

# Brent Thomas Williams



NWA Media/DAVID GOTTSCHALK

"One of the things that we know is the variable inextricably tied to poverty is not gender, sex, ethnicity, race or education. It's disability. And so though I don't want to get in a contest of who's more marginalized, who has suffered more discrimination, it's relatively obvious to me."

**Brent Williams, coordinator for the UA rehabilitation counseling program, is a fiery champion of the disabled, who he says live under the burden of everyday discrimination in a world that often sees them as damaged or helpless.**

APRIL ROBERTSON  
ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

**F**AYETTEVILLE — On the first day of class, University of Arkansas students wandered into the auditorium as Brent Williams took the podium to begin his introduction. It didn't take long for them to realize they were being confronted by more than a 50-year-old man with a long, graying ponytail.

"If you graduate from this master's program and you are not pissed off with the way our society treats people with disabilities, you will not have failed," he said. "But I will have failed you."

Since Williams' arrival as program coordinator for the UA rehabilitation counseling program 12 years ago, its graduates have gone on to be the chief executive officers and executive directors of the Arkansas Support Network, Sources for Community Independent Living Services and the Elizabeth Richardson Center and have largely made up the staff of the Arkansas Rehabilitation Services counselors.

His students are mad and they're doing something about it.

As principal investigator of the federal PROMISE (Promoting Readiness of Minors in Supplemental Security Income) grant, an award of \$32 million and believed to be the largest grant awarded to the University of Arkansas ever, Williams is helping focus efforts of state agencies to help disabled teenagers land their first jobs, begin a lifetime of employment and reduce overall dependency on Social Security benefits. The principal investigator is responsible for the preparation, conduct, and administration of a research grant.

#### VARIATION IN THE LAND OF NORMALCY

Long before his days as professor, researcher and grant writer for issues associated with disabilities, Williams had to come to terms with his own. He has retinitis pigmentosa, a condition that provides extremely limited, fuzzy vision, something he describes as looking through a toilet paper tube with wax paper sealed over one end.

He structures his life, work and doctor's appointments all within walking distance. For

fear that it will change how people interact with him, he often doesn't tell people about his disability upon meeting them.

His education began at Austin College in Sherman, Texas, where he studied an amalgam of subjects and met his lifelong friend Buford Craig.

"He's honest," Craig says. "As my friend, he's sometimes brutally honest, but he'd come to my aid if I needed it. All I'd have to do is say and he'd drive down to Texas."

He said Williams has always been whip-smart and opinionated.

"He doesn't suffer fools lightly," Craig says. "If you're going head to head with him, cock your pistol. He's serious about what he does. If someone blows smoke, he'll knock you down to size."

Williams had long been interested in the unequal distribution of opportunity and that, paired with professor Hank Gorman's insistence that the goal of research was not for better data but to make people's lives better, led him to study psychology.

"I had no idea what the words 'social justice' meant," he says. "But I did notice differ-

entials in power, in opportunity. I realized that some people were successful because they tried hard and some had just as much talent, put forth as much effort ... but it had more to do with opportunity and placement in the system than it did their effort, their ability, their desire."

Williams left Austin College with an undergraduate degree in psychology in 1987, and at the time he wasn't sure what to do with it. After years of liberal arts theory, he got his first job at Wilson M. Jones Medical Center as a psychology technician to get PCP and methamphetamine users into restraints when the police didn't know what to do with them. Patients frequently returned soon after their six-week stay, and it left him with an overwhelming urge to find the next step to keep people from falling through the cracks.

He applied to the rehabilitation counseling program at University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas, and though he wasn't sure what that meant exactly, he got in.

Unfortunately, it meant he had to face his own situation.

See **WILLIAMS**, Page 8D

## Watches, shoes and stuff for hairdo are reviewed

Trend watchers have predicted the decline of wristwatches in light of time-keeping mobile phones ... but the watchmakers aren't down for the count yet.

**Phosphor** — whose Swarovski crystal-studded, now-you-see-numbers-now-you-don't Appear watch was featured in this space two years ago (April 29, 2012) — has apparently decided that if you can't beat

smartphones, join 'em. Touch Time, Phosphor's new model (\$159), is a digital touchscreen timepiece that operates with a swipe of the finger. Via smartphone-like applications, users can customize the watch face, selecting from five built-in displays; check lunar phases and their horoscope; do some figuring on the calculator; check the time in

three zones; or clock their afternoon jog on the stopwatch, among other things. Touch Time is also one of the first watches that, like a smartphone,

#### DRESSING ROOM



HELAINA WILLIAMS

allows the wearer to customize the language on the display (English, French, Spanish, Italian, Norwegian, Swedish and German).

The display stays on continuously, so no having to press a button to check the time.

The watch comes in a variety of silicone, elastic colors, including sky blue, electric orange, soft pink and white. There's also a model with a stainless-steel band.

Phosphor watches can be found at Kenneth Edwards Fine Jewelers, 7811 Cantrell Road, Suite B, in Little Rock, (501) 312-7477, and at PhosphorWatches.com.

See **DRESSING**, Page 6D

## Sculpture weekend for all ages



Arkansas Democrat-Gazette/JOHN SYKES JR.

**Co-chairmen** Luis Gonzalez and Caroline Puddephatt pose with one of their favorite pieces in the Vogel Schwartz Sculpture Garden as they promote Bronze & Brewskis. The art-theme fundraiser focused on young people is in its second year.

JENNIFER NIXON  
ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

The words "museum" and "art" can unfortunately conjure up some cold images. Ancient objects are arranged under glass or hung wired into security alarms. Stern-faced security guards hover. Food and drink are verboten. *Please refrain from speaking at full volume, and mind your hands.*

But at the River Market pavilions later this month, art will be all about cutting loose and helping Little Rock up its "livability" quotient.

Sculpture at the River Market is noisy. It's hands-on. The eating of ice cream and drinking of cocktails are encouraged. And for the second year in a row, there's Bronze & Brewskis — a party aimed specifically at young people.

"It's not stuffy," says Bronze & Brewskis co-chairman Luis Gonzalez. "It's an art theme but it's fun."

See **SCULPTURE**, Page 5D

**CAROUSEL BALL**

**SNEAK PEEK**



Chris and Mike Read, Woman's Club president Diana Glaze, and Marian Ferguson



Sam Itza (in front) with Beth White, Dianne Shewmaker, and Alan and Diana New



Mary Reynolds with her grandson, Adam Reynolds, Charlie and Helen Greenfield, Diane Whitbey, and Ed Jackmack of Vilonia



Laman Library System Director Jeff Baskin, North Little Rock Mayor Joe Smith, board member Ron Oliver and state Rep. Eddie Armstrong (D-North Little Rock)



Sandra Taylor Smith, Mary Ruth Morgan, Otto Seay and Debi Ross. Seay worked at the North Little Rock Post Office in the 1950s.



Bill Benner, Dorothy Romes, Gearlean Pettus and Barbara and Raymond Kresse

# Horse set puts on the dog for Carousel Ball fundraiser

Handsome cut-outs of prancing carousel horses provided the backdrop for the North Little Rock Woman's Club's 24th annual Carousel Ball on April 5 at the city's Patrick Henry Hays Center.

Diane Whitbey served as master of ceremonies for the event, which consisted of a sit-down dinner, dance music by the Tommy Henderson Band, and silent and live auctions. Auction highlights included a Hot Springs vacation, a strand of freshwater cultured pearls from Stanley Jewelers Gemologist, a Saturday-morning beauty gathering at Barbara Jean Ltd., and a case of Stellar Organics wine.

Proceeds from the gala, which raised more than \$12,000, are earmarked for the community services of the club, which is associated with the General Federation of Women's Clubs of Arkansas.

— Story and photos by Helaine R. Williams



Mary and Kevin Stewart

## Argenta opens new chapter on expanded library branch

For 80 years, the beautiful Georgian Revival-style building on Main Street in North Little Rock served as a U.S. Post Office. After a year of remodeling and restoring, the building is now the Argenta branch of the William F. Laman Public Library System.

North Little Rock's leaders, movers and shakers and other guests got a sneak peek of the new library April 4, the day before its grand opening.

Attendees enjoyed wine and soft drinks and a buffet of finger foods as well as a tour of the library, which includes a children's area, meeting rooms, gallery space and computer lab. The gallery currently holds an exhibit of historic photos of Argenta and construction of the post office.

Library system Director Jeff Baskin told the crowd that he thought the remodeled building had turned out beautifully. He noted that it had been brought back as much as possible to the original design, including opening the center of the building up to the roof, making the space light and airy.

Library programming already scheduled at the branch includes children's story times; Good Gardens, an adult program that will include hands-on gardening and guest lecturers; and a summer reading program.

— Story and photos by Cary Jenkins

 **Photos on the Web**  
arkansasonline.com/galleries

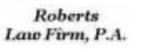
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