

'I had a history as a black person'

HISTORYMAKERS | Digital archives offer sweeping look back

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When Julieanna L. Richardson was growing up, the only black history she heard was "George Washington Carver and the peanuts, and slavery."

But as a college student researching the Harlem Renaissance, "I realized there was a whole world I knew nothing about," said Richardson, founder and executive director of "The HistoryMakers."

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Julieanna Richardson, whose work was honored by Gov. Pat Quinn Saturday, has spent the last 10 years collecting oral histories of African Americans.

(Scott Stewart/Sun-Times)

"There were lots of people who had come before me. ... I found I had a history as a black person."

Richardson, whose work was honored Saturday by Gov. Quinn, has spent the last 10 years collecting oral histories of African Americans -- from national celebrities like Harry Belafonte to local powers like DuSable Museum founder Margaret Burroughs.

"The HistoryMakers" has collected a formidable digital archive of 400 video/audio interviews -- Richardson wants 5,000.

The HistoryMakers interviews don't just cover one subject -- like the civil rights movement -- but individual life stories that together reveal the complex reality of black life, Richardson explained.

"I wanted to accomplish something comprehensive," she said. "Within each person lies many different stories. ... We believe out of that patchwork will emerge a new and more accurate version of our history, a history that will have a lot more voices, a lot more people, a lot more themes, a lot more understanding, of even the issue of our slave past which this nation has yet to deal with."

Housed at 1900 S. Michigan, the HistoryMakers' interview archives can be scanned for information about different subjects.

For example, a researcher can type in "1920s education" and find what different people had to say about that subject.

It's made available to the Chicago Public Schools, and Richardson would like to have it in schools around the state. Schoolchildren get excited when they hear something new -- not just oft-told stories of Martin Luther King Jr. -- she said, and interview subjects are always eager to talk to kids.

Richardson said the black community tends to reinvent itself every generation as if the other generations didn't exist. But it's crucial to remember what came before.

"It's very important that we do not throw away the Rev. Jacksons, the Julian Bonds, the people that pave the path no matter what our viewpoint is -- they provide the path for there to be a Barack Obama," she said.

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