



Durham Mayor Leonardo "Leo" Williams and his 17-year-old son, Izaiah, take a break after enjoying a scooter ride and milkshakes in Durham.

Big, bold moves a hallmark of this board member's approach to surmounting obstacles

Durham Mayor Leonardo "Leo" Williams recalls being a struggling small-business owner in 2020, unable to get a loan to keep his downtown Durham restaurant afloat. He found a way to raise \$3 million to keep small Durham city businesses, including his, afloat, and that experience inspired him to run for elected office.

Williams subsequently won election to serve on the Durham City Council in 2021, before winning Durham's mayoral election in December 2023 and stepping aboard GoTriangle's Board of Trustees as the City of Durham's representative.

During the pandemic, he says, he raised the \$3 million in grants and low-interest loans by creating, with some friends and colleagues, the Durham Small Business Coalition. Turned down by Durham City Council for a loan for his restaurant, he went with other members of the coalition to Duke University and convinced the administration to give a million dollars to small businesses if the city would match it. After he held a press conference to announce the \$1 million funding, the city heard testimony from small-business owners and agreed to match the million in funding, and Durham County followed suit with another million.

Thinking big and making bold new moves to overcome obstacles seems to have been part of Williams' way of operating in both his personal and professional life, and he's looking to continue that trend in transit and as a first-term mayor. He won the mayoral election on a platform that included improving transportation, and he already has a plan to improve the quality of life in Durham through using transit with a new citywide apprenticeship program. The city will partner with for-profit organizations to provide apprenticeships to people starting at 16 years of age.

"It will allow us to get younger people working earlier, getting W-2s in their hands and occupying their time with something productive, rather than not occupying their time and them spending time in the streets," he says. "So, getting people to work physically requires transit. But also getting them to work strengthens our economy, helps put income in the household at an earlier age and also creates a more safe community because they are working and not causing chaos in the streets."

As a policy maker, Williams says, he embraces a holistic approach to improving people's quality of life, and his work is spent articulating how major components of government are all connected. Transportation impacts workforce development, which influences the economy, which impacts the housing market, he explains.

"That's why I believe in holistic government, and that's what I've been working to do," he says.

Williams was born Scotland Neck and grew up in rural Halifax County, where, he says, most people are poor, but money didn't seem to matter.

"It's a low-wealth area of North Carolina, which is fine," he says. "We didn't need wealth. We basically grew our own vegetables. We had our own farms for protein. We didn't really need a lot of money. Money wasn't a thing for us. We lived a good, simple life."

He remembers a childhood spent close to nature and where music was his passion, and when he left for the big city of Durham, it was his love of music that carried him there and comforted him far from home. He attended North Carolina Central University on music-related scholarships, graduating with a bachelor's degree in music education and psychology, and later went on to earn a master's degree in educational leadership.

After graduation, he worked as a teacher (and was twice nominated as a teacher of the year), principal, senior school administrator and a consultant during Gov. Roy Cooper's first administration. When he was working as a consultant, he got the urge to run for elected office. He had married Zweli, a Zimbabwean he had first met and fell in love with when they were students at NCCU, and found himself struggling to juggle delivery runs for her Zimbabwean catering business and his work.

"Her catering got so popular that she basically was running me ragged," he recalls. "I was in the governor's office leaving to deliver catering for her every day, going back to the office smelling like chicken, and it just wasn't going to work. So I said, 'Listen, we've got to open a restaurant because this catering thing is not going to work.'"

Unable to find financial support from loan institutions or even any other models to follow of other Zimbabwean restaurants in the U.S., they took the leap together.

"We just said, 'Whatever. We'll make it happen.' I dissolved my retirement, and we had \$30,000, and we just built it out ourselves. And the next thing you know, we had a restaurant, and it ended up being the first Zimbabwean restaurant in the United States, and we ended up debt-free because we couldn't get any loans. And we now have three restaurants, and we're debt-free."

When it comes to improving transit, Williams believes in being as bold and is looking forward to helping build a regional network as a GoTriangle board member. From a policy perspective, he says the biggest barrier to improving transit is the outdated way it's funded.

"You shouldn't take 50 years to get something that we need to use now," he says. "We can't accept that's just how it is. We have to apply the pressure to make it what it needs to be, and if that means changing the form, let's look at the end in sight and then say, 'What changes do we need to make?' Please, let's stop looking at it as it is and wasting our time with new plans to come in the future but with the same old tools and mechanisms. Everything needs to be reformed."

Improving transit through multimodal options was one of the pillars of Williams' mayoral campaign, and he explains that one of his employees brought that importance home to him. That employee worked on the other side of Durham from his restaurant, and it would take her two hours one way to get to work. After he learned of her plight, he and his wife instituted a policy for their employees that the restaurant would pay for an Uber in situations when an employee didn't have transportation or when transit connectivity was not good.

"Her entire quality of life was enhanced," he recalls. "And I started thinking about it. 'Why the hell does it take that long to get across one little city?' And if that's the case, we are in archaic ages, if we're even thinking about trying to get across the state. She could get to work faster on a bicycle – if she was physically able – than she could riding a bus."

That experience got him thinking that bike lanes and trails need to be formalized as a mode of transportation, and bus and paratransit options must evolve.

"You should be able to have multiple modes to choose from in order to get from point A to point B," he says. "It's a safety benefit, it's an economic benefit, it's a health benefit, and I just didn't understand why that wasn't more of a priority on all fronts from a holistic manner. So, I started preaching that gospel because I believe that's how we should be living."

For the future, he dreams big for transit. The biggest challenge facing the region is vision, he says, noting, "I think we have to be unapologetically ambitious. I think that's our starting point. I think we have to see through barriers for the sake of our dreams coming through as an organization."

"Other countries are leaving us behind with high-speed rail, and what we call high-speed rail is still slow," he says. "So, we need to think about, 'What is it that we need?' Do we want someone to be able to live in Charlotte and work in Durham and be able to get there within an hour and back, without taking up all their day in transit? What is the quality of life that we want our residents, our citizens, to have? And what is the economic vitality that we want for our communities and cities and municipalities to have?"