

# NEIGHBORS ON THE *Fairway*

AN EXCLUSIVE PUBLICATION BRINGING MISSION HILLS, FAIRWAY AND MISSION WOODS NEIGHBORS TOGETHER



*Picture-Perfect Living*



## Picture-Perfect Living

BY SUSAN PEPPERDINE  
PHOTOS BY NATASHA CALL HARRISON

Picture this: “Photography is a hobby, vocation and mental health tonic for me,” Debbie Williams says. That’s a big reason she’s especially happy to be living in beautiful surroundings in Fairway, “The City of Trees.” Her main subject matter is flowers, including the lotus blossoms in her neighbor’s yard.

The Williams family includes Debbie, husband Jerry and sons Jeremy and Jordan, who moved from Atlanta in 2011 when Sprint transferred Jerry to work at the Overland Park headquarters.

To make the move as smooth as possible for his family, he arrived first to search for a house that was as close as possible in character and features to their Atlanta home of eight years. He found it in the Fieldston neighborhood of Fairway. “It’s almost exactly like our house in Atlanta and is close to the art community Debbie is now involved in,” Jerry says.

### First Date

At the University of Texas in Austin in 1987 Debbie Scott, then vice president of a Black law students group, and Jerry L. Williams, president of a group of Black graduate business school students, met through a student social event. “There was a spark between us – and he could dance,” Debbie laughs. He asked if she’d like to have dinner “sometime.” She immediately responded with – Jerry still claims – “How about Wednesday?”

He took her up on the suggestion for a first date at Bennigan’s, where they found out they had a lot in common. “We both liked music and dancing and

wanted to travel to faraway places,” Jerry said. “I think we both knew early on we were going to get married.” After both graduated in 1988, Jerry headed to Chicago for work and Debbie to Little Rock. They continued dating long distance, taking turns traveling to visit each other.

“We were married at a Baptist church in Memphis in December 1990, so this December marks our 30th anniversary,” Debbie says.

### Debbie’s Education and Career

A descendant of enslaved people, Debbie was born and grew up in Memphis, near Fayette County, Tennessee, in the area where her maternal grandparents had been farmers and her paternal grandparents had been sharecroppers who picked and chopped cotton. She is also from a line of military veterans.

As her high school valedictorian in 1980 and recipient of a National Achievement Scholarship for Negro Students, she started getting lots of college catalogs. “I was accepted at both Yale and Princeton University, but chose Princeton because I learned it was better for undergraduates,” she said.

In 1984 Debbie earned her undergraduate degree in politics and a certificate in African-American Studies from Princeton. Her juris doctorate in 1988 is from the University of Texas Law School at Austin.

After completing law school, Debbie interviewed with Hillary Clinton at the now famous Rose Law Firm in Little Rock, Arkansas, but didn’t get hired. But she was hired as an attorney from 1988-90 at Wright Lindsey & Jennings – the same firm where Bill Clinton had practiced from 1981-83 between his two terms as governor. “The office was near the governor’s mansion, and I would see him and say ‘Hi’ when he would come into McDonald’s after he’d been out jogging,” she remembers. Another bit of trivia is that she lived near the Governor’s Mansion, which was featured in the opening credits of the “Designing Women” TV show.

Her last paid employment before having her children was serving as a law clerk in Houston from 1993 to 1995 to U. S. Magistrate Judge Calvin Botley, United States District Court, in the Southern District of Texas. She was also licensed to practice law in Texas in 1990 and Georgia in 2005 when living in those states. Both licenses are currently in inactive status, subject to renewal.

### Jerry’s Education and Career

Jerry was born in San Francisco and when he was little, he remembers his dad worked at an animal shelter and would bring dogs home at night for them to take care of. His family moved to Houston when he was 5 and he grew up with two sisters, now living in Spring, not far from Houston. He also has another sister who still lives in Houston. He graduated from high school in 1979.

In 1984 he earned dual degrees in chemistry and chemical engineering by first attending Texas Southern University, a historically Black college, majoring in chemistry and then transferring to Rice University in the third year to study chemical engineering. “I had gone to all African-American schools, so it was a culture shock when I got to Rice,” he says. “Most kids have that experience much earlier in life.”

After graduation, Jerry worked for two years as a process engineer in a Hoechst Celanese plastics plant. “I’d always wanted to be an engineer, but the work was a lot less fun than I expected,” he said. So he decided to go back to school and received his MBA in 1988 from the University of Texas. That proved to be a wise move in another way since that’s where he met Debbie.

After earning his MBA, he was an information systems consultant for Andersen Consulting and was immediately assigned to a project in their Chicago office, which took him away from Debbie, then in Little Rock.

Since joining Sprint (now T-Mobile) 30 years ago, he has served in various roles, including account executive, executive assistant to former CEO Dan Hesse and more recently director of customer care and now director of value creation and execution. “I enjoy the people interaction and have managed internal teams of up to 250 employees and outsourced teams of approximately 3,500,” he explains. “I traveled the globe like a crazy person – especially to the Philippines, Romania, Costa Rica, Panama and Guatemala.” That stopped with the pandemic and probably will not fully return.

Debbie notes that, "Because of Jerry's work, our family has lived in all four continental U.S. time zones: Atlanta (Eastern), Houston, Dallas/Plano and Kansas City/Fairway (Central), Denver/Littleton (Mountain), San Francisco/Concord (Pacific).

### Jeremy and Jordan

Sons Jeremy, 25, and Jordan, 24, played soccer and basketball as kids and Jordan also ran track, specializing in the triple jump. Both are talented musicians, Jeremy on the trumpet and Jordan on the trombone. They graduated from Shawnee Mission East two years apart and played in symphonic bands that won honors in Winter Park, Colorado.

In his teens Jeremy scored silver on the National Latin exam and was a member of the Nelson-Atkins Teen Advisory Guild (TAG, now known as Nelson-Atkins Teens). He attended Oglethorpe University in Atlanta. When not working, he enjoys playing trumpet and also guitar and writes poetry and music, which he and a friend plan to record for potential sales.

Jordan attended Johnson County Community College and Claflin University, a historically Black college in Orangeburg, South Carolina. Like his mother, Jordan enjoys art and photography. "He took amazing photographs at the Nelson-Atkins Chinese New Year Celebration 2013, which are still on the Facebook page," she said. In 2015 he won the teen award in the Fairway Art Contest for a photo of their border collie mix Pico. He also enjoys basketball, longboarding, video games and, like his dad, is a talented dancer.

"Jeremy's super trait is his clever, quiet humor and Jordan's fashion sense and dance moves make him stand out," his mom says. "Both shine the light of kindness with their eyes and smiles."

"Our boys know how to dream big," their dad adds. Both are now pursuing their dreams in Atlanta, where Jordan moved in early November to join his brother who had returned there several years ago.

### Promoting Diversity

Both Jerry and Debbie have been involved in promoting diversity initiatives through educational institutions, businesses and community organizations.

At T-Mobile Jerry is director and co-chair of the company's Multicultural Alliance employee resource group (ERG), which has just under 20,000 members. The Alliance is made up of four employee networks: Black, Hispanic/LatinX, Asia/Pacific and indigenous groups. Our main purpose is "to inform the company and celebrate the culture of each group," he said. "There's usually a cultural event or important date every month." For Juneteenth 7,500 participated in a videoconference that included a panel discussion with a notable speaker."

One brush with fame came when the jazz/funk band Jerry had played in at Kashmere High School in Houston was featured in the 2011 Jamie Foxx documentary "Thunder Soul" about the band

leader who turned a bunch of typical high school student musicians into a legendary band.

Debbie has been active with Princeton for more than two decades, including conducting interviews to screen students for admission. In succession, she was co-chair of the Atlanta committee of the Princeton Prize in Race Relations, vice chair of the national board and served as chair of the national board from 2012 to 2015.

In recognition of exemplary work for her alma mater, Debbie was awarded the 2014 Award for Service for Princeton, in part for helping to coordinate the national awards program to recognize high school students who made a significant improvement in race relations in their schools and communities. She also earned the 2014 Award for Service to Princeton.

Currently she is co-chair for the Greater Kansas City region of the Princeton Prize in Race Relations and is active in leadership with the local Princeton Club. "I'm also assistant class historian because my parents didn't throw things away!" she laughs. "I have boxes of things like my class registration card from freshman year."

In addition, while her sons were in college, Debbie served with other parents on the Diversity and Inclusion Committee to work on diversity issues in the Shawnee Mission school district from 2015 to 2019.

### Debbie's Photography

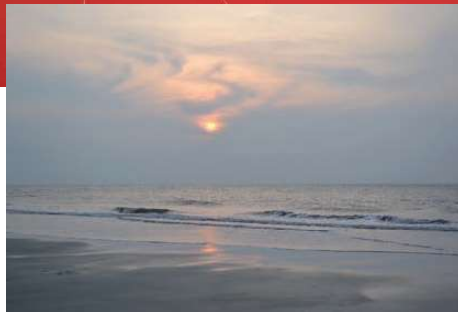
Debbie got involved in scrapbooking and is a "memory keeper" who turned photographer after receiving her first DSLR camera as a gift in 2011. "I have discovered that my photographs allow others to journey with me to botanical gardens and the beauty in my neighborhood even if they cannot join me in person," she explains. "I primarily shoot botanicals in residential or garden settings, along with vacation sites with my family and friends."

She enjoys crafting her style as a self-taught photographer, and says she has been greatly influenced by her experiences with the artists she encountered as a volunteer and past board member of the Kansas City Artists Coalition ([kansascityartistscoalition.org](http://kansascityartistscoalition.org)). Her first solo exhibition was at the coalition's gallery in 2017, then in the River Market area. In 2015 she was a winner in the adult division of the Fairway Art Contest.

Her nature photography is also featured in *For Love – Prayers and Reflections for Lent* by her friend Claire Annelise Smith, Ph.D., a life coach who lives in Mission.

Debbie gives much credit for her artistic inspiration to her late neighbor Betty Mordy, a Master Gardener whose backyard lotus pond was the primary source of many of her photographs, including ones in a showing at a Prairie Village coffee shop. "Fairway gave me somebody I didn't know I needed," she says. "She was everything to me." Betty also introduced Debbie to the American Association of University Women (AAUW) and, in her 80s, to yoga at Fairway City Hall.

*continued on page 10...*





In addition she says, "I'm also grateful to Steve Scharf at Fairway Frames who gave me the opportunity to be the 'Artist in the Window' in September of consecutive years for 'A Lotus Grows in Fairway' and 'From There to Here.'"

### Community Activities

"I like to call myself a professional volunteer," Debbie says.

Currently she's a governing board member of Johnson County Developmental Supports ([jocogov.org/dept/developmental-supports/home](http://jocogov.org/dept/developmental-supports/home)), a Johnson County government agency that serves county residents with intellectual and developmental disabilities by providing programs to facilitate personal and career development, including payment for meaningful work. "My favorite part is working with emerging artists from JCDS and accompanying them to experience special exhibitions at the Nelson Museum, where they are often treated to docent-led activities."

Through Sprint Jerry got involved with and has served on the board of Kansas City Friends of Alvin Ailey since 2014, reaching out to underserved communities. "I was always amazed at what the kids had to go through to participate in the annual summer camp," he says. "They get to dance and learn about the world. It changes lives!"

In 2014 the Southern Christian Leadership Conference presented Jerry the Black Achiever Award for his community work with Black youths through Alvin Ailey and for his role as an African-American business executive.



### Keeping the Faith

When living in Atlanta, both Jerry and Debbie were ordained as deacons at Second Ponce de Leon Baptist Church, the first African-Americans to serve in that role since the church's founding in 1904. Most memorably, the family went on an international mission trip to Chengdu in China. "The four of us taught English for seven days and found everyone was so eager to learn," she said. "It was uncanny how at home we felt." Chengdu is where the pandas are bred, and their group was excited to get to visit them. The family also participated in a church-building project in Mount Sterling, Kentucky.

Since moving to Fairway, they have been active members of Old Mission United Methodist Church. While in school, their sons both played in the Easter and Christmas church orchestras and volunteered with the vacation Bible school. "We miss being back in our beautiful church building with our amazing and welcoming church family," Debbie says.

### Around the World

In addition to the mission trip to China, Debbie and Jerry took advantage of other opportunities to introduce their sons to different cultures around the world.

"We began our international travels as a family in 2009 to visit our German exchange student at his home near Frankfurt," says Debbie. "From there, we went to Paris. They also traveled to Rome and Barcelona, Spain, as a family."



Another favorite vacation spot is St. Simon's Island, Georgia, which they discovered by winning the bid at a 2004 charity auction to benefit the DeKalb County Medical Center in Georgia. "It's a beautiful place to get quiet, rest and relax," Debbie says. As a couple, Jerry and Debbie have also enjoyed short trips to Tokyo, Hong Kong and Florence, Italy.

### Loving the Neighborhood

"What we like best is our neighbors, the beauty of our neighborhood and the walking retreat it has become for us during the pandemic," Jerry says. "Since the pandemic I've discovered I really enjoy walking, two to four miles at a time, and meeting people along the way." Many neighbors are the same ones he sees as a regular at Sylvester Powell Community Center. "Plus, you never know when you will meet Mayor Melanie Hepperly during your walk!"

Debbie formerly served as the block representative to the Fieldston Home Association. "Since moving here, we have hosted fish fries and small New Year's Eve parties," she says. "This year we also participated in a safe driveway Halloween after families with small children suggested it."

"We absolutely love this neighborhood and all the big trees," Jerry notes. And as he and Debbie discovered, Fairway is a welcoming place for both trees and families to put down roots.

