From the Negro
League to
the mayor’s
office: black
America
tells its story

BY ANDREW BUNCH

USC to record interviews
with 2,300 former slaves, has such
a comprehensive attempt been
made to record the African
American experience as told
in the first person, claim those
behind the project.

"We are preserving living
history," said Juliaann
Richardson, who established
the HistoryMakers project. "In
today's world, you hear Rose
Parks and Martin Luther King
Jr. You keep hearing the
same names over and over again.

"But if it had not been for the
lawyers behind the scene and
founders like Harry Belafonte,
there would not have been a
Martin Luther King. The
stories are out there, but you
ever get to hear them. It's a
humming resource and people
will want to tap into this.
It is a resource that will not
be easily replicated."

The project, based in Chicago,
was started when Ms Richardson
was a graduate student at
Harvard, completing a project
on oral history.

She was inspired by the dis-
cover that the history of
blacks in America contained
so many different stories and yet
people had heard very few of
them. The closest compari-
on is Steven Spielberg's

The development of black
consciousness in the US and
the sensitivity surrounding
racial issues as America tries
to reconcile a society still
scared by discrimination is
the cultural backdrop against
which the HistoryMakers pro-
ject is taking place.

The problems of bringing
about such reconciliation were
demonstrated last year by one
of those included in the project,
Mr Belafonte, who enlisted the
position of Colin Powell with-
in the Bush administration to
that of an obedient slave. Mr
Belafonte, a liberal activist,
said: "There's an old saying in
the days of slavery, there were
those slaves who lived on the
plantation and those slaves
that lived in the house. You get
the privilege of living in the
house if you served the mas-
ter... exactly the way the mas-
ter intended to have you."

The Secretary of State re-
plied: "If Harry had wanted
to attack my politics, that
was fine. But to use a slave
reference... is unfortunate
and is a throwback to another
time and another place, that I
wish Harry had thought twice
about using."

Earl Graves, the publisher of
Black Enterprise magazine,
said he believed Ms Richard-
son's work was important
because US history only since
the civil rights movement,
started to recognise the im-
portance of the contributions
of African-Americans."

"And if you have a pro-
gramme such as what is in
place now, that can be put
away, then people a couple of
hundred years from now can
look back," he told The New
York Times.

Ms Richardson said she
hoped eventually that the His-
toryMakers video recordings
would be stored in a digital
archive that would be made
available to black colleges as
well as libraries and national
research centres, including the
Schomburg Centre for Re-
search in Black Culture in
Harlem, New York.

"Out of this will develop
this quiltwork where you'll see
patterns between stories and
you will see new stories emerg-
ing," she said. "It is designed
to show the breadth and width
of the African American expe-
rience. There are lots of ways
of filling in the gaps."