

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with The Honorable Debra James

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	James, Debra A., 1953-
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Debra James,
Dates:	January 31, 2005
Bulk Dates:	2005
Physical Description:	5 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:12:43).
Abstract:	State supreme court judge The Honorable Debra James (1953 -) served as a judge for the New York City Civil Court before being appointed an acting state Supreme Court justice. James was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on January 31, 2005, in New York, New York. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2005_033
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Judge Debra Ann James was born on February 16, 1953 in Knoxville, Tennessee. During her early childhood, the family relocated to St. Albans, Queens, New York. James attended Monmouth Regional High School in New Jersey where she was a member of the student council and the honor society. She earned her high school diploma in 1971.

James received her B.A. degree in American government and political science in 1975 and her J.D. degree in 1978 from Cornell University. After graduating, James worked as the assistant corporation counsel for New York City. She represented municipal corporations in trial and appellate courts. In 1983, she served as associate counsel for New York State Mortgage Loan Enforcement and Administration Corporation. James then went on to work for the New York Mortgage Agency. Prior to running for judgeship on the New York civil court, she served as general counsel for the Roosevelt Island Operating Corporation.

In 1994, James was elected to the New York City Civil Court. During her tenure on the bench, James has managed thousands of lawsuits across a variety of areas. In 2002, James was appointed acting state supreme court justice.

A resident of Harlem for more than twenty years, James is a member of a number of professional and civic organizations. She is an avid reader, jazz music enthusiast, and art collector.

James was interviewed by The HistoryMakers on January 31, 2005.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with The Honorable Debra James was conducted by Racine Tucker Hamilton on

January 31, 2005, in New York, New York, and was recorded on 5 Betacame SP videocassettes. State supreme court judge The Honorable Debra James (1953 -) served as a judge for the New York City Civil Court before being appointed an acting state Supreme Court justice.

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:

James, Debra A., 1953-

Hamilton, Racine Tucker (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

James, Debra A., 1953---Interviews

African American women judges--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

New York (State). Supreme Court.

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 Debra James, January 31, 2005. 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 Debra James, Section A2005_033_001_001, TRT: 0:30:38 ?

Debra James was born on February 16, 1953 in Knoxville, Tennessee to Elizabeth Kemp James, a nurse, and Edward James, an electrical engineer. Her mother was raised in a large family in Tampa, Florida. James' maternal grandfather was a Bahamian who owned a restaurant business in Maryland. James' father, was raised in Falmouth, Kentucky. James' paternal grandmother,

Virginia James, worked as a domestic cook; her paternal grandfather, Edward James, was a chauffeur in New York. Her parents met as students at Howard University in Washington, D.C. A government job took the young married couple to Knoxville, Tennessee, but they returned North to Queens, New York to escape Jim Crow laws. James describes her memories of growing up in the St. Alban's neighborhood of Jamaica, Queens with two brothers. She also recalls holiday celebrations as a child along with the sights, sounds, and smells of her childhood. In New York City, James attended P.S. 34 and J.H.S. 192 before her family moved to Tinton Falls, New Jersey.

African American women judges--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Debra James, Section A2005_033_001_002, TRT: 0:30:14 ?

Debra James was an introspective student who enjoyed dancing to Motown music while a student at J.H.S. 192 in New York City. During junior high, James' father accepted a position with the United States Army Electronics Command, and the family relocated to Tinton Falls, New Jersey, a predominately white neighborhood. The family stopped attending church after the move. In Tinton Falls, James attended Monmouth Regional High School. She talks about her high school experience and memorable teachers at Monmouth. In high school, James wanted to become an engineer like her father, but he encouraged her to pursue a career in the law. After graduating from Monmouth in 1971, James decided to enroll at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York. She arrived on campus after the infamous student takeover of Straight Hall in 1969. She talks about her decision to pursue the law and later, her enrollment at Cornell Law School. After graduating in 1978, James became an assistant corporation counsel for the City of New York.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Debra James, Section A2005_033_001_003, TRT: 0:27:13 ?

Debra James recalls the challenges she faced as an African American woman after graduating from Cornell Law School in 1978. She worked as an assistant corporation counsel for the City of New York before joining the New York State Mortgage Loan Enforcement and Administration Corporation as an associate counsel. In 1988, James moved to Harlem, New York where she was recruited by politicians like C. Virginia Fields to run for a judgeship in the Civil Court of the City of New York. In 1994, James successfully campaigned with Assemblyman Keith Wright and began her service in civil court. James talks about the controversy around judges running for office. She also talks about her experience with criminal court cases as well as memorable housing cases between landlords and tenants. In 2002, she was appointed acting justice on the New York Supreme Court. James describes the difference between lawyers and judges, as well as qualities a judge should possess.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Debra James, Section A2005_033_001_004, TRT: 0:31:05 ?

Debra James recounts information about a landlord-tenant case, Rochdale Holding Corp. v. Neuendorf which was featured in the New York Law Journal in 2005. During her tenure as a judge in New York, James witnessed an increase in gender and ethnic diversity on the bench. James describes herself as a patient judge. She shares her advice with aspiring lawyers and lawyers who may appear before her in court. James talks about reality-based court shows on TV, the importance of jurors, and appellate authority over jury decisions. She reflects upon being a role model and on how the African American experience informs her. James' hope as a judge is to become a member of the appellate court. She

talks about what she would do differently, and her hopes and concerns for the African American legacy. James also talks about the importance of history and art, her values and her greatest accomplishment, how she would like to be remembered, and her legacy.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Debra James, Section A2005_033_001_005, TRT: 0:13:33 ?

Debra James narrates her photographs.