Stanley Williams
By CommonLit Staff
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Stanley “Tookie” Williams III (1953-2005) was a leader of the Crips, an infamous gang that began in Los Angeles in 1969. He spent much of his life in prison. Today, he is well known for the writing that he did while in jail, which included anti-gang activist literature and children's books. As you read the text below, make notes in the margins and looks for evidence to answer the following questions: How did Stanley Williams change, and why did he change?

Childhood

Williams was born on December 28, 1953, in Shreveport, Louisiana. His mother was seventeen when he was born, and his father left the family when he was a baby. In 1959, Williams and his mother moved to Los Angeles, California. They lived in an apartment on the West Side of South Central Los Angeles. His mother had to work several jobs to support them, so Williams was often on his own and began to engage in mischief on the street as a child. He would hang out in abandoned houses and vacant lots in his neighborhood, where he would watch adults get drunk, use illegal drugs, gamble, and stage dog fights. Williams later talked about how the adults who organized the dog fights often had the neighborhood children fight each other as well. Williams participated in these street fights regularly; the adults would bet on him and give him part of their winnings if he won the fight. Williams was bullied by some of the older boys in his neighborhood, so by the age of twelve he began to carry around a knife to protect himself.

Teenage Years

By the time Williams was a teenager, he had developed a reputation as a vicious street fighter. He was kicked out of several Los Angeles high schools for fighting, and spent several periods in juvenile detention center. When he was fifteen, he became the leader of a clique that was regularly involved in street crime on the West Side. In 1969, at age sixteen, Williams was arrested for stealing a car and was sent to juvenile prison again. He became interested in weight lifting during this prison stint, and he became physically much bigger and more muscular. According to Williams, when he was being released from prison, the review board asked him what his future plans were. Williams responded that he planned on “being the leader of the biggest gang in the world.”

1. term, shift, or period of time
Williams soon went on to found the Crips gang with several other teenagers. The purpose of the gang was initially to eliminate all other neighborhood gangs on the West Side and to create a powerful force that could protect the neighborhood. The Crips quickly became a highly violent gang, however, particularly in their brutal rivalry with the other dominant neighborhood gang, the Bloods. Williams engaged in many random acts of violence against rival gang members and innocent people alike, causing great fear in the residents of South Central, Watts and Compton. During his time as leader of the Crips, he was allegedly involved in robbery, drug crimes, and murder.

**Prison Years**

In 1979, Williams was convicted of four counts of murder and sentenced to death. As an inmate at San Quentin State Prison, Williams spent 6½ years in solitary confinement because of assaults on guards and other inmates. He refused to help police investigate his gang, and he was implicated in multiple escape plots as well. In 1993, however, Williams began to change his behavior. He became non-violent, and he eventually became an anti-gang activist while on death row. He wrote nine books warning children and teenagers about the dangers of gang life. He rejected his previous gang affiliation and apologized for his role in creating the Crips, although he still would not help police investigate the gang. He was nominated for the Nobel Peace prize five times and the Nobel Prize for Literature once. While in prison he also wrote a “peace protocol” to help rival gangs work out disagreements.

Because of the serious personal change Williams made in his life, a popular movement gathered to protest and prevent his execution. The movement was unsuccessful, however; clemency was rejected by Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, and on December 13, 2005, Stanley Williams was executed by lethal injection. Before his execution, Williams was quoted on WBAI Pacific radio stating:

“[… I just stand strong and continue to tell you, your audience, and the world that I am innocent and, yes, I have been a wretched person, but I have redeemed myself. And I say to you and all those who can listen and will listen that redemption is tailor-made for the wretched, and that's what I used to be [...]. [...]Redemption] is not predicated on color or race or social stratum or one's religious background. It's accessible for everybody. That's the beauty about it. And whether others choose to believe that I have redeemed myself or not, I worry not, because I know and God knows, and you can believe that all of the youths that I continue to help, they know, too. So with that, I am grateful...I say to you and everyone else, God bless. So take care.”

His life and death stirred intense, emotional debate about the death penalty and its place in American society. A biographical TV-movie called *Redemption: The Stan Tookie Williams Story* was made in 2004, featuring Jamie Foxx as Williams.
Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. Which of the following best states what motivated Williams to found the Crips?
   A. The potential for financial gain
   B. Older teenagers who pressured him into it
   C. The desire for power and protection in a tough neighborhood
   D. His mother and her struggle to provide for the family

2. One of the central ideas of the text is that Williams was one of the founders of the Crips who went to jail for the crimes he committed while a leader of the gang. Which of the following best states another central idea of the text?
   A. Williams was bullied by older peers in his neighborhood, forcing him to carry a weapon.
   B. Despite his crimes, Williams eventually reformed and became an anti-gang activist.
   C. A large following protested Williams’ sentencing in the hopes to save his life.
   D. Even though he reformed, Williams was still sentenced to death by lethal injection.

3. PART A: Williams is quoted in the text stating that he is “innocent.” In a few sentences, explain what Williams means by “innocent.” Is Williams denying that he committed crimes?

4. PART B: Which of the following quotations best supports the answer to Part A?
   A. “I have been a wretched person, but I have redeemed myself”
   B. “redemption is tailor-made for the wretched”
   C. “It’s accessible for everybody”
   D. “So with that, I am grateful”
5. How does the block quote by Williams in paragraph 5 contribute to the development of ideas in the text?
Discussion Questions

Directions: Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.

1. Consider the adults present and the environment in which Williams grew up. Do you think Williams’ childhood influenced his adult behavior? Why or why not?

2. Williams changed his actions during his time in prison. Do you think Williams became a different person? Why or why not?

3. Why was there so much debate surrounding Williams’ execution? Explain.

4. Do you think the death penalty is fair? Why or why not?

5. Can a person change his or her identity? Use evidence from this text, your own experience, and other art or literature in your answer.