

Gwendolyn Williams' life mattered



JOHN W. FOUNTAIN

author@johnwfountain.com | @JohnWFountain

WITH SAMANTHA LATSON

Gwendolyn Williams was a protector, a loyal big sister with a "heart of gold," true-blue. She was Rosa Mae Pritchett's firstborn. No matter how old she got, Gwen was always her baby girl.

Gwen's sturdy light-caramel arms could cradle a younger sibling and also hold danger at bay. She was strong, a lover, not a fighter — unless she had to be. Gwen knew the streets. Growing up in Chicago in the '60s and '70s had taught her that her little sisters and brothers needed a guardian angel.

Still, Gwen was a peace, love and Soul Train child. She harbored no hate. The hateful act inflicted upon her body and soul decades later, however, would leave a lasting scar upon her family who, many years later, still hopes for justice for Gwen. Some day ...

Gwen was the eldest of Rosa Pritchett's six children, born Oct. 6, 1957, in the midst of red-hot Southern segregation in Montgomery, Alabama.

"She was a loving person. You



Gwendolyn Williams PROVIDED

never heard anything mean come out of her mouth. Never ever," her sister Audrey Blinstrup, 53, recalled.

She was also a "tough cookie." Even standing at only 5'4" and petite, with pretty, brown eyes.

Like the time when her younger sisters complained that a group of girls, likely jealous, were throwing spitballs at them during service at the 39th Street Church of Christ. "Gwen said, 'Don't worry, I'll take care of this,'" her sister Rosa Lee

Pritchett, now 57, recalled. The spitballs suddenly ceased.

Gwen loved to dance. Her face lit up as the music and rhythms coursed through her body and over her gentle soul. She also liked to cook: collard greens, homemade cornbread, southern cuisine, chitterlings. The way she pulled off the fat and rinsed the chitterlings of all foreign matter was next to godliness.

Church on Sundays and several times during the week was the family's routine. She was well-versed in Bible teachings but also had been baptized in the unforgiving lessons of the streets. She had learned that the streets could be consuming, cold, cruel. That the streets could inflict lasting scars. Dissolve innocence like Alka-Seltzer tablets in hot water. Entrap young women in relentless swirling winds.

So Gwen instructed her sisters: "I need you to stay straight." She wanted them to go to college, to grow up to be successful, to "have more."

And they did.

There was, however, no protection for Gwen from Chi-Town's merciless streets.

On Wednesday, June 12, 2002, Gwen was found strangled and lifeless, covered in blood. Her body had been discarded behind a Dollar Store in the 4800 block of North Sheridan Road. Police officials reported that Gwen's body was half-

dressed and that she had drugs and alcohol in her system. Investigators also found semen and a stranger's skin beneath her nails — evidence that Gwen — the fighter — had put up a fight. She was 44.

And she is among 51 mostly African American women murdered in Chicago since 2001 by at least one possible serial killer, according to the Murder Accountability Project.

Gwen was not a prostitute. And even if any of the 51 women were, none of them deserved to be murdered.

We believe their lives mattered. We believe their killers must be brought to justice. We believe Chicago owes at least that much to these slain daughters whose lives we will not forget.

Among them is Gwendolyn Williams. She now lies buried in a South Side cemetery, a few feet from her mother, in a royal blue dress. Gwen the protector. A loyal big sister with a "heart of gold," loving, true-blue. Forever Rosa Mae Pritchett's baby girl.

And unforgotten.

Samantha Latson is a journalism student at Roosevelt University, where John Fountain led a yearlong reporting project titled "Unforgotten: The Untold Story of Murdered Chicago Women." She co-wrote and reported a story on Gwendolyn Williams. To read more, visit unforgotten51.com.