

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Darwin N. Davis, Sr.

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Davis, Darwin N., 1932-2006
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Darwin N. Davis, Sr.,
Dates:	February 16, 2005
Bulk Dates:	2005
Physical Description:	4 Betacame SP videocassettes (1:57:05).
Abstract:	Insurance executive Darwin N. Davis, Sr. (1932 - 2006) was one of the black salesmen Equitable Life Insurance hired in the wake of the 1964 Detroit race riot. Davis quickly rose from his entry level position to become the company's first African American regional president. Davis was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on February 16, 2005, in Stamford, Connecticut. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2005_050
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Darwin Nathaniel Davis, retired senior vice president of AXA Financial (formerly Equitable Life Insurance), was born on April 10, 1932, in Flint, Michigan; his maternal grandfather managed General Motors Executive Garage, and his father, Abner Davis, became the first black postal clerk in Flint. After attending Clark Elementary School, Whittier Junior High School, and Flint Central High School, Davis played football at the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff (formerly Arkansas A&M University) where he earned his B.A. degree in business administration in 1954.

Snubbed by General Motors because of his race, Davis served in the United States Army from 1955 to 1957, tracking missiles at White Sands, New Mexico. Returning to college, Davis earned his M.Ed. degree from Wayne State University in Detroit, and then worked as a mathematics teacher at Duffield Elementary School and Jones Elementary School. One of the black salesmen Equitable Life Insurance hired in the wake of 1964's Detroit race riot, Davis became a district manager by his third year. Between 1971 and 1974, Davis earned every type of managerial award Equitable offered. Promoted to vice president of manpower development in 1974, Davis served as the company's first African American regional president in 1975. In 1989, Davis was promoted to senior vice president of Equitable Life Assurance Society and recognized by Black Enterprise magazine as one of the 25 most important African American executives. A mentor to many young African American executives, Davis retired as senior vice president of AXA Financial in 1998.

Davis served on the African American advisory board of Pepsi-Cola and the boards of the Albert Oliver Program, the Jackie Robinson Foundation, the Executive Leadership Foundation, the National Minority Golf Foundation, and the Jesse Owens Foundation. Davis also served as vice president of the Foundation for Ethnic Understanding. Davis, a recipient of many awards and honorary degrees, had four grown children and lived with his wife, Velmarie, in Stamford, Connecticut.

Davis passed away on Sunday, April 16, 2006 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Darwin N. Davis, Sr. was conducted by Larry Crowe on February 16, 2005, in Stamford, Connecticut, and was recorded on 4 Betacame SP videocassettes. Insurance executive Darwin N. Davis, Sr. (1932 - 2006) was one of the black salesmen Equitable Life Insurance hired in the wake of the 1964 Detroit race riot. Davis quickly rose from his entry level position to become the company's first African American regional president.

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:

Davis, Darwin N., 1932-2006

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Davis, Darwin N., 1932-2006--Interviews

African American businesspeople--Interviews

African American executives--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Equitable Life Insurance Company

Occupations:

Insurance Executive

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 Darwin N. Davis, Sr., February 16, 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 Darwin N. Davis, Sr., Section A2005_050_001_001, TRT: 0:31:23 ?

Darwin N. Davis, Sr. was born on April 10, 1932 in Flint, Michigan. His mother, Marrietta Todd Davis, was born on October 25, 1912 in Ayrshire, Indiana. Her family owned land, which they farmed and mined for coal until they relocated to Flint to work at the automobile factories. At eighteen, Davis's mother moved to Chicago, Illinois for a year where she worked at the Murray's Superior Products Company. She returned to Flint with no intention to stay, but met Abner Davis and never left. Davis's father, Abner Davis, was born February 13, 1912 in Franklin, Louisiana, but spent most of his youth in Flint, where his family also relocated for work. Abner was a self-sacrificing, hard worker who became the first black postal clerk in Flint. As a small child, Davis visited Ayrshire and his maternal great-grandfather managed to get his goats to say "hello" to him. Davis talks about learning family history through his brother's research and conversations at family reunions.

African American businesspeople--Interviews.

African American executives--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with Darwin N. Davis, Sr., Section A2005_050_001_002, TRT: 0:27:30 ?

Darwin N. Davis, Sr. attended Elm Park Elementary School before transferring to Clark Elementary School in Flint, Michigan. At Whittier Junior High School, a history teacher expelled Davis after he contested her interpretation of Nat Turner's Rebellion, but his father defended Davis's right to express his views. In 1946, he entered Flint Central High School as one of seven African American students. He was acquainted with future dentist and boxer Dr. Herbert Odom, who attended rival Flint Northern High School at this time. Davis worked at Abbott's Meat Market and played football throughout high school. After graduating, he planned to work at a factory in Flint, but his father insisted he attend a black college for one year. Davis entered Arkansas Agricultural, Mechanical and Normal College on a football scholarship and studied business administration. During his freshman season, Davis offended his teammates with a demeaning comment about cotton pickers. He apologized and earned a spot on the traveling team.

Video Oral History Interview with Darwin N. Davis, Sr., Section A2005_050_001_003, TRT: 0:26:50 ?

Darwin N. Davis, Sr. attended Arkansas Agricultural, Mechanical and Normal College (AM&N) in Pine Bluff, Arkansas from 1950 to 1954. There, he became friends with HistoryMakers Malcolm Hemphill, Jr. and Jeff Donaldson; he also met his future wife. Davis challenged a racist bus driver on an interstate bus trip during college. After graduating from Arkansas AM&N, Davis returned to Flint, Michigan where a General Motors employee refused his request for a job application. Davis then served in the U.S. Army at New Mexico Joint Guided Missile Range. He studied at New Mexico A&M College and completed his M.A. degree at Wayne State University in Detroit, Michigan. Davis taught math in Detroit before becoming a salesman for the Equitable Life Assurance Society of America in 1966. He was named manager of the Detroit district and then company vice president within a decade. In 1983, Darwin became the company's second black senior vice president. Davis briefly talks about Flint's Mt. Olive Missionary Baptist Church.

Video Oral History Interview with Darwin N. Davis, Sr., Section A2005_050_001_004, TRT:

0:31:22 ?

Darwin N. Davis, Sr. encountered discrimination from coworkers throughout his career at Equitable Life Assurance Society of America. One of Davis's colleagues attributed his success to affirmative action. Subordinates often introduced him to fellow professionals as a coworker rather than their boss. Davis witnessed African American female professionals succeed at Equitable Life, but he also saw corporate America continue to discriminate against African Americans in promotion decisions. In 1992, Equitable Life became AXA Financial; Davis retired six years later. He sat on the boards of Pepsi-Cola and the Jesse Owens Foundation and supported educational organizations benefitting minority students. Davis regrets that his father did not live to see his business accomplishments, although he is grateful his mother did. He describes his hopes and concerns for the African American community and how he would like to be remembered. He reflects upon his life and legacy. Davis concludes by narrating his photographs.