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## **Retail trailblazer Cheryl Williams retires after 47 years**

By

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When Cheryl Williams got her first job as a scale attendant at a Kroger store in Gahanna, OH, she did not expect that it would lead to an almost five decade long career in produce — especially considering her produce manager didn't believe she belonged.

Williams was born on the family dairy farm in Ohio in the late 1950s. Though the extended family is still in the farming business, Williams family moved to the “big city of Columbus, OH,” when she was just 3 years of age. Her mom was a homemaker, and her dad went to work for the Coca Cola Co., enjoying a long career. Williams went to the local high school and had no aspirations to have a career or go to college. “I wanted to stay home, have babies and do just what my mom did,” she said. “College was never in the cards.”



Cheryl Williams learned to

play golf so she could be part of Kroger's annual produce golf outing. Here she is flanked by colleagues Mark McLaughlin and Tracy Patterson.

Then life happened.

"I got a job at the local Kroger on May 2, 1974, when I was 17 and a senior in high school," she said.

Kroger had featured a produce department in which all the fresh vegetables and fruits were packaged, but the retailer was transitioning to a bulk display format because of customer demand. "I worked as a scale attendant," she said. "My job was to wait on customers. I learned how to prepare, weigh and package their produce."

Williams was hired as a part-time employee but went to full-time when she graduated from high school in June of that year. "I fell in love with produce," she said.

For the next four years, she stayed at that store working for what she called "a chauvinist produce manager. He refused to teach me anything," she recalled. "He told me my job was to just look pretty."

Williams was determined to learn. She enlisted a fellow produce clerk, who was getting the benefit of on-the-job training, to learn the ropes. "It was a union shop, and I wasn't supposed to be working without being clocked in, but I'd stay late or come in early, and Frank Mesaros taught me everything he knew."

After a while, Williams presented her case to an executive, asking how she could get promoted. He told her that he would come to the store unannounced and check out her work. With Mesaros' help, Williams learned how to set a produce department, with waterfall displays being her specialty. In 1978, true to his word, the produce executive promoted her to a Columbus store and named her assistant produce manager. Williams said her produce managers had no idea how she got the job or learned those skills.



Williams built this display

for the Annual Potato Lover's Month contest.

It still wasn't smooth sailing from there on out. "Women were not taken seriously," she said. "Tony Young was the produce manager, and it took him a while to warm up to me. But he did and we became fast friends."

Over the next 25-plus years, the Ohio native stayed in her environ working at more than a half dozen stores in the area as assistant produce manager, floral manager or produce manager. One of the highlights was being named opening manager for the Max Town Kroger in Westerville, OH, in 1996. She said Kroger management considered that store to be a blueprint for the future. "The fact that they trusted me to open that store was a feather in my cap," she remembered.

Williams married and had a daughter along the way, which caused her to pull back a bit while her daughter was very young. She also served a stint as a produce merchandiser and a produce specialist and opened several more new stores as the opening produce manager. In fact, she was named one of Kroger's Produce Managers of the Year in 2003 when she was the opening manager at a Kroger's outlet in Hebron, OH.

It was during that three-year stint that she met her current husband, Gary Williams. A few months into their dating life, he announced that his heart was in Florida and that is where he wanted to live. Luckily, one of Williams' earlier colleagues in Columbus was running the Kroger buying office in Vero Beach, FL. In 2006, The couple moved to Florida, were married on the beach in Vero Beach and Williams began a more than 10-year gig in that buying office. She started as an inspector and transitioned to a buyer in relatively short order, becoming the East Coast vegetable buyer for most of that time. One year, the Florida Fruit and Vegetable Association honored her and Kroger as "Merchandiser of the Year."

In 2017, Kroger offered a lucrative retirement package to many of its long-term employees and Williams said the package was just too good to turn down.





Williams and her crew at the

Grand Opening of Max  
Town Kroger in Westerville, OH, in 1996.

She and her husband moved back to Ohio — for the time being — as she wanted to be closer to her daughter and grandson. Once back in Ohio she was lured out of retirement and worked for two different suppliers over the last few years, Mike Pirrone Produce Inc. in Capac, MI, as a sales representative and Bottomley Evergreens & Farms Inc. in Sparta, NC, as director of sales and procurement. In both instances, Williams enjoyed working with long-time friends, though she insisted on working remotely, even before the pandemic was a thing. She retired for good in February, declaring it was time and noting that being a supplier was not as fun as being a buyer — especially in her time.

“I loved my job,” she said. “I spent my day on the phone talking about produce with old friends. I loved putting out fires.”

She described her time as a Kroger buyer as being “at the top of my game.” Every day was a good day.

She does lament that retail produce buying has changed, which she saw firsthand as a supplier selling to retailers across the country. “When I was at Kroger, we were all about relationships and keeping our suppliers solvent. That was very important. Now you have people in buying positions that do not know the difference between an apple and an orange. It used to be about who you knew. They’d protect you and you’d protect them. Now it’s all about the mighty dollar. Who can get us the product at the cheapest cost? It is sad.”

Williams admitted that is the major reason she decided to concentrate on being a grandmother. She said being a produce supplier is very difficult these days and very hard to make it, but she reiterated that she loved her career and particularly loved all the great relationships she made in the produce industry. Her tagline on her email signature sums it up: “When your passion and career align, it’s difficult to separate the two!”

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In retirement, she plans to enjoy her extended family as much as she can as she knows that she and Gary will most likely end up in Florida. Her decade in the Sunshine State convinced her that winters are not all they are cracked up to be. “We have to move somewhere warm,” she quipped.

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