

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Don Cornwell

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Cornwell, Don, 1948-
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Don Cornwell,
Dates:	May 17, 2012
Bulk Dates:	2012
Physical Description:	7 uncompressed MOV digital video files (3:40:25).
Abstract:	Broadcast chief executive and financial executive Don Cornwell (1948 -) was the founder of the largest African American controlled television broadcast group in America. Cornwell was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on May 17, 2012, in New York, New York. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2012_077
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Broadcast executive and businessman W. Don Cornwell was born in Cushing, Oklahoma on January 17, 1948. Cornwell moved with his family to Tacoma, Washington, where he attended Stadium High School. After graduating from Stadium, Cornwell enrolled at Occidental College in Los Angeles in 1965. Four years later, he graduated with his B.A. degree in political science. Cornwell then graduated from Harvard Business School with his M.B.A. degree in 1971.

Cornwell was first hired by Goldman, Sachs & Co. in New York in 1971. By 1980, he was promoted to chief operating officer of the Goldman Sachs' corporate finance department of the investment banking division. In 1988, Cornwell left the securities firm to found Granite Broadcasting Corporation. In his twenty-one years as the company's chairman and chief executive officer, the corporation purchased fifteen television stations to become the largest African American-controlled television broadcast company in America. At its peak, Granite Broadcasting generated \$169 million in revenue. From 1991 through 2006, Granite was publicly owned with common stock listed on NASDAQ and several issues of debt registered with the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC). Granite Broadcasting Corporation filed for voluntary reorganization under Chapter 11 of the U.S. Bankruptcy Code in December 2006 and emerged from its restructuring in June 2007. Cornwell stepped down as the company chairman and CEO in 2009.

Cornwell has received numerous honors and corporation directorships throughout his career including serving on the boards of Pfizer, Inc., Avon Products, Inc., American International Group, Inc. and CVS-Caremark Corporation. He is a trustee of Big Brothers Big Sisters of New York. Cornwell was formerly on the board of directors of the Wallace Foundation, the Hershey Trust Company and Milton Hershey School, the New York University Medical Center and the Telecommunications Development Fund. Cornwell's company, Granite Broadcasting, was named Company of the Year by *Black Enterprise*. In 1996, he was honored as the Alumnus of the Year by Occidental College; and in 1999, he was the recipient of the Alumni Achievement Award from

Harvard Business School. Cornwell is married to Sandra Williams-Cornwell and has two adult children, K. Don Cornwell and Samantha Cornwell.

W. Don Cornwell was interviewed by the *The HistoryMakers* on May 17, 2012.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Don Cornwell was conducted by Larry Crowe on May 17, 2012, in New York, New York, and was recorded on 7 uncompressed MOV digital video files. Broadcast chief executive and financial executive Don Cornwell (1948 -) was the founder of the largest African American controlled television broadcast group in America.

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:

Cornwell, Don, 1948-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Cornwell, Don, 1948- --Interviews

African American chief executive officers--Interviews.

African American executives--Interviews.

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Broadcast Chief Executive

HistoryMakers® Category:

MediaMakers

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 Don Cornwell, May 17, 2012. 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 Don Cornwell, Section A2012_077_001_001, TRT: 1:28:55 ?

Don Cornwell slates the interview and lists his favorites. His mother, née Lelia Fredericks, was born on May 30, 1922, in Oklahoma. His maternal grandparents were both teachers in Oklahoma, who worked on contract in African American towns. He talks about the town where he was born, Cushing, Oklahoma and the African Americans and Native Americans who lived there. He also talks about his mother's education at Langston University, where she met his father, Felton Cornwell, in 1940 or 1941. Cornwell talks about Oklahoma's role in education and in the Civil Rights. He also talks about his father, Felton Cornwell, who was born in 1917 or 1918, served in World War II as part of the Buffalo Soldiers, and experienced traumatic stress disorder after the war. His father later became a barber. Cornwell also talks about his family's move to Tacoma, Washington.

African American families--Oklahoma.

African American mothers.

Langston University.

African American fathers.

United States--Armed Forces--African Americans.

Relocation (Housing).

Video Oral History Interview with Don Cornwell, Section A2012_077_001_002, TRT: 2:30:53 ?

Don Cornwell talks about his parents' separation when he was eight years old, his father's high standards for education, and his five siblings. Cornwell describes his father as being an excellent speaker, a trait which he did not inherit, and his mother's resilience, which she passed on to him. He describes his earliest memory of playing in Oklahoma while his grandparents worked, his grandmother's insistence on taking naps, and the differences between the two African American neighborhoods of Tacoma, Washington. He talks about his congenital heart defect, which prevented him from playing many sports as a child, and Stadium High School, which overlooks Puget Sound. He also talks about a teacher at Stadium High School who encouraged him to read three books every summer, watching TV from an early age, and the role of church in his childhood.

African American families.

Divorce.

Childhood and youth.

African American neighborhoods--Washington--Tacoma.

African Americans--Education, Secondary--Washington--Tacoma.

Video Oral History Interview with Don Cornwell, Section A2012_077_001_003, TRT: 3:30:19 ?

Don Cornwell talks about the segregation of Tacoma, Washington, its African American community, and his mother's involvement in the founding St. John Baptist Church and a chapter of the Alpha Kappa Alpha sorority. He talks about his mentor in middle school, who encouraged him to go to college, his high school aspirations and an influential attorney, Jack Tanner. Cornwell remembers the Seattle World's Fair, the 1963 March on Washington, Malcolm X's assassination, and the lack of African American newspapers in Tacoma as one of the major reasons he wanted to into television. He talks about his favorite subjects in high school, and his interest in pursuing a college education. He also talks about his high school counselor who influenced his college decisions. He also talks about his role and what resulted from his being elected his high school's senior class president.

Segregation--Washington--Tacoma.

African American churches--Washington--Tacoma.

Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority.

Mentoring in education--Washington--Tacoma.

African Americans--Education.

African American mothers--Washington--Tacoma.

Video Oral History Interview with Don Cornwell, Section A2012_077_001_004, TRT: 4:30:06 ?

Don Cornwell talks about his tenure as high school senior class president and his decision to go to Occidental College, its small size, history, the communities surrounding the school, and his founding of the Black Student Association there. He discusses his roles in student government at Occidental and his collaboration with a professor to initiate the Bengal Bus line, which transported students from the campus to places around Los Angeles and still exists today. He talks about a professor that was influential and encouraged him to his economics class, which changed his decision to go to business school instead of law school. Cornwell talks about the Black Power organizations in Los Angeles including the Black Panthers and Ron Karenga's US Organization, and the conflicts which arose between those two groups. He also shares a story about meeting Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Occidental College.

King, Martin Luther, 1899-1984.

Black power--California--Los Angeles.

Mentoring in education.

Student government.

Video Oral History Interview with Don Cornwell, Section A2012_077_001_005, TRT: 5:29:30 ?

Don Cornwell talks about Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s assassination and the response in Los Angeles, the Watts riots, and some of his experiences with the Los Angeles police force. He discusses the Black Power Movement and how he translated its ideas to his own concerns about African American curriculum and faculty; the Black Panthers and Ron Karenga's US Organization, the famous 1969 Black Panther shootings in Los Angeles, and attending Harvard Business School. He also talks about the differences between East Coast and West Coast liberalism in the context of being part of the then largest class of African Americans to enter Harvard Business School, and the discrimination that they faced. Cornwell remembers a professor at Harvard Business School who persuaded him to think about investment banking, which ultimately led to his employment at Goldman Sachs.

King, Martin Luther Jr., 1929-1968--Assassination.

Riots--California--Los Angeles.

Black power--United States.

Harvard Business School.

Vocational guidance.

Black Panther Party.

Discrimination in education.

Goldman, Sachs & Co.

Video Oral History Interview with Don Cornwell, Section A2012_077_001_006, TRT: 6:30:16 ?

Don Cornwell worked at Goldman Sachs investment banking firm from 1971-1988 where he enjoyed a great working relationship with his boss and mentor

Peter Sacerdote. The dissolution of Cornwell's marriage influenced his decision to leave Goldman Sachs in order to spend more time with his son. During this time, he was promoted to a more senior position at Goldman Sachs. Encouraged by minority ownership tax certificates, Cornwell decided to leave Goldman Sachs and try his hand at entrepreneurship in 1987. He reflects on being successful at recruiting investors like Oprah Winfrey and putting together the financing to purchase two TV stations in 1988. Over the years, Cornwell also developed an approach to the communities served by his television stations: 1) to get to know personally the important figures in his TV stations' markets; and 2) to do local community fundraising. Cornwell also talks about taking his company, Granite Broadcasting, public in 1991.

Goldman, Sachs & Co.

African American families.

African American business enterprises.

Fund raising.

Broadcasting.

Video Oral History Interview with Don Cornwell, Section A2012_077_001_007, TRT: 7:40:26 ?

Don Cornwell discusses the ventures that his company, Granite Broadcasting, pursued after going public in 1991. Granite Broadcasting bought television stations in Texas, New York, Michigan, California, and Illinois, and then competed with Rupert Murdoch for a station in Austin, Texas. However, these acquisitions led to financial difficulties which ultimately led to Granite Broadcasting's bankruptcy filing in 2006. Cornwell shares lessons he learned and gives advice to young entrepreneurs. His hopes and concerns for the African American community include adapting to ethnic diversity. He ends by reflecting upon his legacy, and how he would like to be remembered as a mentor to young people.

African American business enterprises.

Broadcasting.

Bankruptcy.

Mentoring.