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. One young man in the program exemplified the problem. On one hand, he was a great kid—respectful to his peers and to Montague, quick to stir laughter and very intelligent. “I could see it in his eyes,” Montague said. “Those wheels started turning every time I posed a question.”

The boy would often halfway raise his hand. But then he would glance at his classmates, see them slouching back in their chairs or gazing out the window, and change his mind. His hand would drop and he would stare down at his desk.

The boy was a young Williams, someone who could have turned left or right. “He could have ended up working in a low-paying, unchallenging job,” Montague said. “But, oh, Carlton would have been so much smarter than his boss.”

To Williams’ benefit, he had solid roots. His father spent his 37-year career in the Veterans Administration. His mother worked for most of her life in a factory. Montague describes Williams’ parents as possessing “tremendous, worldly intelligence.” Williams didn’t quite have that at 18. What he had was “great academic potential,” Montague said. “But his world gave him no outlet for that. He needed minority role models like me to nurture those gifts.”

Enter Williams, a young deputy commissioner in the sanitation division of the Streets Department. He had enjoyed a charmed career ever since Mayor John F. Street tapped him in 2000 for a position helping create, serendipitously, the Parks and Recreation Department. Now, Williams was helping veteran streets Commissioner Clarena Tolson spearhead Philadelphia’s Unlitter Us campaign, remove up to 7.8 million pounds of trash during annual spring cleanups and establish one of the greenest trash disposal systems in the country using BigBelly compactors.

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 BigBells 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 BigBells, so that neighborhoods would be cleaner than ever. The result? Happy unions, happy residents and $1 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 his 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.