

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Rachel Swarns

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Swarns, Rachel L.
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Rachel Swarns,
Dates:	January 15, 2014
Bulk Dates:	2014
Physical Description:	7 uncompressed MOV digital video files (3:22:14).
Abstract:	Newspaper reporter Rachel Swarns (1967 -) was the author of <i>American Tapestry: The Story of the Black, White and Multiracial Ancestors of Michelle Obama</i> . She also served as a reporter and columnist for <i>The New York Times</i> for twenty years. Swarns was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on January 15, 2014, in New York, New York. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2014_038
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Newspaper reporter/author Rachel L. Swarns was born in 1967 in Queens, New York. Her father, Joseph H. Swarns, was a real estate agent; her mother, Lucille Swarns, a deputy superintendent for public schools. After graduating from Stuyvesant High School in 1985, Swarns attended Howard University in Washington, D.C., and received her B.A. degree in Spanish and African and Caribbean Studies. She went on to receive her M.A. degree in international relations from the University of Kent in Canterbury, England.

Swarns was hired as a newspaper reporter for the *St. Petersburg Times* from 1989 to 1991, where she covered criminal courts, and then as a police reporter at the *The Miami Herald* from 1991 to 1995. At *The Miami Herald*, she covered federal courts, the Los Angeles Riots and immigration, traveling to Haiti and Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. She was also part of the Pulitzer-prize winning team that covered the aftermath of Hurricane Andrew. In 1995, Swarns joined *The New York Times*, where she wrote about the welfare reform policies of former New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, the historic visit of former Pope John Paul II to Cuba, and health care and homelessness in Russia. In 1999, Swarns became the *Times*' first African American Johannesburg bureau chief. From 1999 to 2003, she covered eleven countries in Southern Africa, and reported on the challenges of racial reconciliation in South Africa, civil strife in Zimbabwe, and the civil war in Angola. Swarns joined *The New York Times*' Washington bureau in 2003, where she reported on domestic policy, national politics, and immigration. She wrote about the Presidential elections of 2004 and 2008, and Michelle Obama's first year in the White House. In 2013, Swarns became a columnist for *The New York Times*, writing a weekly column entitled, "The Working Life," which focused on work, the workplace and the evolving New York City economy.

In 2012, Swarns authored *American Tapestry: The Story of the Black, White and Multiracial Ancestors of Michelle Obama*, a history of First Lady Michelle Obama's ancestry. Also, a series she wrote on the emergence of a professional black elite class in South Africa was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize. Swarns was awarded a visiting fellowship at the Institute for Policy Research and Catholic Studies at The Catholic University of America. She has

also served as a Woodrow Wilson Center Public Policy Scholar.

Swarns lives in Washington, D.C. with her husband and two children.

Rachel L. Swarns was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on January 15, 2014.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Rachel Swarns was conducted by Julieanna L. Richardson on January 15, 2014, in New York, New York, and was recorded on 7 uncompressed MOV digital video files. Newspaper reporter Rachel Swarns (1967 -) was the author of *American Tapestry: The Story of the Black, White and Multiracial Ancestors of Michelle Obama*. She also served as a reporter and columnist for *The New York Times* for twenty years.

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:

Swarns, Rachel L.

Richardson, Julieanna L. (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Swarns, Rachel L.--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Newspaper Reporter

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 Rachel Swarns, January 15, 2014. 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 Rachel Swarns, Section A2014_038_001_001, TRT: 1:30:01 ?

Rachel Swarns was born on July 10, 1967 in New York City to Lucille Smith Swarns and Joseph Swarns. Her maternal grandmother, Elizabeth Smith, was born to farmers on Long Island in the Bahamas. She later moved to Nassau, where she had ten children with Swarns' maternal grandfather, Blatchley Smith, who was the son of a wealthy merchant. The family later immigrated to Miami, Florida in the 1950s, and settled in Staten Island, New York. Originally from Summerfield, North Carolina, Swarns' paternal grandmother, Ruth Swarns, moved to Winston-Salem, North Carolina, where she married William Swarns and worked for the R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Company. An unsuccessful workers' strike forced them to relocate to Brooklyn, New York. Swarns' parents met and married in Washington, D.C., where her father attended Howard University and her mother studied at the District of Columbia Teachers College. They raised her and her two younger siblings in the majority white St. George neighborhood of Staten Island.

Video Oral History Interview with Rachel Swarns, Section A2014_038_001_002, TRT: 2:28:44 ?

Rachel Swarns began her education at P.S. 16, John J. Driscoll School in Staten Island, New York, where she was placed on the academic track. The white students there made discriminatory comments about her hair while the African American students accused her of looking and acting white. During this time, Swarns' father, Joseph Swarns, owned and managed several laundromats in Brooklyn, New York, while her mother, Lucille Smith Swarns, was a housewife who emphasized education. Later, Swarns' mother served as a school superintendent. Swarns attended I.S. 61, William A. Morris School in Staten Island, and tested into the specialized Stuyvesant High School in New York City for the ninth grade. In her junior year, Swarns was accepted into a semester-long writing internship at the New Youth Connections teenage newspaper in New York City. At home, her family subscribed to The New York Times and the Staten Island Advance. At this point in the interview, Swarns describes the development of her racial identity.

Video Oral History Interview with Rachel Swarns, Section A2014_038_001_003, TRT: 3:29:36 ?

Rachel Swarns interned at the New Youth Connections newspaper during her junior year at Stuyvesant High School in New York City, where she interviewed South African religious leader Desmond Tutu. She graduated in 1985, and went on to study Spanish and black diaspora studies at Howard University in Washington, D.C. While there, she served as a reporter and editor for The HillTop student newspaper, and aspired to become a journalist. She also studied abroad in Cuba and Columbia, and completed summer internships at the New York Amsterdam News and the Wall Street Journal. After graduating in 1989, she worked as a criminal courts reporter at the St. Petersburg Times in Tampa, Florida. In 1991, she joined the staff of the Miami Herald, where she traveled to Haiti and Guantanamo Bay, Cuba as a foreign correspondent. She was mentored by Pulitzer Prize winning journalist Sydney P. Freedberg, who encouraged her to cover a story of a white police officer who was accused of sexually assaulting an African American woman.

Video Oral History Interview with Rachel Swarns, Section A2014_038_001_004, TRT: 4:28:40 ?

Rachel Swarns became a metro reporter at the Miami Herald in 1991, where she was one of only a few African American reporters there. In 1993, she received a fellowship from the Rotary Foundation to attend the University of Kent at Canterbury in Canterbury, England, where she earned her master's degree in one year. She spent another year at the Miami Herald before being hired by Joseph Lelyveld at The New York Times in 1995 as a metro reporter in the Bronx borough of New York City. There, she was mentored by African American

journalist and editor Gerald M. Boyd, and served briefly as a foreign correspondent in Russia, where she covered president Boris Yeltsin's heart surgery. In 1999, she married journalist Henri Cauvin, and was promoted as The New York Times' bureau chief of Johannesburg, South Africa. In this role, Swarns covered stories in eleven countries of the southern Africa region, ranging from the civil war in Angola; Prime Minister Robert Mugabe's policies in Zimbabwe; and the AIDS epidemic.

Video Oral History Interview with Rachel Swarns, Section A2014_038_001_005, TRT: 5:30:38 ?

Rachel Swarns was selected in 1999 to serve as the first African American bureau chief at The New York Times in South Africa. While there, Swarns also covered the civil conflict in Angola, including the death of Angolan political leader Jonas Savimbi in 2002. During her time abroad, Swarns faced challenges from her editor in New York City, who undermined her coverage of the AIDS epidemic in Africa. Nevertheless, she received support from senior editor Gerald M. Boyd, who advocated for her story. Later, Swarns' coverage was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize. In 2003, she joined The New York Times' bureau in Washington, D.C. under the leadership of Jill Abramson. There, she covered stories on immigration as well as the 2004 Democratic presidential primaries. At this point in the interview, Swarns describes the division between The New York Times' leadership in the New York City and the Washington, D.C. bureaus. She also talks about the plagiarism scandal involving reporter Jayson Blair.

Video Oral History Interview with Rachel Swarns, Section A2014_038_001_006, TRT: 6:30:02 ?

Rachel Swarns was assigned by The New York Times to report on First Lady Michelle Obama's first year in the White House following the election of President Barack Obama in 2008. In 2009, Swarns wrote the article 'In First Lady's Roots, a Complex Path from Slavery,' in collaboration with investigative reporter Jodi Kantor and genealogist Megan Smolenyak. The piece traced First Lady Michelle Obama's mixed race ancestry to her maternal great-great-grandparents, Melvinia Shields and Charles Marion Shields. Due its popularity, Swarns was approached by HarperCollins Publishers LLC, to write a book on the first lady's family tree. She took a two year leave of absence from The New York Times in 2010, and received assistance from a Fletcher Fellowship and The Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C. to complete her research. In 2012, she published her book, 'American Tapestry: The Story of the Black, White and Multiracial Ancestors of Michelle Obama,' and returned to The New York Times as a columnist.

Video Oral History Interview with Rachel Swarns, Section A2014_038_001_007, TRT: 7:24:33 ?

Rachel Swarns returned to New York City in January of 2012 as a columnist for New York Times, prior to the release of her book, 'American Tapestry: The Story of the Black, White and Multiracial Ancestors of Michelle Obama.' As a columnist, Swarns covered stories that focused on the American family, including adoption and gay marriage. Swarns reflects upon her life and career; and the changes in the field of journalism, such as the role of the journalist in modern society. Swarns also describes her hopes and concerns for the African American community; and concludes the interview by reflecting upon her own legacy and the legacy of her generation.