Leslie Brown
Professor of History
December 2, 1954 – August 5, 2016

A Memorial Gathering
Main Stage, Class of ’62 Center for Theatre and Dance
Saturday, September 17, 2016
4:00 p.m.
Reception - After this gathering, all are invited next door to the Faculty House, where our remembrances of Leslie will continue at a reception hosted by the Dean of the Faculty and the Department of History. The always-elegant fare provided by Dining Services caterers will be supplemented by additional items that were among Leslie's favorite foods and to which, early in her life, she had a professional relationship - at McDonald's.

Reflections - There is a guest book available, here at the '62 Center and at the Faculty House, in which you're encouraged to sign your name, and inscribe a reflection on Leslie's life and work if you like. There will also be an opportunity to record a memory or story on video in a side room at the Faculty House. These collections of reflections will be added to the College Archives - as befits the legacy of a scholar of oral history.

Remembering Daring Change - In 2013, while marking the fiftieth anniversary of a transformative era under Williams’ 11th President, Jack Sawyer, the College recorded a series of short talks on the theme, Daring Change: Imagining Williams' Future. Leslie Brown gave one of the most memorable of those talks - "Embracing Conflict and Change." Her talk can be viewed in the downstairs Lounge at the Faculty House throughout the reception. It's also available online: http://www.williams.edu/daring-change/.

Leslie Brown died of leukemia in Boston on August 5 surrounded by loving friends and her long term partner Annie Valk. Leslie was a professor of History at Williams College. She was born in New York City and raised in Albany, New York. She was 61 years old.

She was a 1977 graduate of Tufts University, and received her Ph.D. from Duke University in 1997. In the interim she worked in retail, as a bartender, as a manager at McDonald's, and as an administrator at Skidmore College, where she first decided to become a teacher. After graduate school she taught at Duke, at The University of Missouri-St. Louis, and at Washington University in St. Louis before coming to Williams in 2008. There she taught a range of history courses on race, gender, and documentary studies. Her book, Upbuilding Black Durham: Gender, Class and Black Community Development in the Jim Crow South, won the Frederick Jackson Turner prize issued by the Organization of American Historians for the best book in American History by a first time author. She and Anne Valk, her life partner, co-authored Living with Jim Crow: African American Women and Memories of the Jim Crow South in 2010 which won the Oral History Association’s Biennial Book Award. In 2014, she published African American Voices from Emancipation to the Present. At the time of her death she was completing a forthcoming edited volume, U.S. Women’s History: Untangling the Threads of Sisterhood, with Anne Valk and Jacqueline Castledine, and working on a project on gender and migration.

Born in 1954, the year of the Supreme Court’s landmark school desegregation decision, Brown v. the Board of Education, Leslie’s teaching, scholarship and activism were attuned to the lives of ordinary African Americans and women. She was committed to showing her students from all backgrounds the significance of gender and race in American History. Leslie was a wonderful hostess, opening her home, her office, and her heart to students and friends during good times and bad. But as much as she loved good food, conversation, basketball, and debate, her true passion was in more solitary pursuits, her gardening, and her time in archives, where she found and collected the stories of people long forgotten.

Her passion for inclusion, fairness, and intellectual rigor changed the way Williams College looks at everything from student life to its role in the wider world. Although she worked there for less than a decade, she made the College a better place. Her friends, students and colleagues are heartbroken. Leslie is survived by Annie Valk and her family.
Order of Service

Gathering Words

Tributes and Remembrances

Colleagues in scholarship: Nancy Hewitt,
Professor Emerita of History and Women's & Gender Studies, Rutgers University

Alex Byrd
Associate Professor of History, Rice University

Song

Gina Coleman, ’90, Principal, Herberg Middle School, Pittsfield
former Associate Dean, Williams College

Tributes and Remembrances

Students: Don Polite ‘13
Giselle Lynch ‘13
Kevin Walsh ‘17
Tayana Fincher ‘17

Dining Services Staff: Jerry Byers, Associate Manager, Paresky Center
Beverly Delisle, Snack Bar Attendant
Tricia Koch, Snack Bar Attendant,
Laurie Wiles, Snack Bar Day Supervisor

Performance Basketball/Matrix Remix - Sankofa

Tributes and Remembrances

Faculty colleagues: Gretchen Long
Professor of History & Director of the Williams-Exeter Programme at Oxford University

Ari Solomon (speaking on behalf of Sarah Bolton,
former Professor of Physics and Dean of the College)

Charles Dew
Ephraim Williams Professor of American History

Moments of Silence

Songs Freedom Medley

Rhon Manigault-Bryant,
Associate Dean of the Faculty, Associate Professor of Africana Studies & Faculty Affiliate in Religion

Closing Words
Leslie and I met 26 years ago at the start-of-the-year picnic for graduate students in Duke's history department. Leslie was launching her first year in the Ph.D. program and I was returning for my second year. We walked home from the picnic in deep conversation about our lives before Duke and our hopes for courses and careers. That year we fell in love as we sat side-by-side in our graduate seminars and read history monographs late into the night. Soon we worked together to coordinate a major oral history project and forged our other partnership as scholars and colleagues.

The conversations and collaborations that started in 1990 continued for more than two decades, during which we explored the past, made a home, completed our degrees and established our careers, and planned our future. Our lives together always intertwined the professional and the personal (and usually the political as well). Over time we supported each other as we taught, wrote books and articles, together and individually, and cooked up thousands of meals and numerous schemes and projects. Struggling through the challenges of being a dual-academic couple, we moved from Durham, NC to St. Louis, MO to Providence, RI and finally to Williamstown. Each place we lived, friends, colleagues and family enriched our lives and filled our home with cheer.

Leslie possessed a beautiful smile and a ready laugh, a keen wit and deep insight, a playful spirit and a strong will. She was tender-hearted but never backed down from a fight. She loved babies, enjoyed children, and disdained fools. As a scholar, student, teacher, colleague, friend, mentor, aunt, loyal customer, and neighbor she touched many people's lives. At Williams Leslie found a place where she felt pride in her students and satisfaction at her ability to make a difference; she also found many beloved friends. I am heartbroken by the passing of Leslie, a.k.a. Doc, but grateful to be part of such a loving community during such a sad time.

Annie Valk
Associate Director for Public Humanities and Lecturer in History
Selections from Leslie Brown’s writings

"On the black side of the veil lay a place that few white people knew existed and still fewer tried to understand but that all African Americans recognized even if they did not wholly dwell within it. Here, in the chaos of emancipation, black folk survived on mutual aid, wit, and hard work. They embraced themselves as whole beings, not just as citizens - and not just as family, but as community. They founded institutions, wove together a national and international network for association, and fashioned an astute culture of oppositional politics. All the more remarkable, black people of African descent intentionally created a future. Proud that the first generation born in freedom had survived to come of age at the turn of the century, they recognized this as an enormous achievement by people whose freedom was undergoing persistent attack. Subsequently, each generation engaged in the work of racial destiny, not just as a collective act of surviving and of thriving in the face of racism but also as the individual and cooperative work of upbuilding for themselves,” p. 10

Upbuilding Black Durham: Gender, Class, and Black Community Development in the Jim Crow South (University of North Carolina Press, 2008)


Excerpt from an interview that appeared in “Looking at Yesterday, Today: How Does Williams History Inform Who We Are and Who We Mean To Be?” Williams Magazine 110 (Summer 2016), p. 26.

“Williams has been involved in major political moments that have been part of important discussions on campus. Students today shouldn’t feel like they can’t have those discussions. It’s the tradition of the college to have them. That’s how students learn. Perceptions change. Teaching changes. Pedagogy changes. We’re constantly seeking new knowledge, and new knowledge changes what we can present. We’re not teaching now what we would have in the 1940s. That’s important for students, alumni and faculty themselves to understand. When knowledge changes, our conclusions have to change. Staying with tradition—‘This is the way it was, and we should leave it’—doesn’t make sense. It wouldn’t be the Williams way, and it certainly wouldn’t be an engaging intellectual enterprise either.”

As part of the Alice Walker Project, a series of campus art installations that seek to give self-identifying women of color spaces to see themselves reflected on campus and agency over how they are depicted in those spaces, Raquel (Rocky) Douglas ´19, asked Leslie in March, 2016 to answer a few questions. This project will be installed in November, during homecoming, and Leslie photo will be on display in Mission. Here are some of Leslie’s answers.

What brought you to Williams? What has your experience here been like?
“I applied and was hired for an assistant professorship in African American history. Accepted Williams’ job offer over others because of its size and its focus on the part of academics I like best, teaching, AND still get support for
my scholarly projects. My experience has been mixed, but mostly good, and in most ways better than anyplace else or any institution where I have worked. I feel mostly respected for my scholarship and teaching by both my students and colleagues. I love my department, which is not just cordial, but engaging and friendly. It's a rare dynamic. I have enjoyed working and being with students in and out of the classroom. Sometimes the hostility or wariness or skepticism is palpable, stressful, and discouraging. And trying to be an active change agent around issues of race especially is downright frustrating. But I have learned to expect struggle and resistance. It helps to be prepared.”

What do you think it means to be a woman of color here at Williams?
“It is to be hyper-visible and invisible at the same time. As one of few faculty of color, I get asked to do a lot of programming, also mentoring and teaching. But there are times when my presence seems to make no difference. I am serious about my connections with students, but it also means doing more labor than most of my other colleagues. It means facing skepticism from white male (and women) students, but much of that work is invisible. In the class, especially because I teach U. S. history (and not as names, dates, places, and events, or presidents and the military tactics of war), it means bearing insults with quiet dignity.

It means being therapist and advisor to a lot of people who are also people of color, as well as people who are not people of color; people who know people of color, or who want to know people of color; people who don't like people of color; and people who do not want to talk about race or gender or sexuality at all. It means bearing witness to the experiences of students of color at Williams, and sometimes intervening.

It means generating a public persona, which also maintains my integrity. But it also means that community gets made and that I have community or communities. I feel a connection to other women of color among the faculty and staff and among the students; I have diverse and overlapping groups of friends and colleagues from all sorts, whose company I enjoy and to whom I am committed as a friend.”

If you could describe yourself in an anecdote, quote, sentence or even a few words, what would those be?
“A student at another institution once asked, "All people have free will; so if slaves didn't want to be slaves, why didn't they leave the plantations?" I stared at him for several moments and finally said, "That is either the best or the stupidest question I have ever heard." And I ended class. At the next class meeting I turned back to the question, and asked a student to come up to the front of the class. I put my finger next to his forehead, like a gun, as said "OK. You have the free will to leave this classroom. I have a gun aimed at Kevin's head and I'll shoot him if you leave. Now, how much free will do you have now?"

What text would you like to appear in your photo?
"In the struggle lies the joy" — Maya Angelou

or

“When I dare to be powerful, to use my strength in the service of my vision, then it becomes less and less important whether I am afraid. — Audre Lorde

or

"Don't hold on to shit”—Leslie Brown

Do you have anything else that you would like to add?
I love my job. I love my work. I don't let the affronts prevent me from doing my work, so that I can continue loving my job.

Where else have you worked?
McDonald's, CVS, Skidmore College, Duke University; North Carolina State University; University of Missouri, St. Louis; Washington University St. Louis, Williams College
Tributes from other friends and colleagues

I'll remember Leslie Brown as a person of great commitment—to the study of history, to social justice, to her students, to her friends, and to her partner Annie. Leslie was a passionate advocate for the necessity of hands-on historical work and its potential to transform the possibilities for transforming our understanding of the present and the future; whether designing courses for Williams, offering workshops for secondary school teachers or serving the profession, Leslie devised multiple ways to expand the scope and relevance of the practice of historical research for assessing American cultures, with particular attention to the fraught and ongoing complexities of race as it intersects with all other facets of individual and collective identities. Over many evenings spent thinking about the structures and habits of Williams, I witnessed Leslie's combination of impatience with injustice and dedication to being an agent of change, here and in the broader world. Leslie urged me to experiment and dare. As dedicated as all faculty members at Williams College are to the liberal arts, Leslie exceed most of us in creating tailored, additional, unofficial courses for groups of students, welcoming them into her home and supporting them in all aspects of their lives. She was an inspiring and often hilarious friend and conversation partner. She is gone far too soon.

Denise Buell, Dean of the Faculty, Cluett Professor of Religion
Williams College

Leslie went to graduate school and came to Williams having had life experiences that those of us who went from college to graduate school to Williams didn't have. Those life experiences were only part of what made Leslie special of course, but they did set her apart from many other Williams faculty members. Partially as a result of those experiences perhaps, history really mattered to Leslie. History was not only some academic exercise. It was about real people struggling to upbuild themselves, their families, and their communities. In her scholarship and in her teaching, Leslie made clear to her readers and perhaps most especially to her students that history is about real people living real lives and that as a result history really matters.

Thomas A. Kohut, Chair, Department of History Sue and Edgar Wachenheim III Professor of History
Williams College

I have loved and admired Leslie Brown since we first met in 2009 in the History Department at Williams College. As a historian, teacher, mentor, and friend she was a force to be reckoned with. There are literally no words to express the depth of my sadness at her passing; instead, I share two memories of Leslie’s endless generosity to celebrate her incredible life. Early on during my first years as an Assistant Professor, Leslie volunteered to read a draft of my "manuscript" (before it was even a manuscript") and then returned the whole thing with EVERY page marked up in pencil. In her overall comments, which she had scribbled on the back of an old syllabus, she told me I had the potential to tell a great story, but that I wasn’t doing it yet. Leslie advised, “Write this book for your students. What is the piece of new knowledge/new interpretation do you want to pass on to them?” She wasn’t a Cubanist, she wasn’t even my official mentor, and there was no reason for her to take that time to help a new Assistant Professor. But, she did it because she wanted me to succeed and because she believed in the power of linking teaching and scholarship to create knowledge. I still have the scraps of paper that she gave me along with the marked up manuscript. Looking back at it now, I realize how right she was and how much her advice impacted my book revisions.

But, Leslie’s generosity didn’t only extend to junior faculty members in her department—she dedicated time, energy, and personal finances to mentoring and supporting students at Williams College. Flashback to May during one of our first years at the college as Williamstown prepared for the influx of families, friends, and alumni attending the annual commencement ceremony. I remember that Leslie called me the night before graduation concerned that African American families coming into town for the big celebration didn’t have anywhere to gather, fellowship, and honor their graduates. I assume one of her students had shared with her their dismay over the prices and limited spacing in Williamstown’s restaurants. I honestly don’t know what led to this phone call, but I do know the result. In less than 48 hours, Leslie had brought food and commissioned a close friend from eastern
Massachusetts, “Chef,” to drive to Williamstown and prepare a meal for any family that didn’t have dinner reservations after graduation. Tracey, a small group of colleagues, and I helped decorate the fellowship hall in the First Congregational Church, while Leslie and Chef cooked a southern style dinner. Together, we all spread the word to students about the event. It was huge success because Leslie made it so. She gave her students and their families a special graduation memory that they will never forget because she saw the need and acted. Hopefully, going forward we can all act when we see a need and live up the standards of generosity and friendship set by Dr. Leslie Brown.

**Devyn Spence Benson, Assistant Professor of Africana and Latin American Studies**  
Davidson College

I recently spoke with a 2013 graduate who told me that her favorite class at Williams was one taught by Leslie. This student was not a history major but loved Leslie’s class because of the particular ways in which it challenged her. Leslie posed provocative questions of the class and demanded deep and courageous responses from her students. This student was shy and lived in fear of being called on because she admired Leslie so much and wanted so badly to live up to her standards. When finally she ventured into Leslie’s office, she realized that in addition to being an exacting teacher, Leslie was a warm and caring person who took the development of her students seriously and had great advice to offer. She eventually asked Leslie for a letter of recommendation for graduate school and is now well on her way to earning a PhD in art history.

It’s no surprise that with Leslie as their role model, all three of the Mellon Mays and Allison Davis fellows she mentored are currently enrolled in PhD programs. They learned from Leslie how to conduct rigorous historical research, how to give public talks and prepare articles for publication, and how to use their scholarly voices to tell stories that have been marginalized. They sometime butted heads with Leslie because she was strong-minded and taught them to be the same, but there was a mutual respect and affection that transcended these minor conflicts. She was an extraordinary mentor.

Leslie’s commitment to making the Williams experience excellent for all students led her to take on all sorts of extra responsibilities. As former director Ferentz Lafargue noted, “Leslie was an unequivocal supporter of the Davis Center throughout her tenure at the college. Whether it was serving on the BSU advisory board or as the keynote speaker or a panelist at countless events, Leslie was incredibly generous with her time. Her presence reverberates in the center's library, to which she often donated books, and her ideas about engaged scholarship, and the merging of history with activism and advocacy will continue echoing through a variety of the center's offerings for years to come.”

We will miss Leslie terribly. At the same time, we are truly grateful for the legacy she leaves in her own work and in her students.

**Molly Magavern, Director of Special Academic Programs**  
Williams College

On the first day of her methodology course, Professor Brown changed the way I talk. “Don’t use the passive voice,” she told the class. “Use the active voice. Assign responsibility. It’s not: black people were enslaved. It’s: white people enslaved black people.” As a white student, I squirmed – but I had to admit that she was right. Leslie Brown had no patience for lies, even the easiest lie of all: that of omission. Of all the lessons I learned from her, that was the most important: an uncompromising love of truth, and a stubborn belief that speaking truth aloud – changing the way we talk – can also change the world.

**Benjamin Williams**  
Williams College, Class of 2018
Leslie’s laugh stays with me. Her humor came in many forms--dry, monotone zingers she stealthily released on the exhale at the end of sentences, or the warm, knowing eyebrow cocked at you as she was poking fun. But most of all, her laugh is what I hear when I feel Leslie with me. Her laugh mirrored her work and her life--bold yet warm, cutting but deeply rooted, and unique but quickly joined by others. Her laugh expressed her love and joy for those close to her, and also her deep power. In the face of the weight of history, she always had her laugh--her stubborn engagement with the world as it was, always striving for what could be. I heard this laugh in all the places that she taught me, whether in Hollander and in Griffin, at Renee’s over brunch, or out on the quad. I hear it with me still, as she still teaches me, as she does to so many. For this--her scholarship, her mentorship, and her laugh--I am grateful beyond words.

Sam Chapin, Teacher of History, Deerfield Academy
Williams College, Class of 2015

I walked onto Skidmore campus summer of 1989. A wave of emotions filled my heart as my mother and future in-laws drove away. I met Candace and other wonderful students whose warm smile and encouraging words made me feel I made a good choice. And there she was...Ms. Leslie Brown. She did not have to say much...her eyes spoke to me...such depth, such passion, and such grace. I knew that I was going to be okay regardless of the challenges that I would face -- both academically and socially. Ms. Leslie Brown and the entire HEOP Family would become my new family. I remember when she told the group, "Look to your left and look to your right." Suddenly, I felt it was everyone's responsibility to help each other make it...and we pushed each other like brothers and sisters. Many may not know this but Ms. Leslie Brown saved me from leaving college for the military. She sat me down in her office and gave me a piece of her mind and heart. I was transformed. Thank you, Ms. Leslie Brown, for helping me see my worth. Thanks to you and our HEOP Family for believing in me and my classmates: En sus manos y en nuestros corazones. Te recordaremos. Amen.

Evelyn Montanez, Spanish Teacher & International Study Away Coordinator, St. Thomas School, Medina, Washington
Skidmore College, Class of 1993

When I think of Professor Brown, I immediately remember the first time I went to her office hours. I took Professor Brown’s History 201 course my second semester of college. For those of you who have had the honor of visiting the second floor of Hollander, I’m sure you can agree that her office was not hard to miss. Posted right in front of her door was a blue review sheet from one of her students. The sheet said something along the lines of, “As a white student, I felt uncomfortable in your class”. Most would read this and wonder why a professor would specifically choose that review to showcase. However, as the semester moved on, I gradually began to understand why she decided to keep that review.

Professor Brown was a prolific writer, true historian, and one hell of a teacher. She openly invited students to disagree with her in class and provoked us to question the so-called history we’d been taught our whole lives. This approach created some conflict between her and a few students, but sparked some of the most rewarding discussions I have ever taken a part of. Her classes were not meant to be a passive experience, but one where you felt every range of emotion from anger to confusion to hope. So yes, I get why she kept that review. It showed that she was willing to have those harder discussions with students, and let know one’s predisposition of a topic prevent her from making her case and point.

Although my time with Professor Brown was brief, it has proven to be an invaluable part of my time on the Williams campus. What I would have found was a mentor and a confidant. I am so thankful for the opportunity to have had her be a presence in my life, and I know her presence will be most dearly missed by those closest to her. May her legacy encourage us to question the status quo.

Chrisleine Temple
Williams College, Class of 2019
I vividly recall Tom Kohut animatedly telling me about Leslie Brown, the outstanding new professor who would soon join the History Department. Not long thereafter, I listened as Leslie read from *Upbuilding Black Durham* at Water Street Books. That now seems a lifetime ago.

Leslie mattered. She was unfailingly generous to me, to my family, and to Williams – with love (unbidden), books (gifts and written), ideas (intelligent and impactful), and mentoring (of “students” of all ages and stages, and even of institutions). She brought Annie into our hearts and lives. Leslie and I shared students and strategies, on stage and behind the scenes. Her generous teaching, well beyond the classroom and office, embraced, challenged, and propelled me, and us. Often at great cost to herself, yet to our benefit, Leslie educated: about race, about history, about access to educational excellence, and their continuing intersections. I am so grateful for the wise and resonant synergies of her scholarship, her teaching, her her service, and her generosity. She lives on.

**Wendy Raymond, VP for Academic Affairs and Dean of Faculty**
Davidson College

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Knowing and working with Leslie Brown was one of the great good fortunes of my life, for which I will be forever grateful. Writing this has been difficult, mostly because it drives home that Professor Brown is really gone. But as I sit in front of my computer screen, trying to find the right words, I can hear her voice in my head, once more dryly advising me to “stop obsessing.” And, as usual, she is right. What I really want to say is simple: I am who I am and I am where I am because Professor Brown invested in me. The time, care, support, and occasional tough love that she gave me shaped my Williams experience and my post-college trajectory.

Leslie Brown was a brilliant scholar and educator, but above all I’ll remember her as a person who was good to her very core. Her dedication to her students was unparalleled. Sometimes the height of her expectations terrified me, as it seemed impossible to live up to them. She genuinely believed that we were all far better than we knew—and from her confidence was born our own. I am not yet the person Professor Brown saw in me, and perhaps I never will be. But as she taught us, in order for things to change, you have to do something differently today than you did yesterday. And because of her, I try to remember to do something differently every day, to take one more step in becoming that person.

The greatest tribute we can pay to Professor Brown is to try to be a little more like her: to see the best in others, as she saw the best in us, and to care enough to help them reach their potential.

**Anne Kerth**
Williams College, Class of 2014
Ph.D. candidate in History, Princeton University

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I am saddened to learn that such a phenomenal woman has passed on. Listening to my peers brings tears to my eyes. Tears of joy because of her life and yet more tears because I cannot recall such moments with her… my children often laugh because many things escape my overloaded memory. Still, I promise, the power I feel in the presence of great women and the impartation of determination, courage and strength has--and never is--forgotten. This was given to me by Leslie, and for years I tried to locate her, but no one I asked seemed to know where she was. There was much I wanted to ask, to say, to this pillar of hope for underserved minorities. I salute her, for a token of the greatness I have passed on to others has come through my Leslie encounter. Live on Leslie. You may have left the arena, but you have equipped many gladiators to continue the journey.

**Thais Sherell (Peaches), Special Education Teacher, Orange Avenue School, Cranford, NJ & President of N-Spired Productions and Services**
Skidmore College, Class of 1993
Directly and indirectly, I owe my college success and professional trajectory to both Leslie Brown and Susan Layden. May Leslie rest in peace and all who were touched or inspired by her continue to work tirelessly to keep her legacy moving forward.

Victor Manuel Gonzalez, Director, CEA Study Abroad, Seville, Spain
Skidmore College, Class of 1993

Not a day goes by that I don’t think about Leslie Brown. I think about the way she used to stand-up in class, strong, and with her characteristic gravitas, take us on spellbinding journeys through the Jim Crow South or the Civil Rights period. She was a masterful storyteller. But perhaps her most lasting legacy will be her engagement with us, her students. I bear witness to countless of times when, during Socratic debate, her straight-forward, short, even simple questions fundamentally challenged the core of some of our arguments. Leslie was unafraid to call us out, to tell us when we were wrong and scoff at absurdity. Therefore, you believed her when she called you “so smart!” or an “intellectual powerhouse.” Those are words that stay with you. Because by doing so, she gave so many of us a rare sense of belonging at Williams College and any other place we ever come across like it thereafter.

Today, I find comfort in her warmth, in all those big hugs she reciprocated and in the, “No. I love you more!” back-and-forths we had after our long office hours. I will miss how our conversations oscillated from the trivial (read: petty) to the consequential. I will miss the way she laughed with GUSTO! Today and always, I will speak Leslie Brown’s name.

Oscar Calzada, Research scientist, Emory School of Medicine
Williams College, Class of 2012

“Where can students of color get intellectual validation that does not require them to so fully assimilate that they lose the best of themselves, their families, and their cultures.” Leslie Brown

On the wall of my new office, I have the above quote to remind me to center the whole lives of students in my work. In everything she did Leslie reminded me that students are the core of what we do in higher education and that not all students have the same access to resources on and off campus. She challenged me to think more deeply about how class, race, gender, and sexuality impact our individual and communal lives. She encouraged all of us to bring our whole selves into a space and to not lose who we are in the process. What I learned from her about student-centered work is at the core of my work today.

I might ask her to speak about a current event and she would school the audience in an hour-long history lesson speaking nothing of the current moment, though you left understanding the present better than ever. Leslie would stop and sit with me on the porch of Jenness and though she often just listened and laughed at me, she helped me think through the way that I did my life work. We didn't always agree and she didn’t usually have answers to the direct problem I was trying to address but she always helped me see the root of the issue at hand. I honestly feel at a loss without her working alongside me in the struggle for justice but I find comfort knowing that we all carry on the lessons she taught us.

Justin Adkins, Associate Dean of Students and Director of the IDEAS Center, Allegheny College

The first time I met Leslie Brown was at the thesis defense of a star history major. This student had written about slave owners in the years leading to the American Civil War, and the title of the thesis began with the words “Southern Masculinity.” After the necessary round of compliments around the table, specifically in praise of the writer’s beautiful prose, Leslie, in a voice at once casual but formidable, asked the question that would silence the room: So, are you saying that male slaves are not to be considered men?
The fact that Leslie had been with us for less than a year at this point – a fact that only dawns upon me now – serves to magnify her courage and ethical convictions. There she was, a newcomer in an unfamiliar institution, and yet she was not afraid to immediately challenge Williams to be a better place. To shake us out of our complacency, no matter how distressing; to urge us to confront the uncomfortable truths that afflict the world in which we all live, even if they may seem far away from our idyllic but isolated “Purple Bubble.”

A couple of years later, after I’d taken the only two history courses of my college career with Leslie, I asked her: Don’t you get so tired sometimes? She knew exactly what I meant, which was one of the things I loved most about her. Aside from her eye-opening lessons about the history of civil rights in the US and the politics of racial identity, which were invaluable to all, Leslie’s sheer presence was especially comforting to those of us who saw ourselves in her in any number of ways. We could ask her difficult questions about how she managed to survive and thrive in a difficult world, because she was our hope that we could, in the end, do the same. To my question, Leslie replied, Of course I get tired. And when I do, I take a little trip somewhere. I get away.

And though it was unsaid, the underlying message seemed to be that we must nonetheless return – return and carry on. Thank you for teaching us history, Leslie. Thank you, in particular, for teaching me how to cope.

Ellen Song
Williams College, Class of 2011
Ph.D. candidate in English, Duke University

Death creates a gap. The dimension of that cleft is correlated with the importance of the person we have lost. Though the death of a loved one is a powerful moment in our lives, the significance of a death is not necessarily linked with how intimate you were with that person.

I would not have called us best friends, but I did consider Leslie a good friend. Our relationship—based on the contents of power and its uses and abuses—examined what was required of each of us. Leslie was much stronger and braver than I in these matters, but her lessons for me were exemplary models of how to use that strength and bravery to stand up to those who were conflicted in their empathic self, ignored/misused their privilege, or constructed barriers that prevented others from achieving their potential.

Standing up. It calls attention to yourself when all others are seated. It signifies you have something needing to be heard or that you wish counted. It attracts the ire of those hating who you are or what you represent. But it also models for others, hesitant in such matters, that standing up, speaking out and being counted establishes a potent bond between people.

Leslie was standing more than she was seated. She saw and understood what was required in order for those bonds—in their accumulation—to render progress and not restraint. Student testimonials verify that Leslie offered them a remarkable model, and through her teaching encouraged potentials we will see reverberating long after this memorial. Other colleagues have duly noted what Leslie brought to their interactions in hallway conversations, classroom discussions and administrative initiatives. All of us at Williams are better for having her among us.

Leslie is dead but she still stands. In her life she gave each of us—even those who have never met her—lessons that we must repeat for others.

Ed Epping, AD Falck Professor of Art
Williams College

We have lost with Leslie’s death a friend and colleague who, with humor, conviction, and modesty, reminded us how our work can be meaningful and why our responsibilities to others matter. As a teacher and a scholar, Leslie was driven by a deep and sincere commitment to the growth of her students, to the historical discipline, and to the inclusion of oft-muffled voices. I appreciate her honesty and impatience with artifice which inspired in me a real trust in her motivations and in her words. And I was touched by her support, sometimes just an off-handed
comment or knowing look that offered more encouragement than she might have realized. She is, already, very much missed.

**Eiko Maruko Siniawer, Professor of History**  
Williams College

Leslie Brown was a rare gem. A fiery revolutionary spirit unmatched and life-giving. Her advice was like medicine—sometimes it didn’t taste good, but it was good. Her love for history, for knowledge, and for teaching is a gift that I will always carry with me. She taught me to love myself enough to search for the voices of my ancestors in the pages and crates of academic archives, to challenge those who seek to quell my fire, and to be unapologetic in my commitments to justice. She had a sense of humor that I will never forget, and her candor, oh and her laugh, I can still hear her laugh. As I continue my own academic career as a doctoral student, I’m saddened by her passing in more ways than I can put into words, but because she was such a great teacher—the lessons and the legacy she leaves will continue to guide. I send my deepest sympathies to Annie and all of Leslie’s family. You are in my thoughts and prayers.

**Ahmad Greene-Hayes**  
Williams College, Class of 2016  
Ph.D. student in Religion, Princeton University

In April of 1988, my mother clipped the job postings from the local paper, circled one in red, and told me I should apply. I was teaching high school English in Schenectady, New York, and wanted to work over the summer. That job was in the Higher Education Opportunity Program (HEOP or OP) at Skidmore College, and it became a pivotal personal and professional experience for me. The person who hired me was Leslie Brown, and she became the mentor I needed and craved to become a better teacher, administrator, colleague, partner, and human being. Leslie taught me to see, think and be in ways that I never imagined: to use perspective taking and listening; to advocate, cajole and sometimes just firmly assert on behalf of our students. I still make mistakes, and sometimes I struggle with what to do in a particular situation, but in these moments the voice that comes strongly to the forefront is Leslie’s: That firm, deep, and laughter-filled voice, with a chuckle that nearly betrays the firmness in the message. It is the voice that said to me one morning that July, “Our students need you to be honest about what needs to change. They need you to listen to them and care about what their opinions are and to use that knowledge to help us shift our practices. They’ve had 18 years of people who haven’t been honest and they are going to meet more of those people even at Skidmore, so even when you don’t feel like it, when it would be easier to just let it go, don’t. That’s why we are here.” This is her voice in my head, keeping me honest and vocal even when it would be easier to just keep quiet.

Skidmore College has one of the best programs for historically underserved students—one that has been recognized by researchers across the nation—and this program emerges from the vision and work of Leslie Brown. It is one important part of Leslie’s wide and enduring legacy. She knew that historically-underserved students deserved equity not equality, and she took a program that had trouble enrolling any students at all (for her first summer program, Leslie walked the streets of the Capital District looking for students to enroll because the program she inherited had not met its enrollment goals) and she transformed practices and policies at Skidmore to make Skidmore’s Opportunity Program a national model for access and achievement. Yes, she drew on her own experiences as an academically-talented but historically-underserved student from the Capital District in upstate New York, but she also never neglected to emphasize that each student is different, that every learner is a new opportunity to discover new ways of teaching and learning. Leslie Brown was an innovative educator from her first days at Skidmore, challenging her admissions colleagues to think about changing African-American demographics and populations and recruiting initiatives, and steering the Opportunity Program in a new direction entirely. Leslie revamped admissions and financial aid support, program staffing and responsibilities, academic support, the summer program, partnerships and relationships with key faculty and staff on campus (relationships she still treasured and spoke about in her interview), lobbying efforts with New York State, supportive services for OP students such as health and wellness and counseling—and the list goes on. Most of all, however, she transformed program philosophy to one of high expectations and nuanced understanding of the needs of historically underserved
students on our campuses—regardless of their race, ethnicity, sexuality, or other social identities. And all of this was accomplished in a few short years before she left for Duke to pursue her Ph.D.; she influenced the lives of the students she worked with in her short time at Skidmore; but, more importantly, the lives of hundreds and hundreds of students who have benefited from the philosophy she so firmly and lovingly nurtured in all of us.

Twenty-five years after our first meeting, I brought two student researchers to Williamstown to conduct an oral history interview for a project on Skidmore’s OP alumni. Her insight, generosity of spirit, advice and storytelling seals that late summer day in my soul. Leslie spent hours with the student researchers, telling them her story, the story of OP and the story of its alumni. She treated us to lunch at The Purple Pub. The students posed with Leslie for a picture. She then took the students back to her office, from which they each emerged with several books—texts she recommended they read based on their interests and their own personal histories, histories that in just a few short hours she was already trying to nurture. I saw Leslie and Annie at several Williams basketball games in the winters since, and Leslie and I exchanged a few calls and emails, but it is still her voice that inspires my work on access and achievement and the work of all those others fortunate enough to be mentored by her, and so it always shall and should be: “I think the thing was that a huge reason why it worked was because we were having fun; that spirit was always there because we were doing something we loved and believed in. And, for me, ultimately, seeing students come up and over that hill down into SPAC for graduation - that was, that is, what it is all about. You can talk about program successes and the individuals who play a role; but ultimately it is about the students and their successes. That’s why we all do what we do on our campuses. It is first and foremost about the students” (Dr. Leslie Brown, 10 July 2014).

Susan Layden, Research Analyst for Enrollment, Retention and Student Achievement
Lecturer, Departments of Anthropology and Intergroup Relations
Skidmore College

As a new student from the city, I never realized what a blessing being at Skidmore through that program really was. As an adult I understand. Your words painted a beautiful picture of Leslie and I know she will be missed. Leslie, all I can simply say is thank you. You have left behind a legacy of kids who now are living fuller and richer lives because of their experiences at Skidmore. Because of you we all had a hand up not a hand out...thank you.

Tamika Byer, Account Executive, Celigo, San Mateo, CA
Skidmore College, Class of 1995

Leslie was not in my department, but I knew her as a galvanizing teacher because her teaching was uncontainable—it exuberantly, generously, and deliberately spilled out of the classroom. I’m thinking in part of Leslie’s deep commitment to projects and conversations that extended into non-classroom spaces: her creative Williams Reads programming (where she worked to engage the whole college community in discussions of Invisible Man and The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks—discussions of race, history, social justice, medical ethics); a variety of events for staff that I saw her plan, moderate, or simply participate in and that always included a warm shout-out to the people who do so much of the work here; an inspiring and moving keynote address she delivered at the college’s first banquet for graduating first-generation students; her work mentoring Mellon-Mays and Davis scholars; her supportive and outspoken presence at the many spontaneous or barely-planned gatherings that have occurred at Williams in recent years as our community has tried to address violence and inequality. But I’m also thinking about how, during my years working in the Institutional Diversity and Equity office, it was not only Leslie but Leslie’s students who so often stepped forward when there was work to be done—leaders and activists who by their own accounts had been transformed and energized by her classes, and who seem to have received from her both the permission to be intellectually independent and outspoken, and a sense of the importance and value of collective life, which demands that we venture beyond the choir. We feel her loss so deeply because she so deeply engaged with all of us.

Karen Swann, Morris Professor of Rhetoric
Williams College
The first conversation I ever had with Professor Brown was regarding my first college history paper during my freshman year. She thought I had plagiarized it. After a long inquiry into where my ideas came from, and some scolding about footnote formats, she decided to believe me and put the issue behind us. She invited me back to meet with her again the following week. We talked for over an hour and a half about everything except history. I quickly became a frequent visitor to her office, sometimes to talk about class, but mostly to just shoot the breeze. Eventually, we decided to move our meetings over to Renee’s Diner, which I began referring to with my friends as, “my dates with Leslie.”

It was at these meetings, or these dates, if you will, where Professor Brown and I became friends. The profound effect of her warm friendliness, her unforgettable laugh, and her unwavering support throughout my four years at Williams cannot be understated. She noticed when something was upsetting me before I even did, and always offered to help. She refused to let me doubt myself as a student, and urged me to step out of my academic and professional comfort zones. And eventually, she guided me through my senior honors thesis—a project that I would never have had the confidence to undertake, had it not been for her continuous encouragement. I know I am only one of many students who have been lucky enough to be taken under her wing, freshman through senior year. And it hurts to know that future students will never get to experience Professor Brown’s friendship and guidance, which has blessed so many of us throughout our time at Williams and beyond. I cannot imagine this college without her, but my hope is that in her absence, we can all do our best to pass her kind and reassuring presence onto those who remain in our day-to-day lives. The Williams community, and the world for that matter, would be better for it.

Arnie Capute, Realterm Global, Baltimore, MD
Williams College, Class of 2016

It was 1989 and I was class of 1993; however, I almost was not. I had a chip on my shoulder about everything from leaving my family in the city to feeling like I had to prove myself after surviving the inner city. I don't what the present statistics are for young men of color today, but I know back then at the height of the crack epidemic we were more likely to end up dead or in jail by 18 then we were to lead a productive life. When I hit the bottom Leslie called me into her office. She was wearing her short sleeve shirt, tucked into her long shorts, her flat fade and her red frame glasses. She asked me to close the door and sit down. She asked me "Why are you here?" I replied to get a college education. She said "Well you sure ain't acting like it." She pulled my folder with my academic history and said, "I can see you are a pretty smart kid, why aren't you showing it?" I said because "I don't have to that's not what you from me. You want me to be less than I'm suppose to be so this program keeps going." She got up from her chair behind the desk and walked up to me and asked me, "Who did you leave behind at home?" I said "my grandmother, my brothers and my sister and right now I don't know why anymore." Leslie looked at me and said, "So you came to fail? So you can go back a failure after all your hard work, after all your grandmother’s hard work?" I said "No" with an attitude. She retorted back "...Then why are you fighting for it, because you have to prove yourself; Let me tell you something young man I prove myself every day, I have had jobs you can't even imagine…hell I drove trucks for a living just to make ends meet. Now I'm here busting ass a LITTLE BLACK WOMAN no different than your grandmother so that you can get an education and do better by your family and yourself and you are going to talk to me about "proving" when you are trying to quit and you ain't even started yet. Get out of my office and get ready to go home and let someone who wants it bad enough be here!" I walked out but with her fire burning in my chest and swore to myself I would graduate in 4 years. I couldn't let my family down, I couldn't let myself down, and I couldn't let her down. In 1993 I walked. Although she had left Skidmore by then she was at SPAC in her tucked in shirt and her glasses, and a nod of approval. Leslie Brown never gave up on me. Since then, I have gone on to be a productive member of society. Not rich or famous, but productive. I am now a father with a daughter that wants to go to Skidmore and a son that is as bright as day. My career is in the Arts and Martial Arts and I have even been published in two college textbooks. I even think there is picture of me somewhere in Skidmore for working with young people. Me: the Dominican kid, the "Afro-Latino-American," the kid from the Bronx who was ready to quit. I owe a great deal of that success and my life to "The Little Black Woman who Busted Her Ass, So That My Black ASS could get an Education." #THANKYOULESLIEBROWN: By the way when I left the office everyone was quiet and I understood just how powerful a spirit had summoned me.

Jose Esquea, Personal Trainer, Martial Arts Instructor and author, New York, NY
Skidmore College, Class of 1993