

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Reverend Dr. Ruth Teena Williams

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Williams, Ruth, 1927-2011
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Reverend Dr. Ruth Teena Williams,
Dates:	August 26, 2004 and September 15, 2004
Bulk Dates:	2004
Physical Description:	8 Betacame SP videocassettes (3:39:48).
Abstract:	Funeral director and priest Reverend Dr. Ruth Teena Williams (1927 - 2011) was president and chairman of the board of Unity Funeral Parlors and president of Unity Limousine Services. She also served as a priest at St. Edmund's Episcopal Church in Chicago. Williams passed away on June 6, 2011. Williams was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on August 26, 2004 and September 15, 2004, in Chicago, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2004_147
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Reverend Dr. Ruth “Teena” Williams was born in New Orleans, Louisiana on October 4, 1927. Williams attended public schools in New Orleans, and after graduating from high school, she enrolled in Xavier University, earning her A.B. degree in 1947. She then attended St. Louis University in St. Louis, Missouri, earning her master's of science in medical social work in 1950.

After earning her master's degree, Williams moved to Chicago and was hired by Cook County Hospital as a social worker in 1950. In 1955, she was hired by the city of Chicago to work as a social worker with welfare recipients, and in 1957 she went to work for the Veterans Administration. In 1959, Williams joined in the family business, Unity Funeral Parlors, and went back to school to become a licensed funeral director and in 1964 she became an embalmer. Williams served as president and chairman of the board of Unity Funeral Parlors, as well as serving as president of Unity Limousine Services.

Wanting to help people, Williams enrolled in the Chicago Theological Seminary in 1977, and she earned her master's of divinity and doctor of ministry degrees in 1980. Since then, she also earned a certificate in Anglican studies from Seabury-Western Theological Seminary and her Ph.D. from the Chicago Theological Seminary at the age of eighty. She served as a part-time priest at St. Edmund's Episcopal Church in Chicago.

Williams was involved with numerous civic organizations, including The Links, Inc., the women's board of the Field Museum and the Chicago Network. She had numerous awards bestowed upon her over the years, including the Spirit of Love award from the Little City Foundation and special recognition from the Links.

Williams was interviewed by The HistoryMakers on August 26, 2004.

Williams passed away on June 6, 2011.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Reverend Dr. Ruth Teena Williams was conducted by Frederick Adams and Larry Crowe on August 26, 2004 and September 15, 2004, in Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on 8 Betacame SP videocassettes. Funeral director and priest Reverend Dr. Ruth Teena Williams (1927 - 2011) was president and chairman of the board of Unity Funeral Parlors and president of Unity Limousine Services. She also served as a priest at St. Edmund's Episcopal Church in Chicago. Williams passed away on June 6, 2011.

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:

Williams, Ruth, 1927-2011

Adams, Frederick (Interviewer)

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Williams, Ruth, 1927-2011--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Funeral Director

HistoryMakers® Category:

BusinessMakers

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 Reverend Dr. Ruth Teena Williams, August 26, 2004 and September 15, 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 Reverend Dr. Ruth Teena Williams, Section
A2004_147_001_001, TRT: 0:29:20 ?

Reverend Dr. Ruth Teena Williams was born October 4, 1927 in New Orleans,

Louisiana. Born in 1895 in Pass Christian, Mississippi, Williams' mother, Louise Cassimere Prudeaux, was known for her hospitality. Williams' maternal great-grandfather had French and Spanish ancestry, came to New Orleans from the Caribbean islands and owned a cigar factory. Her maternal family were strict Catholics. Williams' father, George Ernest Prudeaux, was born in 1893 in Bay St. Louis across the bay from Pass Christian. His ancestry included Creoles and the Acadian migrants from French Canada to the Louisiana Territory, known as Cajuns. Her paternal grandfather owned a seafood shop. Her father was well-read, though he lacked a formal education and worked as an insurance salesman. Williams' paternal family was also Catholic, though not devout. Williams grew up among a tight-knit community in the Seventh Ward of New Orleans. Her grandmothers both spoke French; her parents spoke Creole French but did not teach it to their children.

Video Oral History Interview with Reverend Dr. Ruth Teena Williams, Section A2004_147_001_002, TRT: 0:29:30 ?

Reverend Dr. Ruth Teena Williams' parents met through the local Creole community around Bay St. Louis, Mississippi. Williams' parents had twelve children, and Williams was the eighth born. Her older sister Inez Prudeaux Chauvin was like a second mother to Williams and encouraged her to pursue her education. As a young child, Williams was punished by her mother for repeating something she overheard, which taught her not to repeat gossip or hearsay. Williams' mother cooked winter vegetable soup, gumbo, and freshly caught game and seafood. Williams' childhood home was a social gathering place, and she delighted in the blues music her older brothers played there at night. Williams attended Corpus Christi Church in New Orleans and was impressed by Gregorian chants and the use of incense. Williams describes her family tomb in St. Louis Cemetery No. 2, the economic support network of Creole families in the Seventh Ward of New Orleans and Mardi Gras traditions and celebrations.

Video Oral History Interview with Reverend Dr. Ruth Teena Williams, Section A2004_147_001_003, TRT: 0:28:20 ?

Reverend Dr. Ruth Teena Williams attended kindergarten at a Catholic school held at Corpus Christi Church in New Orleans, Louisiana. She attended Valena C. Jones Elementary School, a public school in New Orleans, where she was influenced by school principal Fannie C. Williams. Williams' parents granted her request to attend the public McDonogh No. 35 Senior High School, though her sisters traditionally attended the Catholic Xavier University Preparatory High School or St. Mary's Academy in New Orleans. She rallied fellow students to confront her archbishop about the church's tolerance of school segregation during the 1940s but was unsatisfied by his response. Williams explains how Creole racial identity evolved from free merchants of color in the Caribbean islands, African Americans and whites and how it historically operated within a tripartite system of discrimination. She also talks about how voodoo was integrated into everyday religious practice despite its proscription by the Roman Catholic Church.

Video Oral History Interview with Reverend Dr. Ruth Teena Williams, Section A2004_147_001_004, TRT: 0:28:50 ?

Reverend Dr. Ruth Teena Williams learned elocution at McDonogh No. 35 Senior High School in New Orleans, Louisiana and participated in a cappella shows at Protestant churches despite her Catholic mother's disapproval. Williams was inspired to pursue a college education by the example of her mother's cousin, who was a pharmacist and social worker. After graduating high school as valedictorian, she attended Xavier University of Louisiana in New

Orleans on a scholarship. There, she majored in liberal arts and edited the student newspaper. She also experienced class discrimination from some of her instructors. Upon graduating in 1947 at the age of nineteen, Williams entered the St. Louis University School of Social Work in St. Louis, Missouri to become a social worker. Williams persevered despite challenging changes in climate and culture. She obtained scholarships and worked in a hospital to fund her studies. Upon graduating with a degree in medical social work in 1950, Williams moved to Chicago, Illinois.

Video Oral History Interview with Reverend Dr. Ruth Teena Williams, Section
A2004_147_001_005, TRT: 0:29:40 ?

Reverend Dr. Ruth Teena Williams began her medical social work career in 1950 at Cook County Hospital in Chicago, Illinois where she assisted immigrant patients and men suffering from alcoholism. Her work was recognized by the Chicago Sun-Times and local radio. In 1955, she left to consult at the city welfare department for a year. She then took a position working with paraplegic veterans of World War II at the Veteran Administration Hospital Westside in Chicago. In 1957, Williams met Albert Williams, a Unity Mutual Life Insurance Company executive who became her husband. Williams edited his company newsletter, House Organ, but aspired to lead Unity Funeral Parlor. She passed her funeral director licensing exam and obtained certifications from Worsham College of Mortuary Science in Wheeling, Illinois in 1969. Upon recognition of clients' unmet spiritual needs, Williams enrolled at Chicago Theological Seminary. She obtained Master of Divinity and Doctor of Ministry degrees in 1980 and 1982, respectively.

Video Oral History Interview with Reverend Dr. Ruth Teena Williams, Section
A2004_147_001_006, TRT: 0:30:40 ?

Reverend Dr. Ruth Teena Williams joined the Episcopal church in 1968 upon seeing its support of her husband during his illness. While studying at Chicago Theological Seminary in Chicago, Illinois, Williams founded LARUTH, a widows' support group which was continuing into its twenty-ninth year at the time of the interview. She also used her training to educate Protestant ministers about funerary service and befriended the wife of Chicago Theological Seminary President Charles Shelby Rooks. At her mothers' deathbed in 1985, Williams experienced her long-awaited call to priesthood. Her husband was diagnosed with life-threatening aneurysms soon after and passed away while Williams was newly enrolled in Anglican Studies at Seabury-Western Theological Seminary in Evanston, Illinois. She experienced doubts about her calling but received support from a monk. Williams was ordained in 1987 at St. James Cathedral in Chicago. At the time of the interview, Williams was completing her Ph.D. at Chicago Theological Seminary.

Video Oral History Interview with Reverend Dr. Ruth Teena Williams, Section
A2004_147_001_007, TRT: 0:18:00 ?

Reverend Dr. Ruth Teena Williams obtained a position as a priest at St. Edmund's Episcopal Church in Chicago, Illinois upon her ordination. At this time, women had been allowed to enter the Episcopal priesthood for less than a decade, and she experienced gender discrimination from church members and friends. She accepted a dean's assistantship at St. James Cathedral in Chicago, where she also experienced gender, age and racial discrimination. At the time of the interview, Williams had returned as a part-time assisting priest to St. Edmund's and has been honored with accolades. She reflects upon discrimination and progress in the Episcopal church, especially regarding the church's recent debate about sexual orientation among ordained priests.

Williams describes her hopes and concerns for the African American community and how she would like to be remembered, and reflects upon her life and legacy.

Video Oral History Interview with Reverend Dr. Ruth Teena Williams, Section
A2004_147_002_008, TRT: 0:25:28 ?

Reverend Dr. Ruth Teena Williams narrates her photographs.