

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Denise Rolark-Barnes

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## Overview of the Collection

<b>Repository:</b>	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
<b>Creator:</b>	Rolark-Barnes, Denise, 1954-
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Denise Rolark-Barnes,
<b>Dates:</b>	March 1, 2013
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2013
<b>Physical Description:</b>	8 uncompressed MOV digital video files (3:53:45).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Newspaper publishing executive Denise Rolark-Barnes (1954 - ) is the publisher of The Washington Informer, the director of The Washington Informer Charities, and the executive producer of "The Washington Informer News." Rolark-Barnes was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on March 1, 2013, in Washington, District of Columbia. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2013_091
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Newspaper publisher Denise Rolark-Barnes was born in Washington, D.C. Her father, Dr. Calvin W. Rolark, Sr., was the founder and the editor of the *The Washington Informer*; her stepmother, Wilhelmina J. Rolark, a politician and activist, served on the Council of the District of Columbia from 1976 to 1984. Rolark-Barnes was interested in writing at a young age and first wrote for the *The Washington Informer* while she was in middle school. After graduating from Howard University in 1976 with her B.A. degree in communications, Rolark-Barnes enrolled in the Howard University School of Law where she became editor of *The Barrister*, the law schools' student newspaper. Rolark-Barnes graduated from the Howard University School of Law with her J.D. degree in 1979.

In 1980, Rolark-Barnes joined the staff of *The Washington Informer* and was assigned as the newspaper's managing editor. After working with her father, Dr. Calvin W. Rolark, she took over as publisher of *The Washington Informer* in 1994. Rolark-Barnes also served as the director of The Washington Informer Charities and is the executive producer of "The Washington Informer News," a bi-weekly television news program. In addition, she is the host of "Let's Talk," a public affairs program, and "Reporter's Roundtable." Rolark-Barnes has appeared as a guest reporter on "The Tavis Smiley Show," "Tony Brown's Journal," NBC-4's "Reporter's Notebook," and several local radio and television programs.

Rolark-Barnes is the president of the District of Columbia chapter of AARP and is a member of the board of the National Newspaper Publishers Association and the United Black Fund, Inc. She is actively involved with the District of Columbia Black Public Relations Society Foundation, the Historical Society of Washington, D.C., and several other community non-profit organizations. Through The Washington Informer Charities, Rolark-Barnes sponsors the annual Washington Informer City-Wide Spelling Bee as well as internships and writing competitions for high school and college students interested in pursuing careers in journalism.

In March of 2008, Rolark-Barnes was honored by the National Newspaper Publishers Association with the

Chrysler Financial/National Newspaper Publishers Association Foundation Entrepreneurial Award, which recognizes the nation's black-owned newspapers for their entrepreneurial accomplishments and commitments to community service. In 2011, she received the Jack and Lovell Olender Foundation Generous Heart Award and the Summit Health Institute for Research and Education (SHIRE) Community Champion Award.

Rolark-Barnes lives in the Washington, D.C. with her husband, Lafayette Barnes. They have two sons.

Denise Rolark-Barnes was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on March 7, 2013.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Denise Rolark-Barnes was conducted by Larry Crowe on March 1, 2013, in Washington, District of Columbia, and was recorded on 8 uncompressed MOV digital video files. Newspaper publishing executive Denise Rolark-Barnes (1954 - ) is the publisher of The Washington Informer, the director of The Washington Informer Charities, and the executive producer of "The Washington Informer News."

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## 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®.

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## 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.

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## Controlled Access Terms

This interview collection is indexed under the following controlled access subject terms.

### Persons:

Rolark-Barnes, Denise, 1954-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

### Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews  
Rolark-Barnes, Denise, 1954- --Interviews

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## Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

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The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

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## Occupations:

Newspaper Publishing Executive

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## HistoryMakers® Category:

MediaMakers

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## 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 Denise Rolark-Barnes, March 1, 2013. 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).

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## 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.

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## Detailed Description of the Collection

## Series I: Original Interview Footage

Video Oral History Interview with Denise Rolark-Barnes, Section A2013\_091\_001\_001, TRT: 1:28:12 ?

Denise Rolark-Barnes was born on December 26, 1954 in Washington, D.C. Her mother, Vera McGlassom Rolark Abbott, was born on June 11, 1933 in Holly Springs, Mississippi to Sweetie McGlassom and Henry McGlassom, but was raised by her aunt in Detroit, Michigan. After graduating from high school, Vera McGlassom moved to Washington, D.C. to work for the U.S. State Department. DNA tests revealed that her family is descended from the Tikar people in Cameroon. Rolark-Barnes' father, Dr. Calvin William Rolark was born on May 18, 1927 to Beatrice Block Rolark and Ross Rolark in Texarkana, Texas. Ross Rolark was an auto mechanic and his father was named William Rolark. Calvin Rolark and his brother, Ross Rolark, both attended Prairie View A&M University in Prairie View, Texas. After serving as a paratrooper in the U.S. Air Force, Calvin Rolark moved to Washington, D.C., where he worked in the Pentagon and then for North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance Company and Richmond Beneficial Insurance Company.

Video Oral History Interview with Denise Rolark-Barnes, Section A2013\_091\_001\_002, TRT: 2:31:21 ?

Denise Rolark-Barnes describes how her parents, Dr. Calvin William Rolark and Vera McGlassom Rolark Abbott, met on U Street in Washington, D.C. and got married in 1952. Her father left the insurance business and entered the newspaper business, first as an editor of the Capitol Spotlight newspaper and later founding the Washington Informer in 1964. He was also involved in the Civil Rights Movement and Washington, D.C.'s political efforts for self-determination, and was friends with city councilman and HistoryMaker Marion Barry. Rolark-Barnes remembers her parents' divorce in 1956 and her father's remarriage to HistoryMaker Wilhelmina Rolark, with whom he founded the United Black Fund in 1969 to meet unmet needs in Washington, D.C. and internationally. Rolark-Barnes reflects on her parents, her childhood, and working at the Washington Informer from the age of nine. She remembers not attending the March on Washington in 1963, but attending the riots after Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s assassination.

Video Oral History Interview with Denise Rolark-Barnes, Section A2013\_091\_001\_003, TRT: 3:29:01 ?

Denise Rolark-Barnes attended Rudolph Elementary School, Barnard Elementary School, Benning Elementary School, and Keene Elementary School in Washington, D.C. At Benning Elementary School, she participated in the spelling bee, which was later sponsored by the Washington Informer. At Keene Elementary School, Rolark-Barnes had her first white teacher and her first encounter with racism in the fifth grade. Through her mother's work at the State Department and her father's paper, Rolark-Barnes met prominent African American leaders like HistoryMakers Dick Gregory, Marion Barry, Reverend Benjamin Hooks, Julian Bond, and Reverend Jesse Jackson. Rolark-Barnes attended Rabaut Junior High School, where she was class president and enjoyed her English classes, but where she also lost interest in school. She remembers cultural changes after the assassination of Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1968, including the introduction of Black History courses, taught by Chaka Henderson.

Video Oral History Interview with Denise Rolark-Barnes, Section A2013\_091\_001\_004, TRT: 4:28:36 ?

Denise Rolark-Barnes began working for the Washington Informer when she

was nine and writing a column in junior high school. She reflects on the small staff that ran the paper and her tasks at the paper during summers. Rolark-Barnes attended Calvin Coolidge High School and night classes at Theodore Roosevelt Senior High School, which allowed her to graduate a year early in 1972. She attended Hampton Institute in Hampton, Virginia for two years and Howard University in Washington, D.C., where she graduated from in 1976 with a degree in communications. Rolark-Barnes describes the Washington, D.C. politicians she knew, including Mayor Walter Washington; HistoryMaker Mayor Marion Barry; HistoryMaker Barbara Sizemore; and her stepmother, HistoryMaker Wilhelmina Rolark. She describes some of the difficulties faced by the Washington, D.C. school district in the early 1970s, as well as the 1974 African Liberation Day in Washington, D.C.

Video Oral History Interview with Denise Rolark-Barnes, Section A2013\_091\_001\_005, TRT: 5:28:39 ?

Denise Rolark-Barnes describes her experience in Washington, D.C. in the 1970s, including African Liberation Day in 1974. At Howard University, Rolark-Barnes studied communications and her professors included Wallace Terry, and HistoryMakers Samuel Yette and Haki Madhubuti. She was also trained at WHUR by Charlie Cobb and wrote for Howard University's student newspaper, the Hilltop. Rolark-Barnes received her B.A. degree in 1976. Inspired by her stepmother, HistoryMaker Wilhelmina Rolark, Rolark-Barnes enrolled at Howard University School of Law, where she studied communications law. In her first year, she became editor of the law school newspaper, the Barrister, where she butted heads with HistoryMaker Dean Charles Duncan. She was responsible for printing Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall's keynote speech in the newspaper. Rolark-Barnes had an internship with the broadcast bureau at the FCC, but decided to return to the Washington Informer after receiving her J.D. degree in 1979.

Video Oral History Interview with Denise Rolark-Barnes, Section A2013\_091\_001\_006, TRT: 6:28:50 ?

Denise Rolark-Barnes began working full-time for the Washington Informer in 1979 after graduating from Howard University School of Law. She reflects on Washington, D.C. politics in the late 1970s and 1980s, including the takeover of the Washington's City Hall by Hanafi Muslims in 1977, the event which resulted in HistoryMaker Marion Barry getting shot and the death of journalist Maurice Williams. Rolark-Barnes recalls the growth of the black middle class in Washington, D.C. under Mayor Marion Barry, who was elected in 1978, and the rapid social decline that Washington, D.C. experienced in the late-1980s and 1980s after that middle class moved to the suburbs, crack cocaine became an epidemic, and violence in the city increased. She also recalls her experience marching in the twenty-fifth anniversary of the March on Washington, her work with photographer Sam Courtney, and the popularity of go-go music in the early 1980s.

Video Oral History Interview with Denise Rolark-Barnes, Section A2013\_091\_001\_007, TRT: 7:28:55 ?

Denise Rolark-Barnes describes the positive changes that occurred in Washington, D.C. since the 1980s with groups like Concerned Black Men, Alliance of Concerned Men, and Peaceoholics working to keep young black men out of prison. She shares her journalistic philosophy of focusing on the positive news that comes out of the African American community and what can be done to address the problems within the community. She also shares her concerns for the African American community, including education, HIV/AIDS, teenage

pregnancy, domestic violence, and lack of infrastructure. In 1994, Rolark-Barnes took over as publisher of the Washington Informer after her father's death. She also hosted televised news programs "Reporter's Roundtable," "Washington Informer News," and "Let's Talk." She describes the small staff of the Washington Informer, including Ron Burke, Denise Barnes, Shantella Sherman, and HistoryMaker Roy Lewis. Around 2000, Rolark-Barnes considered selling the paper to boxing promoter Don King.

Video Oral History Interview with Denise Rolark-Barnes, Section A2013\_091\_001\_008, TRT: 8:30:11 ?

Denise Rolark-Barnes reflects on her pride in the Washington Informer, particularly its sponsorship of the Scripps National Spelling Bee and its tribute to her father after he died in 1994. She describes the history of the Black Press in Washington, D.C. that predates the Emancipation Proclamation, and reflects on the importance of digitizing the black newspapers for posterity. Rolark-Barnes talks about how the National Newspaper Publishers Association and the National Association of Black Journalists encourage African American journalists in the mainstream and Black Press. She also reflects on her hopes and concerns for the African American community, her family, her legacy, how she would like to be remembered, and her stepmother, HistoryMaker Wilhelmina Rolark.