

Editorial

Like it 'tis: HistoryMakers a creative depiction

Julietta Richardson, a Harvard-educated lawyer turned historian, is compiling a videotape history of living African Americans.

Their voices and images are being recorded and preserved as a chronicle depicting the prominent and famous of our time, and, true to its mission to produce a comprehensive living history, it also dramatizes the experience of ordinary people.

Ms. Richardson likes to tell one story: How Chicago real estate magnate and author Dempsey Travis responded when he was first confronted with the n-word.

When Mr. Travis heard the word, he went to his mother and expressed his chagrin and rage. His mother gathered up a swatch of black velvet, one of the most beautiful fabrics in the world, Richardson said, and demonstrated its profound allure to her son.

From then on, Travis had no trouble with the word. "There is a lot of power in the story of someone's life," Richardson said from her office and studio at 1900 S. Michigan Ave.

It's there that HistoryMakers, a non-profit organization Richardson founded, is creating stories of African Americans that have so far gone unrecorded.

Richardson plans to produce 5,000 videotapes. She has already created an interactive CD-ROM and other materials titled "Pioneers in the Struggle" about the work of African Americans in Illinois government that's used by schools throughout the state.

She conceived the idea of a digital archive after an academic background beginning in her hometown of Newark, Ohio, where she said two things were taught about the nation's African American historic experience: Slavery and George Washington Carver.

The big part of African Americans' history is too often missing, she said, so she intends that the HistoryMakers archive will some day close the gap when, by the year 2005, 5,000 oral histories she envisions for the archive are on videotape.

She says she's on the precipice of producing a project of national scope and has already raised \$2.4 million of the budgeted \$30 million needed to finish the HistoryMaker project.

Since her undergraduate days at Brandeis University, where she studied American history and theatre and performed on stage, Ms. Richardson has, she said, felt strongly that history created by Black people should be shared in a living form with the world.

The stories her work produces will be the massive, the biggest chronicle of its kind. It will follow a similar work made in the 1930s that recorded voices of African Americans who told of their lives as slaves in the 19th century.

We look forward to two events next month that promise to be brilliant examples of the HistoryMakers concept.

On February 9, Chicago's Channel 11 will broadcast "An Evening with Ossie Davis Ruby Dee", an example of how Richardson is making a living record of African American entertainment history.

On February 22, theatrical history will be celebrated in a program at the Chicago Cultural Center, when Richardson presents "Showtime: Black Theatre in Chicago."

Foundations have granted half a million dollars to HistoryMakers, and private donations amount to nearly \$2 million so far.

We commend those who support this most creative approach to preserving the story of African American