



## Frank K. Wheaton

[by Regan Morris]

News that segregationist U.S. Senator Strom Thurmond had an illegitimate daughter who was half African-American stunned the nation. Essie Mae Washington-Williams kept her secret for 78 years. But when Senator Thurmond died at age 100, she turned to media-savvy lawyer Frank K. Wheaton to help her tell her story. LawCrossing speaks with Wheaton about his broadcast and legal careers and how he may have discovered a new cottage industry representing the illegitimate children of politicians.

Broadcaster, actor, model, attorney—Frank K. Wheaton has had a diverse and eclectic career, which he said has made him uniquely qualified to represent Essie Mae Washington-Williams. Ms. Washington-Williams, he said, wanted to tell her story with dignity, and she wanted legal representation. Mr. Wheaton said many attorneys had asked for hefty retainers to take her on as a client. But he jumped at the chance to be a part of such an historic moment, agreeing to represent Ms. Washington-Williams on contingency.

Ms. Washington-Williams' incredible story has been the focus of Mr. Wheaton's career since they met in the summer of 2003. Since then, he has worked to maximize her publicity, choreographing her public coming out while negotiating book and movie deals.

Mr. Wheaton, 53, said Ms. Washington-Williams wanted to set the history books straight and do so with dignity. He views his job as assuring she maintains that dignity, without slinging mud at the Thurmond family. And to make sure Ms. Williams-Washington gets paid for her incredible story and possibly to contest the estate of Strom Thurmond, who financially supported her throughout his life but left her nothing in his will.

Mr. Wheaton negotiated the deal for her book *Dear Senator: A Memoir by the Daughter of Strom Thurmond*. A movie and a Broadway play are being considered.

"I felt that regardless of whether she got anything from the estate or from Thurmond or not, I felt it was such an important moment in history, such an important opportu-

nity to become part of something huge and something important that would have impact, that was worth more than any amount of money that I could have ever have been paid," he said.

Mr. Wheaton said they do not plan to contest Strom Thurmond's estate at this time, but that could change. He wondered why Thurmond would send Ms. Washington-Williams money throughout her life and then leave her out of his inheritance.

"I felt that her story was rich enough by itself that I could create commercial opportunities that would allow her to make as much if not more than she would ever have hoped to make from the estate," he said.

Mr. Wheaton said he always wanted to be both an attorney and a broadcaster and decided to initially focus on broadcasting. After graduating from California State University at Northridge with a Bachelor's degree in Radio/TV and Film, Mr. Wheaton worked as a radio announcer, engineer, and producer. Then he went to Washington, DC, and worked on the "Daily Drum" radio show for WHUR-FM. He eventually joined NBC and worked as an engineer with broadcasters Barbara Walters and Willard Scott.

While many joke about his having a face for radio, Mr. Wheaton had nothing to hide. Indeed, he soon moved into acting and modeling in New York City, appearing in newspaper ads for everything from Amway and Amtrak to Millionaire Cologne for Mennen and McDonald's.

Hollywood seemed like the obvious next step in Mr. Wheaton's career, and it was. He starred in ABC's "CounterAttack: Crime in America," a pioneer in early reality-based TV. But the show was canceled after about six weeks, and Mr. Wheaton decided it was time for a change.

"I decided to fulfill the lifelong dream of going to law school," he said. "And that's what I did."

Mr. Wheaton, the son of voice actor James Wheaton, attended the University of West Los Angeles at night and acted in commercials during the day. Although he now is an Of Counsel member of Scolinos, Sheldon & Nevell, Mr. Wheaton said he never wanted to work in a firm. He wanted the law degree to use in his own entertainment pursuits, and he dreamed of becoming a sports and entertainment manager/attorney.

He opened The Management Group, or TMG, in 1984, which has represented sports and entertainment stars, including Milton Berle, James Worthy, and Al and Florence Griffith Joyner. Mr. Wheaton, who has created and produced shows like "The First Annual Michael Jordan Celebrity Golf Classic," "The Milton Berle Celebrity Golf Classic," and "World's Fastest Athlete" for ABC's "Wide World of Sports," said his law degree is useful when negotiating deals.

"I always wanted the status of being a lawyer because fortunately, as it may be for me, people assume that there's a certain level of education, a certain level of experience that you might bring with you," he said. "So



wherever I am in the country and the world, you know I don't have to explain away certain things."

Mr. Wheaton passed the Indiana State Bar exam and intended to open an office there, but has stayed in California. He grew up in Compton, CA, and recently ended a deal where he was Compton's spokesman.

"My interest has always been, in a bigger sense, to serve as a representative of law or as a representative of the client," he said. "It's not so much my interest on the day-to-day practice of law. I'm more interested in concepts and entertainment-based and creative projects with which I've been so fortunate to become involved."

Mr. Wheaton credits his parents for his success, saying they always encouraged him to pursue his dreams and were "intellectually rich."

Through Ms. Washington-Williams' story, Mr. Wheaton may have embarked on yet another chapter in his career: as a representative of alleged children of U.S. Presidents.

He said six people claiming to be children of five different U.S. Presidents have come to him seeking counsel. He won't say which presidents and that it will take time to sift the fact from the fiction.

He said the alleged children of the politicians "have been encouraged" by Washington-Williams' story.

"I am prayerful that I can bring their stories in as dignified a manner as I have been able to do with Mrs. Williams' story," he said. When asked if he thought the claims were true, Mr. Wheaton said, "Yes. In fact, I've heard other people verify that they also know these other persons."

Mr. Wheaton, who has been lobbying to help erect a monument in Washington to Black

patriots who have fought in American wars, said the Thurmond cases were so important to him because they're an important and painful part of American history.

"Because as a pre-Civil Rights baby, I got a chance to learn and know who Strom Thurmond was and what the South was all about," he said. "At the same time, I'm one of the beneficiaries of affirmative action, which is why I could have chosen any college in the country to go to."

Mr. Wheaton also clearly is proud of his role in the story, describing himself as "a kid from Compton, California, who played a chess game, an intellectual chess game against the institution of Strom Thurmond."