



Hampton Woman Joins FBI

By P.J. BUDAHN
Staff Writer

NORFOLK — Jerria L. Williams is as poised and polished as a fashion model stepping from the pages of Vogue magazine.

But her purse often contains two items not normally found among a cover girl's collection of warpaint — a revolver and a golden badge.

"It may sound mushy, but I'm proud to be an FBI agent," she said.

Miss Williams, 26, is the latest addition to the FBI's 35-agent office in Tidewater.

She is the first black female to take up duties here as a special agent.

"To me, the FBI used to be (a bunch of) white males with dark hair and dark suits. It was a mysterious organization," said the Hampton High School graduate.

Perhaps no path leads unerringly into the ranks of the nation's elite law enforcement outfit.

But Miss Williams arrived at "the bureau" by a special route.

A graduate of Morgan State University in Baltimore, she studied psychology and French in Switzerland for a year under a scholarship.

Psychology was her main interest.

Getting to understand people was a skill she acquired early as an Air Force brat, uprooted for places like England, Germany, France and Morocco.

"Psychology was taking that (childhood experience) and moving into a career," she said.

For two and a half years she gained some practical experience as a juvenile probation counselor in Newport News. She worked with troubled kids and their parents.

"On a one-to-one basis, they were delightful kids," she said. "You could like them without liking what they had done."

Then why do nice kids do rotten things?

"It's a low self-image. I saw it over and over again," she said.

"Most of them didn't get any encouragement at home. Going out and robbing a house was exciting. It was more an entertainment than a conscious effort to do something wrong."

Eventually, the frustrations of trying to salvage lives that didn't want to be salvaged made her look for a change.

She first read about FBI recruiting in a newsletter published by the Peninsula Womens Network.

"I was looking for a career where I could fit in and grow," she said.

At first, she wasn't even aware the FBI accepted women agents.

The bureau opened its gates to females in 1972 and now has 430 women among its nearly 8,000 agents.

In September, she entered the rigorous FBI Academy in Quantico for four months.

The schedule broke down into three basic areas — firearms, physical training and classroom work.

"Any one of them wouldn't have been too bad, but all of them were equally stressed," she said.

Firearms — which she hadn't dealt with much before — were a special concern, as they are to all new agents.

"When I'm working with fellow agents, I want to be sure the

others are confident about my (marksmanship) skills," she said.

Miss Williams said being a woman and being black haven't created any problems or caused any special comment since coming to Norfolk in January.

"When you say, 'FBI — I want to talk to you,' the response is the same as a white male would get."

In fact, that aspect of the job — the attention — is the main drawback that Miss Williams has encountered so far.

Her parents, Buford and Odessa Williams of Hampton, and her sisters Lisa and Janine might be proud of her.

But a lot of people are intimidated by the image of an FBI agent.

And intimidation isn't the response an attractive single woman likes when she's off work and at a social gathering.

"If they find out you're with the FBI, many people keep asking questions," Miss Williams said.

"So I just tell them I'm with the Justice Department."

Miss Williams is the latest addition to the FBI's area office.

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