

Williams: [00:02:06] No, I did not. My connection to St. Louis is actually I married a single dose girl. So. Yes.

Williams: [00:02:13] So I grew up in Georgia, a little town outside of Atlanta called Covington, Georgia. It's about 30 miles from Atlanta along Interstate 20. I left there at the age of 16 and go to college and have not lived there since. So I went to the university, South Carolina State University and then on to the army for twenty nine years.

Nichols: [00:02:36] So you went to college when you were 16?

Williams: [00:02:38] When I was 16.

Nichols: [00:02:39] That is incredible, wow. You skipped a couple of grades.

Williams: [00:02:45] No, it was location. And so I grew up in a house that was directly across the street from the school. And the first grade teacher was friends with my mom. And so they realized that I may have been a little advanced. So I went to school. That was four turned five. So as a result, I just kept going. There were issues related to that because I was never with my peer group. So when my friends were driving, I was still hitching a ride right there.

Williams: [00:03:14] And I just remember that for the. We have something called the junior senior prom and the small town. So both the dreams and seniors had their event together. And my junior year, I didn't have a driver's license. Everybody else in my class did. And so.

Nichols: [00:03:28] So your date had to drive you. Is that what happened?

Williams: [00:03:31] Well, actually, my no, it was worse than that. My thought my father had to drop us off.

Nichols: [00:03:40] You kind of got a jump start.

Williams: [00:03:41] I did. I got a jump start. You know, I probably would do it all over again. But that was one handicapped early.

Nichols: [00:03:48] So when you went to college, what was your degree in?

Williams: [00:03:50] Civil engineering technology? And went on to do graduate study and facilities engineering management at Arizona State. So the Army fort, fortunately, were able to send me on to graduate school there. So I ended up graduating from there and also at Jackson State University.

Nichols: [00:04:05] So you went into the army as an officer?

Williams: [00:04:07] I did. I was commissioned as a second lieutenant. And so, you know, it was the height of Vietnam. And so the option was to go in as an enlisted person or as an officer. And so luckily, I was able to go in as an officer. And the goal was at the time because my peers all were laughing because in ROTC, you know, you have this group. And so there were like 50 of us who were in the same class. And I bet all 50 of them would have said the person most likely not to stay in the army would be Otis Williams. As it turns out, after he won the state probably the longest and moved the farthest.

Nichols: [00:04:42] You stayed there for almost 30 years, right?

Williams: [00:04:44] Almost 30 years. And the reason I was there, I was there so long, I kept getting opportunity. And as I indicated, the Army afforded me the opportunity to get a graduate degree at their expense. And I kept getting great assignments. I look back on my past and I had the opportunity to work for Colin Powell and others like that that influence me greatly over time. So it was good.

Nichols: [00:05:07] Oh, my goodness. I can't imagine working under leadership like Colin Powell. So when you retired, you were Colonel.

Williams: [00:05:15] My father used to ask me, when am I. When are you going to get out? And I would say, as long as they are promoting me, I will.

Williams: [00:05:20] So I was fortunate to get promoted to colonel and serve. And at that point I decided that I probably need to change jobs because I didn't see the future.

Nichols: [00:05:30] A future. The next step. The next step.

Williams: [00:05:32] So then I retired and actually took a job here. As I was saying, I retired on June 30th of 1998 and came to work here in St. Louis and July 6th of 98. So just a few days.

Nichols: [00:05:45] You had a few days to three days.

Williams: [00:05:47] And so I've been have been working at this job now since that time.

Nichols: [00:05:51] Sure; my dad was a Marine. My father in law was in the Army. My husband's uncle was a Green Beret. You know, so in talking to both my dad and my father in law, my dad would say there's nothing that will turn a boy into a man quicker than being in the military.

Williams: [00:06:09] You're right. My father said the same for me because he did not foresee me being that person. In fact, he used to laugh and says, you need to stay in school because you aren't going to be able to work these day jobs out there. You need to use your brain. And so and so as a result. So, you know, there's a lot to be said for the Army with the standards that they have and the discipline that is instilled. OK, that's good. That's good.

Nichols: [00:06:36] So that's where I was going with that. It's the best leadership training in the world. Right. So what are some of those leadership tenets that you learned there that now you see that you've carried forward with you?

Williams: [00:06:47] Well, I mean, a lot of us around the moral code really, you know, and so and I've talked to my staff, they'll tell you integrity is honesty are the things that drivers for us. And so we don't do anything that can't stand an open window. So I instill that in all my folks. And the other thing I tell them is that bad news that I get better, you know, by holding onto it. And so I just always tell me, no matter what, what the issue is, where we're going. And so I stand tall on integrity.

Nichols: [00:07:18] That is so good. You just reminded me. So Dornum Hearts was on the podcast a few, a few weeks ago, and he was the former CIO for Centene. And he said you could always tell the culture of a company by how quickly bad news rose to the top. Sounds like you've got the same kind of policy at the St. Louis Development Corporation that you want them to tell you good or bad, right?

Williams: [00:07:43] Well, they have to, you know, because I'm always being approached by people. And if I don't know all the aspects of it, then I can respond differently, you know, on some things, you know. So to a person in my organization, they know that no matter what, it

could be good or bad. They did let me know what's going on because I'm generally the mouthpiece for the organization. And in many cases, for the city on economic development matters.

Nichols: [00:08:06] Right. So how did that transition happen from, you know, being a colonel army to five days later, to being an executive director?

Williams: [00:08:16] Well, I wasn't big like a director immediately, so I was hired to do a specific project. And the specific projects in the city really based want to take advantage of my leadership ability, I assume. So I came to do what was called a Hope six project. And I hope six project is around the Old City Hospital just south of downtown. And that community around Nazli Perrino had about tall buildings that were about 14 stories tall, 12, 14 stories tall. Most of those apartments were abandoned. In fact, there are about 2000 units. And so my job was to try and transform that. We essentially was the demo, all of those facilities and then to rebuild some new around it and to provide new infrastructure around.

So, I told my wife, first of all, I can do that for two years because a typical Army assignment and that we move on. And one of the reasons that it attracted I was attracted to it is that we had never had an opportunity to spend any appreciable time in St. Louis, which is my wife's home. So getting out, I decided that, well, we can take this job in St. Louis and be here for a short time, get this thing done. And it had nothing to do with me understanding economic development, but it had a lot to do with being able to lead and to get things done. So as a result, I went through that process.

Williams: [00:09:36] We got that done. And I just continued to work. I got involved in other things. And one more thing.

Nichols: [00:09:43] One thing led to one thing led to another.

Williams: [00:09:45] So while I was doing with the initiative, the Convention Center Hotel came up. And so the Marriott Grande. It was the next project where we were trying to get that. So it kept going. Road to Busch Stadium to just a number of things repetitively.

Nichols: [00:10:03] Yeah. You have been involved in so many different initiatives from what you just described to core tags to T. Rex to Engy A.. I mean, I know you were very instrumental in getting Injia to put their headquarters here. So what have been some of the most exciting

projects that you've done and which ones do you think have made the most impact on St. Louis?

Williams: [00:10:29] Actually, I think the one that has the greatest impact right now and is real-time time is the NBA. What we didn't know, what we didn't know about the NJ. I mean, there was a secure facility south of downtown. And, yeah, you know, we didn't know that there were three thousand employees, but we didn't understand the impact that it had globally, nationally. And I say we knew that they had 3000, but not really. I mean, you know, but the impact that it had to the city's economy into the state's economy. And so the fact that we were able to retain it, I mean, it now means that the state continues to get almost eight million dollars annually from their withholding taxes that the employees have. Thirty one hundred employees.

The city continues to get the earnings tax, which is a little over three million. So had this facility moved, Illinois, the state of Missouri would have lost Thirty-one million dollars, essentially. And that was in 2014. Today, that same group whose average salary at that time was 75000 today, that ever salary is a little over one hundred and one thousand. And so that multiplier of impact to the state.

What that has led to is the development of an eco system we call geospatial, which is the location technology that they're famous for. So if you're going anywhere in the world, you probably have your phone or your G.P.S.. So the people who are responsible for their location technology are these folks. Right. So if your boat out in the ship of the ocean or airplane flying where you are in the world is based on the information, at least wondering what they're doing. So they have a great impact on us. Best I call what I call the the social aspect. Everyone now knows about. But it's all of that things that they help do for the Defense Department that people don't know about that is equally as important. But there if we found now that that we got started, that there about 27000 people that are working in that location technology area within St. Louis and that places where we weren't really thinking about I mean, obviously, Enterprise Rent-A-Car buying their major companies, but they have a portion of their company that's voted on precise technology, location, technology. Right. But we also know that there are no major companies that are supporting the energy.

They would tend to fly into the city of St. Louis, meet for a couple of days and fly up. And so I think with initiative we have now that we are trying to figure out how to get them to relocate here, grow here and grow this ecosystem. And with the new format that former Director Cardello was thinking, which was a little more open technology, more or less secure that they intend in this

new building that they are building, about 20 percent of the space will be nonsecure. So that they can interact with the developer community that does not have that secure clearance. And so they are going to be doing something different. We are hopeful that we are able to then take advantage of that and get more innovation, more entrepreneurial types that can interact with them in that location. So fortunately for us, we have a commission. I said we asked Park with Jason Hall's help and with folks who are working through the T Rex and Cortex and Singlish University and Universal Missouri, all of those stakeholders are working together with us to try and grow this ecosystem. And so this has been great.

Nichols: [00:13:51] I can see future articles, you know, that are Jogi about the success. We're going back.

Williams: [00:13:57] We're about to roll out a plan that will essentially be very similar to the roadmap that was published about 20 years ago by Battelle Institute for the Bio SDL and the whole bio industry that now is globally recognized. Right. And so we think that with the consultant that we have Techonomy, that when they rollout their report, which should happen within the next 30 days, that that will be the roadmap for growing geospatial information. And so it will give the I call them the philanthropic community and corporate community a path forward. As far as how to contribute toward the growth.

Nichols: [00:14:36] Yes, right. I want to dive more into that. But we need to take a quick break and we'll be back with Otis Williams.

AD: [00:14:44] Hi, everybody. I just wanted to take a second and tell you about something. Our team at Technology Partners can do for your business. We've spent over two decades partnering with organizations and helping them saw their I.T. needs from a 360 degree perspective. A huge part of how we solve those needs is by developing custom applications of all shapes and sizes. If your team is looking for software and then out of the box solution just as that. Right, it's time to consider how we might be able to help. Go to TBI, dot code, slash custom apps and learn more about our awesome capabilities.

Nichols: [00:15:19] So, Otis, tell me a little bit about Geo Futures.

Williams: [00:15:21] Do you have futures is the advisory base that we have put together. And so we've done this with a number of stakeholders involved. Fortunately for us, where we have someone leading our efforts there. Andy Deering and then supported by what I call our kitchen

cabinet with Jason Hall and myself and a number of others who are working to try to ensure that we can advance the growth of the ecosystem that's geospatial. And so Geo Futures is the banner which we're moving forward. It is a consulting group that is named Techonomy who is leading our efforts. And they are essentially looking at all of the what we call baseline data to understand where we are in this area for a number of interviews and public meetings. And I call them frequent meetings with the advisory group. There are about 45 of us in US and an advisory group under the GEO Features Advisory Group.

Williams: [00:16:16] And the disciplines range from the university types to folks who are corporate and users of geospatial people who are working in geospatial in GSA. So it's a broad spectrum of people. And the geo features were put together with the idea that we would replicate what happened about 20 years ago with bio Estill. When we know where we are now, we're globally recognized in the bio arena and in the ag arena. And so this is an effort to put together a roadmap, a path forward such that we can all rally around and everyone will know what our goals are and how we intend to get there. And so you're going to give the corporate community, the philanthropic community, all an opportunity to find a place to help those involved, to get involved and to help us move this forward.

[00:17:07] We see great things, really because there are over twenty-seven thousand people who are working in the geospatial ecosystem now and that many people recognize this in a sense that great companies are very involved. So we all about location technology. When we use our phone, when we travel, everybody needs to know where they are. And all of that happens as a result of geospatial. She'll spend time.

Nichols: [00:17:30] I want to talk a little bit about as LDC St. Louis Development Corporation, because a lot of our listeners may not even understand, you know, what is the mission, you know, what are some of the initiatives that you're involved in? Can you tell us a little bit about that?

[00:17:45] **Williams:** St. Louis Development Corporation is the city's economic development arm. And I always say that economic development is a team sport. So we only do this with folks who are in the same sphere. So we work on a daily basis with the chamber, with the Alliance SDL and with the St. Louis Economic Development Partnership, Missouri Partnership, as well as Department of Economic Development for the state. And locally, we have what we call community organizations that we work with as well. Most prominent would be the downtown SDL group that we work with. And so we interact with those folks and our mission is to try and

grow the St. Louis economy. The city of St. Louis is economy and our goal is to retain businesses, to help businesses expand and to work with our partners, to attract businesses to the city and region. And so all of that is to maintain and build our tax base so that we can provide constituent services to citizens.

Nichols: [00:18:39] And that is done how I mean, through tax incentives, tax advice.

Williams: [00:18:44] We have a lot of your that goal is to assist the businesses, obviously.

[00:18:48] And so when there are things that need to be done, we essentially look at ways that we can help. We have done that through a number of federal programs, being able to coordinate those things, things like the new markets tax credit program and the opportunity zone. But locally, one of the tools that we use and essentially it is call tax abatement and types increment financing. Those are tools that can be used where taxes that were generated by the project itself can, in fact, help finance that project. We don't give money to people. Many people think that when they think that the city of St. Louis is incentivizing something is that we are writing a check.

[00:19:27] You know, most often the headline will say the city just passed a ten million dollar tip and we immediately get social media and others that says, you know, you guys could use that 10 million dollars over here. What's happening is that we're generally trying to incentivize something that is not doing anything. Presence. I give an example of a project or a property is currently paying one hundred dollars in taxes. Through our incentive, we may have a project that will occur on that site or at that location. That property now generates taxes. That's say two thousand dollars. I'm just giving you an example. An example. And so you are increasing the amount of taxes being generated on that, you know. And so what happens on a tax increment financing issue is that half of that goes to the development and half goes to the city. So we're still a thousand percent better off. I mean, that's a that's an extreme example. Sure. But it is a real example of how the value and we don't do anything that does not provide the city of St. Louis with a return on investment.

[00:20:29] And I can say that that's the case over the last four years. In previous years, probably when I first arrived, I would call it feel good because we were in such need and desire. I think we have a transition to where we have a plan going forward.

Nichols: [00:20:44] And I know that you and I have talked a little bit. And for you, transparency is very important, right? It's very important to the citizens. And and it just goes back to what you said at the beginning about integrity. You want it all out there in the open. You don't want to do anything that, you know, somebody couldn't look through a glass wall and see what you're doing. So that's exactly right. It makes sense to me now.

Williams: [00:21:06] So our goal is to follow all the things that we incentivize. We would like for there to be a portal for the public to be able to look and monitor how well we are doing. And we're gonna win a lot and we may, you know, not win some, but everybody will see there's nothing hidden.

Nichols: [00:21:24] So, Otis, right now we are kind of in a a little bit of a crisis state. I would say there is the pandemic of the coronavirus that is affecting everyone right now. I mean, there's fear, obviously, from people about getting the virus. There's an economic impact. And I know that you recently had a meeting with the mayor about this. So can you tell us a little bit I mean, what would you say to the citizens of the greater St. Louis area right now about this pandemic?

Williams: [00:21:56] Well, obviously, we're working with all of our partners. So this is an integrated approach from the federal government, the state and the region. Each jurisdiction and each responsible entity needs to do the right thing. And these are guidelines that health officials have put out, you know, by washing hands and about distance from people and about a number of things that are good practice. And so we're all pushing those things. But for the government in this case, the local government, you know, we need to be able to respond to the needs of the citizen.

[00:22:28] And so, you know, the question is, are we going to close that? The government is not going to close. We will be the last to be the last man sitting will be the last minute, because that is what we do.

[00:22:39] We put we are here to provide services to the citizens that I think citizens look for, that the virus is having a great impact economically, obviously, for the city of St. Louis. One of our bread and butter areas is tourism and the hospitality industry and events. And so the fact that major events and conventions and at this point, any meeting over a thousand people won't happen within the next 30 days for sure. That will have a major impact. So we are meeting with our partners to figure out how we can assist the small businesses and businesses that are

impacted. You know, we don't have that. So we don't have that golden bullet right at the moment, but we're sort of trying to sort through that.

[00:23:22] And as I said, you know, what we knew on Monday is not what we know today. And we are reacting differently than what we would have had on Monday. And so next week we will be reacting differently. And so as we know more about the impact of the virus and we get more testing equipment and more things that can help solve this problem. We think that we will be able to react better at that point.

Nichols: [00:23:47] You don't want to be a party to the hysteria. You don't want to do that. But yet, at same time, we do need to take it seriously. That is correct.

Williams: [00:23:57] This is very serious. And so we need to be responsible. Do the right thing. And I think that's what we're all asking. So if you quarantine should be quarantined, if you are working from home or work from home, if there are ways that employers can provide an opportunity for employees to work from home, that should be one course. You know, I know we want people to continue to go and do the thing, you know, give live life to live life but they need to be responsible as they doing.

Nichols: [00:24:27] Yeah. And I've also said this is a time for unity and division. It is. We need to come together as a community.

Williams: [00:24:35] You know, there are so many things that people have planned and their schedules have all changed.

Nichols: [00:24:41] But we're all in the same boat.

Williams: [00:24:43] We are. I mean, I never would have figured that I would be at a time when all of the major sports leagues have cancel or postpone their leagues.

Nichols: [00:24:52] We don't have her during that. Yeah, but gotta be ready and prepared. It's going to be agile. So this is something extra. This can be somebody in your past presently is or a team member that you want to talk about. And what was there something extra in your opinion?

Williams: [00:25:10] Well, I you know, I think the person that impacted my life the most is, believe it or not. My high school band director.

Nichols: [00:25:16] Oh, OK. And what instrument did you like? Are you a trombone?

Williams: [00:25:20] I was a trombone player. You know, the trombone. Have those lips. But his name was Timothy Adams. I guess maybe I was 13 when I met him. He he may have been twenty three or four just so he was young.

Nichols: [00:25:33] He was a young whipper-snapper.

Williams: [00:25:34] He was young, but he came with lots of energy. And even before I went into the military, he was one of those guys that talked about honesty and he would always use the phrase stick to it. So he came in and he changed the culture of our high school in the sense that our band, the band that I was not yet in, was known to play different kinds of music.

[00:25:56] He introduced all of us to cultural and symphonic kinds of things, and he would take us to here. I mean, I think maybe the ninth grade I went to my first symphony, probably with under any other circumstance, I probably in my lifetime would not have gone to that as yet, you know, that period of time. But I got to understand and appreciate different music. And that was what he was all about. And, you know, obviously, being African-American, I grew up in a I call a culturally rich environment where I was very spirited music.

[00:26:29] And so I got to appreciate the Beethoven's box and the box and the Beethoven's and their medals and appreciate that that music and and then through appreciate country and Western, which was not something that I liked at that time.

Nichols: [00:26:46] He opened up your eyes.

Williams: [00:26:46] But he was also the person that insisted on being a good music technician, which led me to be able to get a scholarship to go to school.

[00:26:55] So I went to college on a music scholarship and I probably would not have been able to go had not gotten that scholarship. That's sort of why I say he was a great impact, because I the fact that I was able to go to college and the fact that I what I learned from in high school, all of the things that I probably would not have otherwise.

Nichols: [00:27:14] Well, I love that story. Thank you for sharing that story. And I always say sometimes the teachers, the coaches in our lives, sometimes odors are the unsung heroes, aren't they? They are. I have a similar story, you know, of a teacher that really, really impacted me. So to all the teachers out there, thank you for what you do. Keep doing it. Exactly. You're impacting people whether you realize it or not. So what do you believe is something extra that every leader needs or there's something extra as it can be more than one otis.

Williams: [00:27:46] To be a very effective leader, I think you have to have integrity hopping back to that because I think that people have to be able to trust what you're doing. And I also think you have to be an honest person and you have to be able to have people trust you. I think your actions are sort of key. So the people who follow you, if they see what you're doing and if you're doing quote what you think is the right thing, they'll know whether it's real or Memorex.

Nichols: [00:28:12] Right. There is high responsibility, though, isn't it? Because people are watching you, whether you realize that or not. I love you. Probably know Danny Ludeman. Yes, ODAs. And I remember Danny saying I watch people's feet more than I watch their mouth. And I just I've never forgotten that. And, you know, it really is you've got to walk the talk because if you don't, that trust is not going to be there.

Williams: [00:28:36] One additional thing I think I would say is that I think as a leader, you have to be able to prepare the next generation. And if what makes my day is seeing some of the young folk I have on my team and you see a lot of them unfold, that that was intentional because I knew that the workforce was aging and we needed to instill and grow, you know, a new leadership group every day. I was one of them. Do something. We'll do something that just makes me feel like a parent. You know, my own kids, I always feel good when they are successful. But when these kids are doing good things and they are just by it, you can sense it by all of the good things that are happening in the city.

Nichols: [00:29:21] There's a lot packed in there, but we don't have time to unpack all of it. But I want you to be able to tell the listeners, is there something exciting that's coming up that you want to talk to them about?

Williams: [00:29:32] Yes. The city of St. Louis has been for a year now going through development of a economic and equitable economic development strategy and framework that we want to. Use going forward. And our goal is to be able to cover the entire city and so forth.

Such a long time people have said the central Carter has been where our focus has been, and we want to be sure that we are intentionally and have a plan to try and address what's happening in north and then southeast Saint Louis and all over the city. This framework will be published. It was an effort, I call it a labor of love, where we have had public meetings, we've had online interaction. We are talking to a number of stakeholders. We have an advisory group as well. And we're at this point getting final feedback from them on recommendations moving forward. And so we hope to be able to unveil this end of April, although that depends on our ability to interact with our consultants who we have planned for them to travel. But we'll see. We'll see how it all works.

Nichols: [00:30:35] How will the public know about this? I mean, is there a Web site.

Williams: [00:30:42] roll-out There will be a roll out event. But people can actually now look online and go to our Web site, St. Hype Hyphen MO. I call it MO dot gov. But you go to the assembly, see Web site and you there's a whole there's a link there that will lead you to the equitable economic development framework. And you can look at where we are when it is rolled out and is introduced. There will be a public event.

Nichols: [00:31:06] All right. Well, we'll look forward to that. Otis, thank you so much. I know that you've got a lot of things on your plate right now. So I just cannot even thank you enough for just making the time to be here in educating our listeners. And I look forward to what's gonna come down. You've still got a lot of initiatives in you.

Williams: [00:31:25] I Think there are a few out there. Thank you. I appreciate it.