

Civil rights activist to speak at Wagner commencement

Myrlie Evers-Williams, widow of Medgar Evers, will be the keynote speaker on May 24

By JILLIAN JORGENSEN
STATEN ISLAND ADVANCE

Myrlie Evers-Williams, the civil rights activist and former chairwoman of the NAACP, will be Wagner College's commencement speaker this May 24, the school announced.

"We are deeply honored that Myrlie Evers-Williams, a woman of unequalled moral leadership for civil rights and American democracy, will be with the members of the Wagner community for our commencement. This will be an occasion to remember," Wagner College President Richard Guarasci said in a statement.

Mrs. Evers-Williams, the wife of slain civil rights icon Medgar Evers, served as chairwoman of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People from 1995 to 1998, the first woman ever to chair the civil rights organization. Mrs. Evers-Williams is credited with helping bring the organization out of turmoil — it was \$4 million in debt when she took over, and had been the subject of scandal when former executive director Benjamin Chavis used funds to ward off a sexual harassment lawsuit.



EVERS-
WILLIAMS

Mrs. Evers-Williams, a native of Vicksburg, Miss., met her husband, Medgar Evers, at Alcorn State University in Mississippi. They worked together organizing voter registration drives and civil rights demonstrations — but the two became a high-profile target because of activism.

Their home in Jackson, Miss., was firebombed in 1962, and a year later, Medgar Evers was shot and killed by a sniper in front of his home. His killer, Byron De La Beckwith, was not convicted of murder until 1994.

Despite the loss of her husband, Mrs. Evers-Williams remained active in the civil rights movement. She moved to California and co-wrote a book about her husband, "For Us." She made an unsuccessful bid for a spot in Congress in 1970, and later served as a commissioner of public works for Los Angeles — becoming the first black woman named to the Board of Public Works there in 1988.

She started the Medgar Evers Institution, which promotes education, training and economic development, after her tenure at the NAACP. In 1999, she published a memoir, "Watch Me Fly: What I learned on the Way to Becoming the Woman I Was Meant to Be."

Mrs. Evers-Williams became the first woman and layperson to ever offer an invocation at a presidential inauguration when she did so for President Barack Obama's second inauguration.

The commencement ceremony will be held May 24, beginning at 10 a.m.