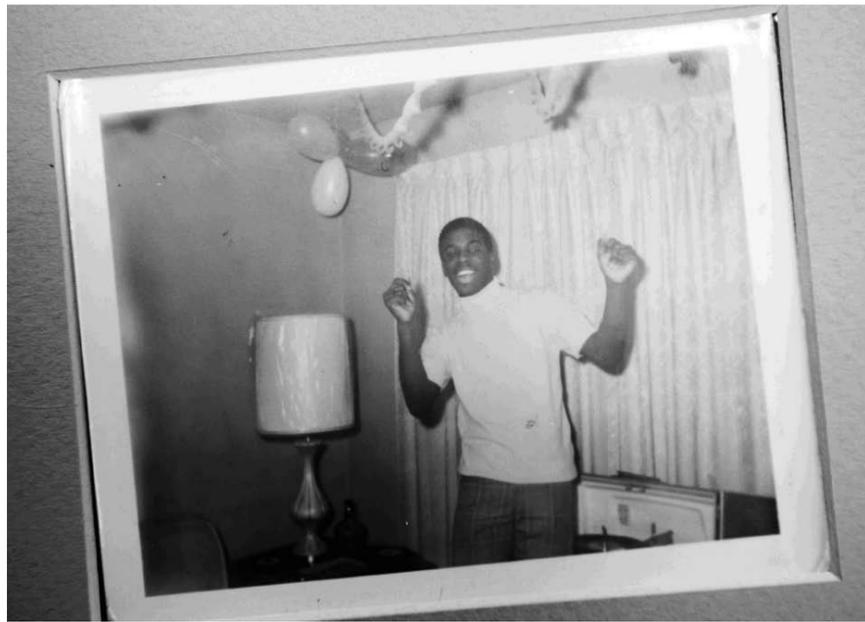
Schreiber says that, for his first year in Amsterdam, Williams suffered from depression.

"When he moved to Amsterdam, he had his feeling of guilt: Why am I still here?" Schreiber says. "He had lost so many, you know, and he felt like, 'I'm still here and I can even move to Europe.'"

In Amsterdam, Williams continued to be an activist against AIDS. He wrote articles for gay publications and became involved with "Strange Fruit: The Real," a group for gays and lesbians of color. They organized safe sex and culture workshops.

During the last years of his life, Williams began dressing more in African clothing.

"He was really into his appearance," Schreiber says. "He had this beautiful walking stick and would walk the streets of Amsterdam like a prince and lots of people knew him. People would stare at him. I followed him once, because I



Reggie Williams as a teenager. Photo by Andrew Anderson.

didn't believe it. You know, Amsterdam is so tolerant and accepting. But it was true. People would just look. In America, people would just say something."

In 1996, Williams was diagnosed with colon cancer. Despite many hospital stays, he and Schreiber continued to travel, visiting France, Germany, Britain and the United States – again ignoring the U.S. travel ban.

When his health allowed it, Williams continued to write articles about AIDS and took part in several conferences in the United States and around the world.

## 'You can be open'

*"So, what is this (AIDS) all about, you may be asking. I guess what all this is about is learning to use a walking stick when you just don't have the strength to walk*

*without one. It is about life turning when you least expect it and learning to accept the shelter of a lover and friends because you can't survive without them. It is about my body beginning a process of giving up the ghost and me learning to live with that." —1995*

In Amsterdam, Williams continued to be an activist against AIDS. He wrote articles for gay publications and became involved with "Strange Fruit: The Real," a group for gays and lesbians of color. They organized safe sex and culture workshops.

On Feb. 7, 1999, at the Academisch Medisch Centrum Hospital in Amsterdam, Williams passed away.

The funeral took place at Westerveld Crematorium. Memorial services were held in Amsterdam, San Francisco and Cincinnati. His ashes were buried at his mother's grave.

Since 2001 Schreiber has been trying to find a home in Cincinnati for his Reggie Williams exhibit. Last year Stop AIDS showed an interest.

"In May, I sent out e-mails again to several organizations and David White at Stop AIDS replied he was interested," Schreiber says. "He's a blessing, because all I needed was

one person who thinks it's interesting, and we're going to do it."

"It was my goal all the time to bring the exhibit here because Cincinnati needs to know about this guy who lived here but moved away and who accomplished so much in his life. He really made an impression. If this exhibit inspires one or two people to say, 'Oh yeah, you can be open about being HIV-positive,' it'll be worth it."

The Reggie Williams Exhibit is sponsored by the Black AIDS Institute ([www.blackaids.org](http://www.blackaids.org)) and will be on display at Stop AIDS ([www.stopaidsincy.org](http://www.stopaidsincy.org)) from Feb. 7 through March 7. Stop AIDS is at 220 Findley St., Over-the-Rhine. Admission is free. For more information about Williams, visit [reggiwilliams.net](http://reggiwilliams.net).

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