MEMORIAL RESOLUTION
WILLIAM WIGGINS, JR.
(1934-2016)

Professor William Wiggins, Jr. was a member of the Indiana University Bloomington community for nearly five decades. During that time he was a loyal and much cherished citizen of his department, his profession, his university and community. He sought the goodness in all—colleagues, students, friends, townsfolk—and patiently prodded them to discover it within themselves and others.

Bill was born May, 1934 in Port Allen, Louisiana and grew up in Louisville, Kentucky. He received his BA from Ohio Wesleyan in 1956. His next two degrees were in theology (Phillip’s School of Theology, BD, Atlanta, Georgia in 1960 and Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary, MTh, Louisville, Kentucky in 1965); he then arrived in Bloomington to begin doctoral studies in Folklore in 1969. Bill became the first African American male to receive a PhD in Folklore in 1974.

Enroute to the completion of his doctorate, Bill served as a graduate Associate Instructor, in fact, the first Associate Instructor, in the department of African-American Studies. He collaborated with two others from the Folklore Institute to develop A150 “Survey of the Culture of Black Americans.” This course still serves as the basic introduction to the department’s curriculum. Bill’s now-legendary lectures and a cadre of enthusiastic and able AI’s brought many from A150 to major or double-major in the department. Bill also developed “The Black Church in America,” still a staple among department offerings. He would later create and teach “Sports and the Afro-American Experience,” a course once featured in an ESPN documentary on collegiate student-athletes. In 1993 Bill was promoted to the rank of Professor of Afro-American Studies.

During the span of his career Bill published widely on a number of subjects touching on folklore. A seasoned raconteur, Bill appreciated a story well-told whether a novel, a yarn, poetry, or song lyric. In spirit, he subscribed to a principle articulated by, among others, Toni Cade Bambara: “Stories are important, they keep us alive.” He was especially drawn to the vernacular of African Americans and coupled his deep interest with his analytical skills to plumb the communal ethos, wisdom, wit, and heroism of African American expression. “O Freedom”, a book-length study of African American Emancipation Celebrations, drew attention to what is widely known as “Juneteenth.” He produced an important manuscript on Joe Louis, the national hero and heavyweight champion. Two documentary films were also developed and produced under the titles of “The Rapture Family.”

Bill’s service commitment to department, university, community, and national boards and committees was exemplary. He was asked to serve in an interim capacity for three administrative positions: Chair of the African American and African Diaspora Studies Department, Dean of the Office of African American Affairs, and Director of the FASE Mentoring Program. He served on the Indiana Historical Society Board for many years. He consulted widely with many institutions as a member of the Smithsonian Institute Advisory Council. To an IUB audience he introduced Dr. Lonnie Bunch, founding Director of the Smithsonian’s National Museum of African American History and Culture which has become a stunning attraction since in its opening a few months ago in Washington, D.C. Bill was the first recipient of the Dr. Herman B Wells Lifetime Achievement Award for individuals who demonstrate dedication and love for students and Indiana University. He was also the first winner of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Building Bridges Award for dedicated service and leadership.

As a teacher Bill Wiggins had an enormous impact on hundreds of students’ lives, undergraduate and graduate. As one colleague has put it, “He didn’t just teach a subject, he taught individuals.” Testimonials to his teaching effectiveness abound. Colleagues noted his patience
with students during office hours and the many students who emerged from his one-one-one and small group office gatherings both informed and smiling.

As a colleague Bill was always generous and courteous. He was an inveterate consensus-builder within the department, listening closely to all sides. He could lower the temperature of a discussion when it needed calming and inject humor and enthusiasm at the proper moment. He took on committee responsibilities with good cheer. Consistently. Bill would return from his many conference or consulting travels with specific information or contact numbers to share with colleagues doing research in the relevant areas.

Perhaps a brief account of a winter afternoon's journey can reveal something of Bill's qualities as friend and scholar. After emerging with two colleagues from a leisurely lunch at the West Baden Hotel in nearby French Lick, Bill insisted that the car's driver redirect away from the return route to Bloomington for a short tour of French Lick. Bill requested three circuits of the town. On the first he related that Joe Louis had trained there and pointed out the sites of the hotel where he stayed with his entourage and the sites of a church serving a small African American community. He related that, to the delight of dozens of fans and onlookers, Louis trained in the lobby of the once-majestic hotel, now with a casino. On the second circuit he talked about the racial policies that prevented Louis and his entourage from staying at the hotel, though Louis was by then revered as a national hero. On the third circuit, Bill illuminated the role and placement of athletics and national, indeed world, politics. Presenting cogent details, the mentoring voices of a folklorist, the historian, and the sociologist were merged with ease and flavored with the tone of a friend.

Bill Wiggins died in December, 2016. He was a loyal and proud citizen of the university and this city in the middle of the Middle West. He was a loyal colleague. He was a loyal friend.

We request that this tribute to William Wiggins be presented in the Bloomington Faculty Council, that it be preserved in the minutes and archive of the Council, and that copies be sent to members of his family.

John McCluskey, Jr.
Emeritus Professor, African American and African Diaspora Studies

Frederick McElroy
Associate Professor, African American and African Diaspora Studies

This resolution will be presented in and become a part of the minutes of the Bloomington Faculty Council.

Copies should be sent to Mrs. Janice and Mary Ellen Wiggins