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## Woman's legacy may be saving black America's past

It took a mid-life crisis for Julieanna Richardson to find her life's calling. With her roots in theater and her training as a corporate lawyer, Richardson was casting about for a new career direction as she entered her mid-40s.

She'd been the city of Chicago's cable administrator and later operated her own video production company, while also founding a regional home shopping channel that went bust.

"I was at a point in life where it gets to be about legacy-building," she said. "I didn't have children."

And then, "this idea came to me," Richardson said.

The idea was to videotape oral histories from 5,000 African Americans, creating a living record of 20th century African-American history that could be made available in searchable format to scholars and eventually to the public. It would be the largest archival project of its kind since the recordings made of former slaves by the WPA in the 1930s.

Not everybody thought it was a great idea.

"My friends thought I was certified looney-tunes at the time," Richardson recalled.

But after doing her lawyerly due-diligence, Richardson was convinced she was on the right track.

She called her non-profit project The HistoryMakers, and when Richardson got started in 1999, she calculated she'd be bringing the job to completion sometime this year.

With 1,000 interviews in hand, she's now had to readjust her sights for a 2009 finish line, and even that is qualified with an addendum of "hopefully."

But as Richardson, 50, welcomed the public Monday to a Dr. Martin Luther King Day open house at The HistoryMakers' office in the South Loop, it was evident that the new timetable is no sign of any failure on her part but a recognition of the daunting goal she set for herself.

### Web source

The HistoryMakers has already achieved many successes, including a Web site, *thehistorymakers.com*, that has become a popular source for biographical information on contemporary African Americans.

The HistoryMakers collection, however, is not just another who's who of the African-American community, Richardson emphasizes, with interview subjects including the obscure as well as the famous.

The HistoryMakers' modest third-floor offices at 1900 S. Michigan were pierced Monday by the cold but buzzing with the warmth of activity as staffers lectured on the importance of African Americans appreciating and recording their history, while volunteers demonstrated how they are transcribing the interviews and

indexing them for a searchable database that Richardson hopes to make available through libraries and museums.

### Day of service

Richardson said she's told her staff the King holiday will no longer be celebrated by the organization with a day off, in recognition of Coretta Scott King's original intent that it be a day of service.

In that vein, she was appreciative of the 100 or so members of the public who spent part of their off day touring The HistoryMakers' office and listening to King-related talks from University of Chicago history professor Charles Branham and Ald. Dorothy Tillman (3rd).

She didn't even mind me sitting in and taking

notes.

Richardson complained that King is being treated more and more these days as a single-dimensional "mythological character."

"We're down to just one speech, the 'I Have a Dream' speech," she said. "I don't know if we'll wake up one day, and he won't even be black any more."

That wouldn't seem likely to me, but one of the points of a white guy going to an event like this is to try to see the world from another point of view.

Toward that end, I'd hoped to burrow into some of the taped interviews for you, but that didn't quite work out under the time constraints. The typical interview is three hours long. No editing is performed. Although the project is national in scope, there have been an abundance of Chicago interview subjects because of its local roots.

In the early days of The HistoryMakers, Richardson did all the interviews herself. Now there are six people doing that work, while she has to devote most of her time to the fund-raising efforts that keep the project afloat.

She said she's raised \$5 million (including \$900,000 from Illinois taxpayers) toward her \$30 million goal and acknowledged she's also trying to find strategies to reduce the projected cost.

If she can bring her project to a successful completion, Richardson will have assured her own place as a history maker.



Julieanna Richardson  
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