

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with The Honorable Lillian Burke

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Burke, Lillian, 1915-2012
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Lillian Burke,
Dates:	June 17, 2004
Bulk Dates:	2004
Physical Description:	6 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:44:21).
Abstract:	Municipal court judge The Honorable Lillian Burke (1917 - 2012) became the first African American woman to sit on the bench in the State of Ohio, when she was appointed to the Cleveland Municipal Court in 1969. Burke was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on June 17, 2004, in Cleveland, Ohio. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2004_082
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Attorney and retired judge Lillian Walker Burke was born in 1915, and grew up in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. After graduating from high school, Burke attended Ohio State University, where she received her bachelor's of science degree in education in 1947. In 1951, she received her law degree from the Cleveland Marshall College of Law, now part of Cleveland State University, and was admitted to the Ohio Bar.

While pursuing her law degree, Burke worked as a teacher in the Cleveland Public Schools. After graduating from law school, Burke served three years as the assistant attorney general, specializing in workmen's compensation. Burke was later appointed to the Ohio Industrial Commission by Governor James Rhodes, and served in that capacity for three years. Burke became the first African American woman to sit on the bench in the State of Ohio with her appointment to the Cleveland Municipal Court in January 1969; she was later elected to that office in November 1969, where she served until her retirement in 1987.

Judge Burke worked with a number of community organizations and voluntary associations, including The Cleveland Restoration Society; the City Planning Commission; the Landmark Commission; The Cleveland Foundation African American Outreach Advisory Committee; the National Council of Negro Women; the City Club; the NAACP; and Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority. Burke also established the Lillian Walker Burke Scholarship for students attending the John Marshall College of Law.

Burke passed away on March 27, 2012 at age 94.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with The Honorable Lillian Burke was conducted by Regennia Williams on June

17, 2004, in Cleveland, Ohio, and was recorded on 6 Betacame SP videocassettes. Municipal court judge The Honorable Lillian Burke (1917 - 2012) became the first African American woman to sit on the bench in the State of Ohio, when she was appointed to the Cleveland Municipal Court in 1969.

Restrictions

Restrictions on Access

Restrictions may be applied on a case-by-case basis at the discretion of The HistoryMakers®.

Restrictions on Use

All use of materials and use credits must be pre-approved by The HistoryMakers®. Appropriate credit must be given. Copyright is held by The HistoryMakers®.

Related Material

Information about the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview, as well as correspondence with the interview subject is stored electronically both on The HistoryMakers® server and in two databases maintained by The HistoryMakers®, though this information is not included in this finding aid.

Controlled Access Terms

This interview collection is indexed under the following controlled access subject terms.

Persons:

Burke, Lillian, 1915-2012

Williams, Regennia (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Burke, Lillian, 1915-2012--Interviews

African American women judges--Ohio--Cleveland--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Municipal Court Judge

HistoryMakers® Category:

LawMakers

Administrative Information

Custodial History

Interview footage was recorded by The HistoryMakers®. All rights to the interview have been transferred to The HistoryMakers® by the interview subject through a signed interview release form. Signed interview release forms have been deposited with Jenner & Block, LLP, Chicago.

Preferred Citation

The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Lillian Burke, June 17, 2004. The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

Processing Information

This interview collection was processed and encoded on 5/30/2023 by The HistoryMakers® staff. The finding aid was created adhering to the following standards: DACS, AACR2, and the Oral History Cataloging Manual (Matters 1995).

Other Finding Aid

A Microsoft Access contact database and a FileMaker Pro tracking database, both maintained by The HistoryMakers®, keep track of the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview.

Detailed Description of the Collection

Series I: Original Interview Footage

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Lillian Burke, Section A2004_082_001_001, TRT: 0:30:50 ?

The Honorable Lillian Burke was born on August 2, 1917 in Upson County, Georgia, where both of her parents had grown up. Her mother, Ozella Davidston Walker, was a homemaker who took pride in setting beautiful tables, cooking and praying for her six children. Burke's father, George Walker, was the son of a former slave and moved the family to Duquesne, Pennsylvania after he got a job in a steel mill. Burke grew up during the Great Depression. As a child, she enjoyed attending Sunday school and Baptist Young People's Union at Macedonia Baptist Church in Duquesne, bobsledding in the winter, taking piano

and voice lessons, and playing basketball. She attended Oliver School and Crawford School where she had an encouraging fifth grade teacher. Burke never had a black teacher and recalls that African Americans were discouraged from going into teaching; she also had few African American professional role models in her community. Burke educated herself on African American history by reading books at the library.

African American women judges--Ohio--Cleveland--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Lillian Burke, Section A2004_082_001_002, TRT: 0:29:31 ?

The Honorable Lillian Burke attended Duquesne Junior High School in Duquesne, Pennsylvania, where she sang in the school chorus. She remembers baking the best biscuits in her home economics class by using her mother's recipe instead of the teacher's and remembers another teacher's skepticism that she did not know how to play 'Take Me Out to the Ballgame.' Burke loved to read and impressed her eighth grade class with her knowledge of the New York Stock Exchange. Outside of school, Burke took singing and piano lessons at the National Negro Opera Company in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania run by Mary Cardwell Dawson. Burke attended Duquesne High School, where she was a star on the basketball team. She wrote her senior thesis on Paul Laurence Dunbar in an effort to shine a positive light on, and teach other students about African American history. Burke expresses concern for the state of Duquesne's education system in 2004 and recalls playing basketball with students when she was a substitute teacher in Cleveland, Ohio.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Lillian Burke, Section A2004_082_001_003, TRT: 0:31:16 ?

The Honorable Lillian Burke graduated from Duquesne High School in Duquesne, Pennsylvania in 1934. She could only afford to attend Duquesne University in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania for a year; and then worked in Pittsburgh, Cleveland, Ohio and Washington, D.C. to save enough money to attend The Ohio State University in Columbus, Ohio. There she lived with her aunt, since African Americans could not live on campus, and worked at the Ohio Statehouse and for lawyers. After graduating in 1947, she taught in Cleveland, before matriculating at Cleveland-Marshall College of Law. Burke got married in 1948, and by the time she graduated from law school in 1951, had a son. Her mother cared for her son in Pittsburgh while Burke studied for the Ohio Bar Exam. After passing the bar, Burke was an assistant attorney general specializing in workman's compensation. She was appointed vice-chairman of the Ohio Industrial Commission by Governor Jim Rhodes. Burke's husband died in 1982 and she has a close relationship with her son.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Lillian Burke, Section A2004_082_001_004, TRT: 0:30:02 ?

The Honorable Lillian Burke remembers the dean of Cleveland-Marshall College of Law in Cleveland, Ohio, and her classmate HistoryMaker Stanley Tolliver, Sr. After graduating from law school in 1951, she attempted to find a job as a law clerk, but was offered a job as a secretary instead, which she refused. Burke went on to be appointed by former Ohio Governor James Rhodes to serve as one of three members on the Ohio Industrial Committee and remembers her commute from Cleveland to Columbus, Ohio. In 1969, Governor Rhodes appointed Burke as the first African American female Municipal Court Judge in Ohio. She had a huge amount of public support, and remembers a party thrown in her honor following her appointment. Burke was later asked to serve on the Commission of Accreditation, in Washington, D.C. Burke has established

scholarships through the Cleveland Foundation and the Pittsburgh Foundation, and was active in the National Council of Negro Women (NCNW) and other civic organizations in Cleveland.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Lillian Burke, Section A2004_082_001_005,
TRT: 0:30:10 ?

The Honorable Lillian Burke describes her working relationships with Ohio political leaders such as former Governor James Rhodes, and Cleveland mayors Carl Stokes and Michael R. White. As a judge, Burke took courses that would supplement her knowledge in specific subject matters, such as legal medicine. She lists other female judges in Ohio, such as HistoryMaker The Honorable C. Ellen Connally. After retiring in 1987, Burke traveled and organized investment clubs for African Americans in Cleveland, Ohio. Burke reflects upon her roots, her greatest achievement, the impact of the Civil Rights Movement on her career and the future of affirmative action. Burke presented her son as a candidate to practice before the U.S. Supreme Court while Justice Thurgood Marshall was still on the court. Burke is proud of her family, especially The HistoryMaker's founder Julieanna Richardson, and recalls other well-known people from Duquesne, Pennsylvania.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Lillian Burke, Section A2004_082_001_006,
TRT: 0:12:32 ?

The Honorable Lillian Burke narrates her photographs.