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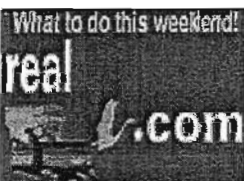
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Tuesday, December 10, 2002 1:42 P.M. Human Rights Day

Video catches black history firsthand

The Associated Press

Posted on December 8, 2002

NEW ORLEANS (AP) - Decades from now, history buffs will be able to see and hear Norman Francis reminisce about his family, his legacy, the sights, sounds and smells of growing up, what kind of boy he was and what set him on the path to becoming a successful college president.

Francis, president of Xavier University, this November became the 402nd entry into what may become the largest video oral history of black people in the United States.

Francis' story will be added to the stories of novelist Terry McMillan, physicist and educator Walter Massey, Black Enterprise magazine founder Earl Graves, performers Ossie Davis and Harry Belafonte and thousands of others.

Francis' oral history was videotaped by a camera crew from The HistoryMakers,

a Chicago-based nonprofit

organization.

Also in New Orleans, the Chicagoans interviewed poet Kalamu ya Salaam, musician Harold Batiste and chef Leah Chase. All four were chosen because of their unique accomplishments in their fields, said Crystal Foster, director of the HistoryMakers project.

"When we're finished, we will have interviewed 5,000 well-known and unsung African-American history makers," said Julieanna Richardson, a Harvard Law School graduate who in 1999 established the archival project to expand awareness about the contributions of people of African ancestry in the United States.

"Ultimately, the video oral histories will be available in digital archives," she said.

HistoryMakers seeks to show the breadth and depth of a crosscurrent in American history that often has been slighted or ignored. The first-person narratives offer insights into how African-American men and women achieved their goals and explain why the history makers chose their celebrated paths.

In Batiste's interview, for example, he revealed that his desire to distance himself from negative racial attitudes led to his career as a musician.

Despite his passion for music, his mother wanted him to be a doctor. So, "we compromised," Batiste recalled. "I agreed to teach music."

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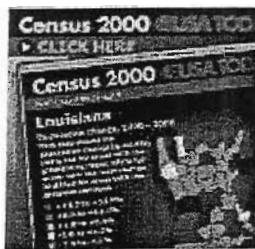
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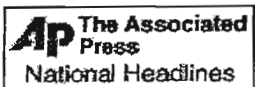
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• Interactive map



While teaching at New Orleans public schools, Batiste was criticized by the school system's music supervisor. "He told me I was spending too much time teaching them (students of African ancestry) to read music."

"He said, 'their parents just want them to play a few songs.' " But at the "white schools," the teachers routinely spent a lot of time teaching students to read music, Batiste said.

"I got out of the system because of racial attitudes, even though I loved teaching, and I loved those kids; it launched me in a career in music."

Batiste later returned to teaching and joined the University of New Orleans jazz faculty in the late 1980s.

Anyone interested in viewing the Batiste interview or any of the other archives will have to go to the HistoryMakers office in Chicago on Michigan Avenue. However, when the collection is complete in 2007, the public should have free access to the archives via 10 or 12 locations throughout the country. The Amistad Research Center at Tulane University may be one of those locations, Richardson said.

"We want to make sure this information is available to the widest audience possible," she said.

"There still exists in this country a very limited view of African-American achievements and accomplishments," Richardson said.

The public knows about many of the contributions of black people in the sports and entertainment fields, as well as their history as slaves, she said.

"But we still don't think of African-Americans as scientists, medical leaders, founders of patents and innovators," she said. "These things exist, but they're just not widely known."

The oral histories of Francis, as well as Willy T. Ribbs, the first black person to race in the

Indianapolis 500, and musician Charles Burrell, who began his career with the Denver Symphony Orchestra as a classical bass player in 1949, are some of "America's missing stories" and add to the public's understanding of black history, Richardson said.

After graduating from Harvard, Richardson did stints as a corporate lawyer, a cable-

television administrator, a home-shopping-channel executive and chief executive officer of a video production company.

Richardson and her 10-person staff at HistoryMakers decide who is included in the video archives with assistance from a group of scholar consultants.

"We get recommendations from all over the country," she said, adding that the public can participate in the process, as well by submitting recommendations at the Web site www.thehistorymakers.com. The organization is financed with corporate, foundation and government grants.

"History makers" are people who have made tremendous strides via their own accomplishments or have been associated with an organization or event important to black people, she said.

"Out of this quilt work, we can weave a more accurate history," she said.

It is a history with a common thread as well, said Larry Crowe, the former director of the African-American Artists Alliance of Chicago.

Crowe interviewed Francis as well as about 80 others.

"The connection has to do with the struggle we have to wage no matter what economic level we're born into," he said. "In all the stories, the history makers have to overcome obstacles other people don't have to deal with."

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