The two-year Park Ranger program came to an end. Williams and most of his peers graduated with associate’s degrees. Many of the program’s alumni became upstanding citizens after all. But Williams realized that what he wanted was a bit different from that of his friends, a bit more … academic. He received a full-time job at Fairmount Park, paid his way through the last two years of his bachelor’s degree program and then strolled into Montague’s office. Williams wanted a facility recommendation. He was applying for a master’s program in public administration at Widener University.

“I want to study in this program,” Williams told Montague. “So I can be successful like you.”

Cleaning up a messy situation

It was 2008, and tensions were mounting with city unions. The Streets Department was dedicated to making Philadelphia one of America’s greenest cities. But the department’s tight budget meant that new green initiatives had to help the city save money—or, as many union members saw it, help the city cut jobs when unemployment was already bad enough.

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Williams’ first move was to assure the unions that no jobs were at risk. His second was to promise community leaders that his plan of using one BigBelly to replace every three traditional trashcans wouldn’t compromise neighborhoods’ cleanliness.

Then Williams had to realize these promises. The BigBellies proved so successful that the necessary garbage personnel dropped from 34 to nine. So Williams devised a plan to re-employ the other 25, largely in recycling. Then he helped community leaders purchase their own extra BigBellies, so that neighborhoods would be cleaner than ever. The result? Happy unions, happy residents and $7 million in the city’s coffers. And eventually, Williams’ promotion to commissioner of L&I.

Staying optimistic

Today, Williams lives with his wife, Melissa, and his children in Northeast Philadelphia. But he frequently treks back to West Oak Lane to visit his mom and coach youth sports. The drive sometimes takes him down Ogontz Avenue, a street he knew as a child for its vacant lots and blight. It’s a different place now. The boarded-up windows are disappearing. Property values are up. The streets, too, are much cleaner.

A few miles away is Fairmount, where he once led students from the city’s worst schools on their first nature walks. And two miles from Fairmount is Temple, where Williams himself was led through its first exploration of academia. Of course, in a downtown office 10 minutes south, 55,000 problems await. But Williams doesn’t stress. After all, he is a quintessential optimist for a reason.