

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with The Honorable Leah Ward Sears

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Sears, Leah Ward, 1955-
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Leah Ward Sears,
Dates:	October 15, 2004
Bulk Dates:	2004
Physical Description:	5 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:21:20).
Abstract:	State supreme court judge The Honorable Leah Ward Sears (1955 -) is the first African American woman appointed as a Superior Court judge in the State of Georgia. She is also the first woman and youngest person ever to serve on Georgia's Supreme Court. Sears was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on October 15, 2004, in Atlanta, Georgia. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2004_205
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

The Honorable Leah Ward Sears became the first woman and the youngest person ever to become a Georgia State Supreme Court Justice. Sears was born on June 13, 1955 in Heidelberg, Germany. She grew up traveling the globe with her family and father, Colonel Thomas Sears, who served as Master Army Aviator in the U.S. Army. The family eventually settled in Savannah, Georgia, where she attended elementary and high schools. In 1976, Sears earned her B.S. degree at Cornell University and moved to Atlanta, where she attended Emory University to earn her J.D. degree.

After earning her law degree, Sears decided to stay in Atlanta. There, she made a name for herself working as a trial lawyer for the law firm, Alston and Bird. In 1985, after five years of working, Mayor Andrew Young appointed her as a judge in Atlanta's City Traffic Court. After serving three years in this position, Sears was appointed as a Superior Court judge for the state of Georgia. She became the first African American woman to hold such a position in the state of Georgia. In February of 1992, Governor Zell Miller appointed Sears to Georgia's Supreme Court, where she became the first woman and the youngest person ever to serve. Sears retained her seat on the state's Supreme Court by winning a statewide election in the fall of 1992. This made her the first woman to win a contested statewide election in Georgia. In 1993, Sears received an honorary Doctor of Law degree from Morehouse College. She then continued her education and earned a LL.M degree from the University of Virginia School of Law. Sears is currently the number two justice in Georgia's Supreme Court. She is considered next in line to become the state's chief justice.

Sears has several civic and professional affiliations. She served as chairman of both the American Bar Association's Board of Elections and the Judicial Section of the Atlanta Bar's Minority Clerkship Program. Sears founded and served as the first president of the Georgia Association of Black Women Attorneys. Currently, she serves as an adjunct professor of pretrial litigation at the Emory Law School Council and is a member of Alpha

Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc. In 1998, Sears was named the “Georgia Woman of the Year” by the Georgia State Commission on Women. In 2001, she was the recipient of the Emory Medal from Emory University for being an “Outstanding Young Alumna”.

Sears is married to Haskell Sears Ward, and they have two children, a son, Addison, and a daughter, Brennan.

Sears was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on October 15, 2004.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with The Honorable Leah Ward Sears was conducted by Larry Crowe on October 15, 2004, in Atlanta, Georgia, and was recorded on 5 Betacame SP videocassettes. State supreme court judge The Honorable Leah Ward Sears (1955 -) is the first African American woman appointed as a Superior Court judge in the State of Georgia. She is also the first woman and youngest person ever to serve on Georgia's Supreme Court.

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:

Sears, Leah Ward, 1955-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Melnick, Coy (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Sears, Leah Ward, 1955---Interviews

African American judges--Interviews.

African American lawyers--Interviews.

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Georgia

Occupations:

State Supreme 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 Leah Ward Sears, October 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 The Honorable Leah Ward Sears, Section A2004_205_001_001, TRT: 0:28:30 ?

Leah Ward Sears slates her interview and explains the manner with which she assumed three different full names in her life. She lists her favorites. Sears' mother Onnye Jean Roundtree Sears was born on January, 17 1930 in Sand Springs Oklahoma. Sears' grandmother was Elva Roundtree who was alive during the Tulsa race riots. Elva's grandfather was a Buffalo Soldier. The identity of Onnye's father was believed to be a white Tulsa school superintendant named Boyd. Onnye was very light skinned with long straight hair and was very intelligent, which separated her socially and educationally from others. She taught school but her income was always secondary. Thomas Euric Sears was born April 6, 1927 in Norfolk, Virginia. His mother and father were Eunice Mears and Thomas Sears. They had fifteen children, most of whom did well or attended college. The family was upbeat about race relations and maintained great faith in God. Thomas' parents were very strict and food was rationing was common but he fondly remembered his youth.

Family--History.

African American families--Germany.

Military bases, American--Germany.

United States--Armed Forces--African Americans.

Miscegenation—Social aspects.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Leah Ward Sears, Section A2004_205_001_002, TRT: 0:29:50 ?

Sears' older brother was born in Heidelberg, Germany and her younger brother was born in Monterey, California. Her father was among only a few black officers in Germany; her parents had high expectations for her. Since her father was so dark and her mother so light, for a time Sears believed her mother was white. Sears was maltreated by white majority classmates in the United States. School busing, which took her from a majority white school to a black one, incentivized her early graduation. She enrolled into Cornell. She was active in high school and developed an academic side and a vain side. She adored Cornell for its buffet style approach of liberal arts education and political activism. Her parents, but especially her father, had more conservative dreams for her.

Military bases, American--Germany.

Miscegenation—Social aspects.

Family--History.

African Americans--Social conditions.

African American women—Race identity.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Leah Ward Sears, Section A2004_205_001_003, TRT: 0:29:11 ?

The open and liberal environment at Cornell allowed Sears to embrace foolhardy notions. Although she developed strong beliefs that were eventually disproved through her life experience, she was also convinced that many personal

convictions are often innate. Sears took few classes in the Africana Studies Department but strongly identified with her race. She lived in an all black female cooperative and majored in Human Development and Family Studies. In life she began questioning the unstructured attitude that celebrates life decisions that may be harmful to child rearing. At eight years old she followed the Warren Court very carefully because she sensed that it was righting a wronged country. She married her first husband Love Collins, III, a West Point graduate, on July 3, 1976. She enrolled in Duke University's law school but dropped out because of the long distance from her husband. She re-enrolled at Emory in Atlanta. At twenty-seven years old, Atlanta Mayor Andrew Young appointed Sears to a judgeship in a lower court. There she learned patience and an appreciation of the diverse circumstances of the public.

African American women--Race identity.

Families of military personnel.

Cornell University--Alumni and alumnae.

Identification (Psychology)

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Leah Ward Sears, Section A2004_205_001_004, TRT: 0:28:23 ?

When she moved to the appellate court she prepared with courses at the University of Virginia, where she studied for three years and earned an LL.M. As a judge she learned that her primary responsibility was to be a quiet, considerate, and compassionate counselor of the legal process for all types of persons. At 32 she successfully ran in a contested election for the Fulton County Superior Court. This accelerated trajectory from traffic court up to felony cases without the intervening courts initially upset some of her peers. Sears had ambivalent attitudes with regard to the death penalty but as a judge she divorced her personal judgment from the law. The phenomenon of high black incarceration represents the product of numerous factors beginning from childhood, reinforced by society, and the mandatory sentencing at the Superior Court level; prosecutorial discretion exists but is not applied consistently between the wealthy and the poor. At 36 Governor Zell Miller appointed her to the Supreme Court in 1992.

Television talk shows--Social aspects--United States.

Work and family.

Family--Law--Georgia.

Sentences--Criminal procedure--Georgia.

University of Virginia--Alumni and alumnae.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Leah Ward Sears, Section A2004_205_001_005, TRT: 0:25:26 ?

Sears passionately believes in civil access to the courts for all persons. Her court's reversal of *Bowers v. Hardwick* was an effort she personally spear-headed. Another prominent case was the removal of child molestation charges for Marcus Dixon among others. Sears wishes the black community to resolve its many lingering problems rather than ignoring them. One such problem is the effect of absentee fathers. She believes society give disproportionate accolades. Materiality, sex, and beauty are like wine while civil servants work the vineyards. Sears married Haskell Sears Ward in 1999. His wisdom provided a measured and calming perspective that helped her job performance. A famous Atlanta murder demonstrated to her that even people she knew could harbor great darkness. Sears wished she matured earlier to avoid a doomed first marriage; a blended family is tarnish. It is her quiet pursuit of excellence and

trailblazing that will help her be remembered.

Work and family.

Law--Georgia.

Judicial review--Georgia.

Divorce--Psychological aspects.