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**Contact:** Ben Laurro, Pure Publicity  
818.753.4056 or [Ben@purepublicity.com](mailto:Ben@purepublicity.com)

# Inspiring Youth to a Greater Purpose

## *One Black Man's Journey from Poverty to Ph.D. through Education, Determination and Robotics*

**Atlanta, GA** - While American history was made with the inauguration of the first African American President Barack Obama, young people are realizing their career aspirations are endless. **Dr. Andrew Williams** is inspiring African Americans to overcome obstacles of higher education through his personal story of education, determination and robotics.



**College education discrepancies between the races are startling. 2008 statistics reveal that African Americans make up only 13.3 percent of incoming college freshman, with 9 percent receiving bachelor's degrees (8 percent in science and technology majors). However, white students comprise almost 75 percent of incoming freshmen, with 70 percent earning bachelor's degrees (67 percent in science and technology). (Science Magazine, May 16, 2008).**

Williams believes these findings are a result of the lack of role models in the science and engineering field, unlike the entertainment and sports industry.

In his memoir, ***Out of the Box: Building Robots, Transforming Lives*** (Lift Every Voice, January 2009), Williams shares his childhood affinity for inventions, gadgets, basketball, spiritual faith and his pursuit of seemingly impossible dreams.

William was born in 1964 to an African American military father and a Korean-born mother who battled mental illness. His family moved from the tiny trailer where Andrew slept inside a cardboard box, to a poor community in Junction City, Kansas. After high school, Williams became the first African-American to earn a doctorate in engineering from the University of Kansas. In 1992, Williams, who had remained abstinent, married his graduate school sweetheart. Wedding guests included family, friends and Coach Tony Dungy.

The Williams moved to Milwaukee, where they encountered racial prejudice and suffered the loss of their still-born child. After much soul-searching, Williams felt called to teach at a HBCU (Historically Black College and University). "I have always wanted to uplift and enable African American young people academically, vocationally, spiritually and economically... to inspire young men and women to dream beyond themselves," says Williams.

In 2004, Williams accepted a teaching position at Spelman College in Atlanta, the oldest African American college for women. One of his goals was to help young women pursue the field of computer science and robotics, so Williams formed a robotics team with six African American females. A year later, the "SpelBots" became the first all-female African American team to compete in the RoboCup Soccer Tournament in Japan, the international "Olympics" of robotics and artificial intelligence. Williams is currently working on a humanoid robot. The use of robots has expanded into numerous fields including health, medical, space exploration, military and search and rescue.

Today, Williams, a recognized leader in robotics education for African Americans, continues to point students toward their potential success in life. "My story is about the joy of education and robots and artificial intelligence. It's about not letting others define your destiny by putting you in a box of low expectations despite your upbringing or social status," he says. His official website is [www.andrewbwilliams.com](http://www.andrewbwilliams.com).

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### **About the Author**

Andrew Williams, the Founder of the First All-Female RoboCup Robot Soccer Team, was the first African American to earn his Ph.D. in Electrical Engineering at the University of Kansas, his M.S. in Electrical and Computer Engineering at Marquette University, and his B.S. in Electrical Engineering at the University of Kansas. He's currently the Associate Professor of Computer and Information Sciences at Spelman College in Atlanta and founded and directs the Advancing Robotics Technology for Societal Impact (ARTSI) Alliance, [www.artsalliance.org](http://www.artsalliance.org), which provides educational robotics programs centered around healthcare, the arts, and entrepreneurship for over a dozen HBCUs and K-12 institutions. He's also an Associate Minister at Mt. Calvary Missionary Baptist Church. He and his wife reside in Atlanta with their three children.

### ***Out of the Box: Building Robots, Transforming Lives***

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### **Sample Interview Questions for Dr. Andrew Williams:**

1. What was it like to be raised in an interracial family? How did that impact your world view?
2. How did you deal with challenges you faced in your life: poverty, your mom's mental illness, death of first child?
3. When do you discover your affinity for gadgets and inventions?
4. What made you decide to leave a faculty position at a major research institution (University of Iowa) and teach at an HBCU for women?
5. What can be done to improve the education of African Americans and other minorities in the high-tech field?
6. What are some stereotypes about the technology and robotic fields?
7. What are some important points a mentor should focus on when trying to impact the lives of young people?
8. What have you learned from the young people you have worked with that has surprised you?
9. Who are some of the successful women who became part of the first black, all-female RoboCup team?
10. President Barack Obama has just been sworn in as the 44<sup>th</sup> President of the United States. How has that reality affected the young people you teach?