

# FROM POTS AND PANS TO BRASS BANDS

## The musical journey of Herman Williams IV

By Anita Oubre

**M**overs and shakers are the people who are constantly in pursuit of knowledge. Herman Williams IV has taken his love of learning and acquired skills and is making things happen in New Orleans. His love for his hometown is apparent, and although he could pursue a career anywhere in the world with his talent and education, he chooses to stay in New Orleans and says, “I cannot imagine living anywhere else.”

The 23-year-old is the drummer, trumpeter and leader of the Knockaz Brass Band, a powerhouse of professionally trained musicians who bring the sound of New Orleans traditional brass band music to the table.

The band was formed in 2014 when a group of St. Augustine High School students entered “Class got Brass,” an annual competition for band programs across the state to showcase the New Orleans brass band sound. Schools are rewarded, not only monetarily, but with instruments and repair as well as bragging rights and pride. That particular year, the group won first prize in the competition and brought back a \$10,000 check to their school.

“This was the beginning for us,” Herman said. “Although our group members were all on different levels, we realized together that we could do something special and also make a few dollars on the weekends.”

Fast forward the clock and, as of today, The Knockaz Brass Band continues to receive five-star ratings from clients, vendors and wedding sites such as The Knot. They provide a professional and engaging experience that brought joy to over 300 events annually

PHOTOS PROVIDED BY HERMAN WILLIAMS IV

pre-pandemic.

Herman takes pride in having a stellar reputation and he boasts the group has even traveled to perform across the country. Besides raw talent, the group is known for being prompt, well-dressed and friendly, while providing exceptional customer service. Herman explained that he was building the band and his clientele base while applying college core lessons to guide him along the way.

“The average musician who is reliable will get the gig over the best musician who is not reliable,” Herman said with emphasis. Reflecting on the many lessons he has been taught by teachers and mentors over the years, he added, “The actual gig itself is not the only place where reliability comes in. The behind-the-scenes work is just as important. That includes taking care of emails, logistics, payroll, human resource management, preparing contracts and invoices, as well as fielding inquiries that may or may not lead to future gigs.”

Growing up in the Carrollton neighborhood, Herman first attended Henry W. Allen Elementary School and later McDonough 15 High School in the French Quarter. He laughs as he



recalls, “My very first instruments were my mother’s pots and pans.”

While most kids dreamed of trips to the local toy store, Herman loved going to Guitar Center. In middle school, the students started out in music class playing the recorder. The students who showed promise were given an instrument. Drums were the first instrument he picked up, and then around fourth grade, his middle school band instructor, Kelvin Harrison, an award-winning band director and established jazz musician, put a trumpet in his hands to play.

It was not too unfamiliar to Herman who had briefly played trumpet before when the legendary Walter Payton, a friend of his grandmother, introduced him to the popular horn instrument. Herman recalls spending time at the home of Payton who had a grandson about the same age. Play dates consisted of studying sheet music and writing out the music, as well as playing the songs.

“Even as a child, I’ve always loved music. It relaxes me and is another language to learn,” recalled Herman.

Herman noted that his mother, Leslie Williams, is a gifted singer and he brags that she could sing professionally. She has been an educator for the past 30 years and holds Master’s degrees from Xavier and Holy Cross universities. His mother has

always been the major voice of direction in Herman’s upbringing.

His father, Herman Williams III, is a pastor with a Bachelor’s degree from Union Baptist Theological Seminary and a skilled carpenter. Some of Herman’s fondest memories growing up took place on fishing excursions with his father. Herman reflected on being out on the water all day and the patience it taught him. “There were days when we would spend hours and hours on the water and not catch a thing and other times, we would have too many fish to take home,” Herman recalled.

Being brought up in the church has made a big impact on Herman’s life. “Faith is everything,” he said. “I encourage people to not be bound by the rules of

PHOTOS PROVIDED BY: HERMAN WILLIAMS III





any specific denomination in Christianity but to make sure they have a relationship with God.” Herman spends ample time in church, as he is the drummer for both New Hope Baptist and Providence Baptist churches, and he defines music as “an avenue to a spiritual connection.”

Herman’s formative years as a student at St. Augustine High School played an integral part in molding and shaping him into the professional he is today. “As a Black man there are many struggles in life. St. Aug taught me how to maneuver around those struggles and still be successful,” he said.

Besides a rigorous academic schedule, there were many life lessons that were stressed on a daily basis, Herman noted. These included responsibility, being respectful to others and taking life seriously. As the trumpet section leader for four years in the internationally acclaimed Marching 100 band, that responsibility taught him leadership and management skills. It was during those years that he became serious about his craft, putting in the hours of practice necessary to become the best he could possibly be.

“We were the hardest working band in Mardi Gras,” Herman proudly stated. “We practiced for hours, and in those days we marched pretty much every night.” He reflects on his days at St. Aug as some of the best days of his life.

The discipline and lessons taught by role models such as Coach Payne, Eddie Williams, Jeffrey Herbert and Derrick

Pannell at St. Augustine were not in vain. Herman received a full scholarship to Tulane University where he majored in marketing with a minor in management. While in college he held a position as a student worker in the dean’s office at LSU School of Medicine and after graduation he was encouraged to apply for a full-time position. Today he is a coordinator with the Office of Undergraduate Medical Education.

Herman stays busy between his full-time job and his band, but he also has a full plate managing his newly acquired rental property. As a first-time homeowner he has new responsibilities to tend to. He takes the role of landlord seriously, especially after watching his parents be landlords.

Before the pandemic, Herman doesn’t recall having much leisure time. Since the number of gigs has declined drastically in the past year, Herman has picked up a new hobby. He enjoys biking and can easily pedal a good 15 miles when the weather permits. Listening to music for pleasure is also relaxing to Herman. And, of course, there’s the food. Herman enjoys dining out and appreciates the traditional fare that is world-renowned.



Most of all, he appreciates living in what he calls “the best city in the world. We have the best culture, music, history and real estate. New Orleans is a big pot of gumbo that includes everything.”

