

BY DON TERRY
TRIBUNE PHOTO BY CHRIS WALKER

Go tell it

**JULIEANNA RICHARDSON URGENTLY PURSUES A MISSION—TO BUILD AN ENORMOUS
'LIVING ARCHIVE' OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN HISTORY, ONE COMPELLING PERSON AT A TIME**

JULIEANNA RICHARDSON, THE HARD-DRIVING, bespectacled hunter of African-American treasures, is sitting in a room surrounded by her excavation tools: omni lights, tape recorders, monitors and a JVC K429 digital camera. ■ The year is 2001. It is early in the life of her audacious dream to create "a living archive" of 5,000 videotaped interviews of African-Americans from all walks of life—some famous, such as Eartha Kitt, some unsung, such as Junius "Red" Gaten, a 103-year-old man who delivered ice from the back of a horse-drawn wagon to customers in Chicago's Black Belt—including anti-lynching crusader Ida B. Wells and boxing champion Jack Johnson. Richardson views the man she is about to interview as somewhere between the entertainer and the iceman.



The room she occupies is at the top of the stairs of a former automobile dealership on South Michigan Avenue’s Motor Row. Richardson has made it her base camp on the southernmost edge of downtown Chicago. On this day she is going over her notes one last time, mapping out her strategy for prying what she hopes will be a treasure trove of memories from the man, a little-known South Side pol with a toothy smile, an unflappable demeanor and places to go.

In fact, when the pol arrives at her office, he gives Richardson the impression that he is in a considerable hurry.

Undaunted, Richardson starts plying him with questions. She wants to know everything about him.

Everything.

What’s your favorite food?
Red beans and rice.
Favorite color?
Blue.
Favorite saying?
“I’m tired.” [The man has a young daughter at home.]
Where’s your father from?
Kenya.
Your mother?
Kansas.

For three hours, Richardson asks questions about his life and he answers. She has made the busy pol slow down, as he gives his take on being a black man in America.

His mother, he explains, had “inculcated” in him the sense that being “African-American is a wonderful thing, that it is special in some way.”

Years later, a representative for the politician would climb the steep stairs leading to Richardson’s third-floor offices to review the interview. He wanted to make sure that his boss, Barack Obama, the man who was in such a hurry, hadn’t said anything that might derail his bid for the presidency of the United States.

President Obama is one of nearly 1,900 African-Americans in more than 80 cities and

towns as far away as Oslo, Norway, who has sat down with Richardson or her staff for interviews as part of The HistoryMakers, an ambitious, non-profit oral history project whose mission is to document and digitalize the African-American experience from slave cabins to the White House. The collection contains more than 8,000 hours of taped interviews.

“I didn’t put ‘Black’ in the name because I don’t want a project that just speaks to black people,” she says. “I want to mainstream the history.”

She says the interview subjects themselves take a back seat. “I’m not so much interested in the people,” Richardson says, “but in the history that lies within. I’m looking for nuggets of history that will provide a bigger picture.”

Richardson founded The HistoryMakers in 1999, shortly after visiting the Civil Rights Museum at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis where Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated on April 4, 1968. She did her first interviews in 2000.

The History Makers, housed at 1900 S. Michigan Ave., began as her brainchild. It has become her life. “I wanted to leave a legacy,” she says. “I didn’t have children.”

In the beginning, she was racing against

the clock. Many of her initial interviews were with people in their 70s, 80s and beyond. They were early civil rights pioneers, educators, artists, dancers, ministers, lawyers, doctors, businessmen and women, Pullman car porters, Negro League baseball players, Tuskegee Airmen. They were survivors of Northern segregation, Southern Jim Crow, Indiana lynching. They were stubborn strivers and unrequited patriots. But now they were dying off, taking their stories of tragedy and triumph with them to the grave.

“There’s a saying, every death is like burning a library,” says Richardson, who is 54. “I feel a real sense of urgency to tell our story, because so little of it has been recorded.”

Negro League star Ted “Double Duty” Radcliffe never spent much time in libraries. But he was filled with stories. He was a few weeks shy of his 99th birthday when he sat down with Richardson in 2001.

Radcliffe said he never saw snow before he arrived in Chicago in 1919 from Mobile. Nor had he ever owned a suit with long pants until a gambler called “Snoochy” bought one for him. “I was wearing short pants until I was 18,” Radcliffe said.

Snoochy also gave Radcliffe one of the only jobs he had outside of playing ball. He put Radcliffe to work at the front door of his gambling house, “searching the people and taking the knives off them.”

As racism forced African Americans to carve out a separate universe, paralleling every aspect of life, Chicago was a hotbed of black baseball. Radcliffe was a living link to those days. Richardson was determined to keep him alive in her archive. He passed away in 2005 at the age of 103.

Radcliffe grew up in Alabama with a lanky hard-throwing “wizard” of a pitcher, Leroy Paige, known as “Satchel.”

“He could throw that ball so hard it would act like lightning,” Radcliffe told the camera.

New York sportswriter Damon Runyon christened Radcliffe “Double Duty,” after watching him play a double-header, catch-



Isaac Hayes
Musician, composer



Carol Moseley Braun
Former U.S. senator



Eartha Kitt
Singer, actress



Julian Bond
Civil rights leader

ing the first game, pitching the second. Both were victories. “I had a good career,” Radcliffe said. “I can’t kick.”

His face lit up when Richardson asked him about the time he played against Ty Cobb in Cuba in 1925. “He tried to steal second,” Radcliffe said. “I threw him out both times. He quit. He said, ‘I ain’t gonna play against no nigger. Ain’t no nigger gonna throw me out.’”

Cobb could have saved himself the embarrassment of getting thrown out by a colored catcher if only he had taken the time to read the words Radcliffe had inscribed on his chest-protector:

“Thou shalt not steal.”

A few years ago, Richardson was courting a potential financial supporter. She and the white businessman were having dinner when he said, “What history? Blacks didn’t do anything before the civil rights movement.”

The remark felt like a slap.

“I wanted to go over the table at him,” Richardson says.

Since the rise of Obama, she’s been hearing even more nonsense about history and race.

Obama is the end of black politics.
We’re living in a post-racial America.
Race doesn’t matter any longer.

“How do you take hundreds of years of racist stereotyping and erase it on one election night?” she says. “You don’t. I like the potential, but we’re still a long, long way away.”

Robert Starks, a professor of political science at Northeastern Illinois University, says The HistoryMakers is an antidote to ignorance, white and black, old and young. “African-Americans are left out of history and people don’t know what we’ve done,” he says.

“Obama didn’t just fall out of the sky,” Starks continues. “The national press has given all the attention to Obama and has overlooked the blood, sweat and tears all the way back to [Jean Baptiste Pointe] du Sable that laid the groundwork for this young man to become president. If you had not had a Harold Washington and a Jesse Jackson, you

wouldn’t have a Barack Obama. I don’t know if he understands that. I know for a fact that the young people in my class don’t understand that.”

Juanita Thurman is trying to make sure that the students in her African-American history class at Lincoln Park High School understand. Thurman has been taking her classes on field trips to The HistoryMakers since 2002.

Not long ago, Richardson asked the students in Thurman’s latest class what they knew about the history of their families.

“My great-great-grandmother was a sharecropper in Mississippi,” a boy says.

“What’s a sharecropper?” Richardson probes.

“It’s basically almost a slave,” he says.

Someone else’s grandfather was a fisherman; another was a farmer in Puerto Rico.

Richardson asks a 17-year-old about his family history. The boy says his father left when he was 3. But his stepfather has been in his life for more than 10 years and “made up for what my real daddy didn’t do.”

His stepfather never had “nothing growing up, so he chose the street life. He stopped selling drugs to take care of us, his family. He tells me every day to be a better man than he was.”

Richardson nods her head, listening as intensely as she does when interviewing a politician or business leader.

“We believe here that everyone has a history,” Richardson tells the students. “It all begins with the personal story.”

In the 1930s, the Works Progress Administration—the WPA—dispatched writers all over America to interview and, in some cases, tape record, the memories of former slaves. While influenced and inspired by the project, which was turned into a book and radio documentary in 1998 called “Remembering Slavery,” Richardson did not want to focus her archive on any one area of black American life. The HistoryMakers, says Michael Flug, senior archivist of the

Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection at the Chicago Public Library, “is by far the largest general oral history for African-Americans that has ever been done.”

“The project is quite remarkable for its size and scope across so many fields of endeavor,” Flug continues. “African-Americans are the most under-documented group in the whole country in archival terms. The struggle to document the under-documented is a tremendous struggle. It’s a massive project. Julieanna Richardson is doing a great service.”

Gloria Swanson—the legal secretary, not the actress—has transcribed about 250 of the interviews that typically last three hours or more. In 2004, she heard about Richardson’s project and wrote her a letter, thanking her for “stepping up and documenting this history so it wouldn’t be lost.”

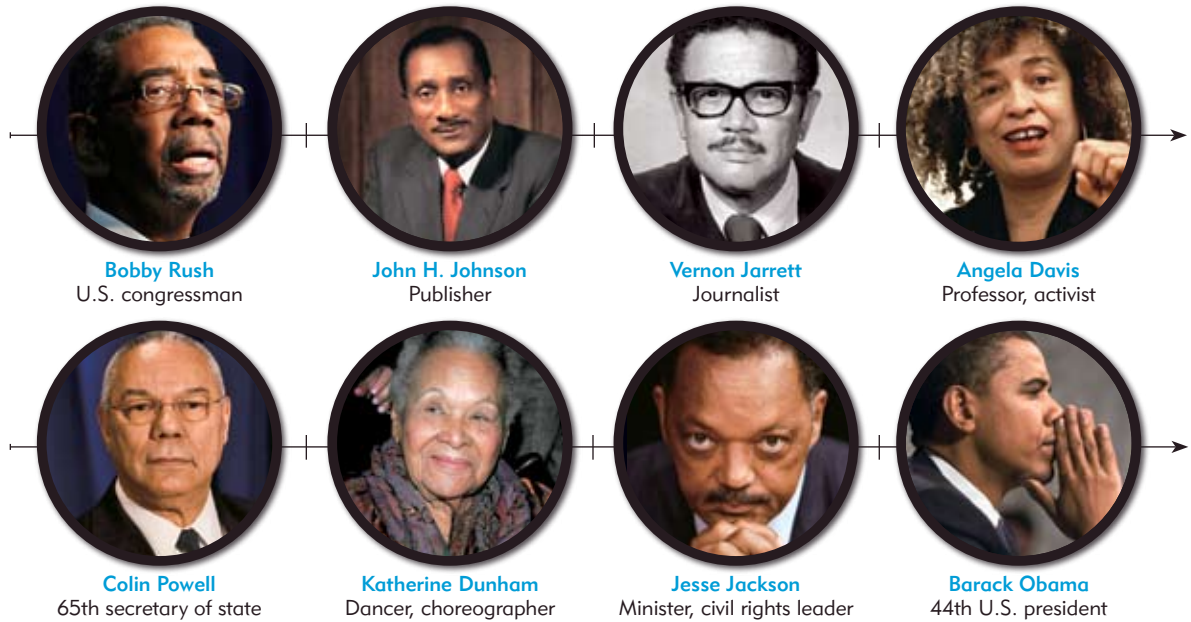
“I offered my services,” says Swanson, who does freelance transcriptions. “I assumed she had somebody. As it turns out she didn’t.”

Richardson handed Swanson a tall stack of videotape and Swanson took the tapes to her home office. The work took longer than she expected. She kept stopping to laugh or cry. “The interviews were so interesting,” Swanson says. “The old people from the South told sad stories.”

Someone would forget to bow and scrape to a white man or avert his eyes when passing a white woman in Alabama or Mississippi and they would have to leave town in a buckboard wagon or freight train. “They were the front runners of Emmett Till,” Swanson says. “But they got out alive. They lived to tell their stories to me and you.”

Richardson has a knack for finding people like Swanson to help her keep HistoryMakers moving forward. She also has a knack for chasing them away. “I can be a little intense,” Richardson says with a laugh. “I have to be careful sometimes how I talk to people. I don’t mean any harm.”

Larry Crowe, who has conducted more than 800 interviews for The HistoryMakers project, says Richardson “is driven by an invisible whip.”



“She wants you to get it done twice as fast as humanly possible,” he says.

Crowe recalls traveling to Denver with Richardson to interview an African-American theologian for the archive. When Crowe and Richardson arrived at the man’s office, he wasn’t there. He had apparently suffered a heart attack and was at the hospital.

While Crowe was giving the man’s assistant his condolences, Richardson was whipping out her address book, searching for someone else in the area to interview. She didn’t want to waste a minute. “Here’s a number,” she said, handing Crowe her address book. “Call him and let’s go.”

“She can cut it to the bone sometimes,” he says. “She’s not playing. She’s trying to get this done as fast as possible.”

When she first began The HistoryMakers, Richardson conducted all of the interviews herself. “I was trying to figure out our processes,”

she says. She also didn’t have much money.

Overall, she estimates that she has personally conducted about 300 of the interviews and holds the record of 37 in one month.

When she interviewed Professor Angela Davis, the ’60s radical icon, Davis focused on American terrorism.

Davis grew up in Birmingham, Ala., in an area named “Dynamite Hill,” so called, she told Richardson, because “the Ku Klux Klan and other racist formations were determined to prevent black people from moving into that part of Birmingham.”

One of her earliest memories as a child was “the sound of this thunderous, warlike, end-of-the-world” explosion as she was wash-

ing her shoelaces for church the next morn-

ing. “It was thoroughly frightening,” Davis said.

Richardson asked her what she discovered about black history at the time. “It was so important for us to learn, as black children, that we were much more than what the prevailing authorities represented black people as being; mainly inferior. We were barred from the white schools, we were barred from most aspects of society in Birmingham, so that I utterly appreciate the fact that so many of my teachers must have been thinking very consciously about subverting that sense of inferiority that might well have become entrenched.”

One person Richardson has not been able to persuade to sit down with her and her digital camera is Berry Gordy, the founder of Motown Records. He has yet to respond. She will keep trying. “Motown is synonymous with the 1960s, cultural awakening, and the civil rights movement,” Richardson says. “Yet it meant much more. It was the ultimate of creativity and it humanized the black experience. Furthermore, Berry Gordy, good or bad, was a founder and being a founder, I have a special affinity for founders. I am always looking for parts of myself in their story and I also look for things that I could use from them to improve my organization, my success.”

A Harvard-trained lawyer and a magna cum laude graduate of Brandeis University, Richardson is not a professional historian or archivist, a fact that has arched not a few ivory-tower eyebrows.

“She’s basically a builder, not a historian,” says Michael Frisch, a professor of American Studies and History at the State University of New York at Buffalo and the President-elect of the Oral History Association, as well as

an adviser to Richardson’s project. “But I’ve found the interviews to be very rich, fully appropriate for the most exacting kind of scholarly research.”

What she is, is a woman deeply in love with the souls of black folks. Yet mention Black History Month and Richardson reacts strongly.

As soon as February rolls around, Richardson is deluged with requests from community groups, schools and corporations, seeking her help—often at the last minute—in putting together a black history program for their church, classroom or wood-paneled boardroom in the clouds.

She often obliges. But just as soon as the month is over, the flood of requests slows to a trickle; the history is put back on the shelf and, Richardson fears, is forgotten until the next dreary winter. “Our history has been marginalized, crammed into the shortest month of the year,” she says. “It drives me crazy.”

In the archive room on the second floor of The HistoryMakers building are the hundreds of videotapes and DVDs that make up the collection so far. There are also hundreds of photographs and scores of magazine articles, books and newspaper clippings on prospective HistoryMakers yet to be interviewed. To see it, a researcher, student or anyone else has to make an appointment to climb the 32 steps to Richardson’s office.

Richardson is working hard to make the archive more accessible. Currently, brief descriptions of the interviewees are available on the Web at TheHistoryMakers.com. They are divided into 15 categories, depending on profession, such as ArtsMakers, PoliticalMakers or MedicalMakers. So far, 400 of the interviews have been digitized by the School of Computer Science at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, employing speech-alignment, image-processing and lan-

guage-understanding technologies. With a few computer keystrokes, the digital archive can be searched by a name, a word or a subject matter. You can type “Barack Obama” and “civil rights” and up pops that section of the interview.

She hopes that a digital version of the collection will someday be available on the Internet. But like newspapers and other businesses feeling their way along the information superhighway, Richardson is trying to figure out how to “monetize the collection so we can continue our efforts.”

Funding is never far from Richardson’s thoughts. “I move one step forward and then my funding gets funky and I move a step back,” she sighs. “I want to be catapulted forward.”

Richardson says to reach her goal of 5,000 interviews she will need \$30 million. So far, she has raised \$11 million from corporate contributions and other fundraising, including the black-tie gala, for which The HistoryMakers is perhaps best known, “An Evening With . . .” The event, which is taped before a live audience and aired on PBS, features one famous African-American interviewed by another high-profile African-American about his or her life. In September, the late Eartha Kitt was interviewed by journalist Gwen Ifill.

Richardson was a nervous wreck. “Eartha was the oldest one we have featured on “An

Evening With . . .,” Richardson says. “Her career spanned six decades. You think of all the people she touched, all the history that she represented, all in one person.”

But the rehearsal earlier that day with Kitt and her band had not gone well. There was low energy. Then the doors opened late. There was a mixup about the seating. Richardson had some heated words with the show’s director. “I was being very direct,” she says. “It had been very stressful.”

Kitt was tired and, as it turns out, she was slowly dying. But when it was time for the 81-year-old diva to perform, she made the audience gasp with an over-the-head leg kick that someone half her age couldn’t have performed.

Later, as Richardson was editing the program for the PBS broadcast, she wasn’t happy with the shot from one of the five cameras. She was looking for a better angle when she noticed something she had missed on the night of the performance.

After Kitt finished the song, “Here’s to Life,” she raised her glass—and she was crying.

She died on Christmas Day.

Another library gone.

A few years ago, Merri Dee, the longtime Chicago radio and television broadcaster, made Richardson cry. They were having lunch when Dee told her that people in the neighborhoods believed a person had to be

a celebrity or a big shot to be interviewed by The HistoryMakers. Richardson was hurt and couldn’t hold back her tears. “An Evening With,” she protested, was how she helped pay the bills.

“I work so hard, and to be misunderstood was painful,” she says. Still, she does not deny that there is a strong undercurrent of achievement in the archive. She makes no apologies either. “What I saw missing when I started was the black middle class,” she says. “There is a purposeful attempt to expose the other side of the black community.”

Richardson doesn’t like to admit it, but being interviewed by Julie, as everyone calls her, has become a sort of status symbol in the nearly 10 years she has been collecting African-American memories. Although she says she still has to chase after some interviewees, others lobby to get grilled by her. After all, being anointed a HistoryMaker puts you in heady company: the new president of the United States, Rev. Jesse L. Jackson, Time Warner chairman Richard Parsons, Colin Powell, actress Diahann Carroll, dancer Katherine Dunham, journalist Lu Palmer, publisher John H. Johnson and Mr. Cub, Ernie Banks.

“We are not a who’s who,” Richardson insists, making no attempt to hide her irritation at the very notion. “What we’re really

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trying to show is the diversity of the African-American experience.”

Richardson herself is diversity personified. A small-town girl now living in the city of broad shoulders, she has been described as mercurial, brilliant, spacey, artsy, a control freak, passionate, entrepreneurial.

“I saw in Julieanna a person who had come up with an idea and is so passionate about it that she’s bringing it to life despite the odds,” says B. Joseph White, president of the University of Illinois, which is in the second of a three-year research and educational partnership with The HistoryMakers. “There are many, many more good ideas in the world than there are ideas that are turned into action. This is a seriously important archive.”

In college, Richardson wanted to be an actress but decided there weren’t a lot of roles for black women, certainly not enough to make a living. She ended up going to Harvard Law School and practicing law for Jenner and Block, a corporate firm, when she first moved to Chicago in 1980. “I hated being a lawyer,” she says. She has been Chicago’s acting cable administrator and ran her own cable shopping channel, “Shop Chicago,” in the late-1980s. “I lost my shirt with the cable channel,” she says. “But everything I’ve done in life has led me to what I’m doing now.”

Julieanna’s journey began in the hill and steel country of Pennsylvania. She was born in Pittsburgh, the oldest of four sisters. She spent her early life in the mill town of Duquesne, about 12 miles away. “The sky was never blue,” Richardson remembers. “It was orange.” She lived with her mother and her mother’s mother on top of a steep hill while her father, Julius, was away serving in the Army. She’s named after her father. Her mother, Margaret, taught piano. The house on the hill was always filled with music.

As a child, Richardson watched a lot of television and just knew that any day she would be discovered on the streets of Duquesne and whisked away to Hollywood. “I was a child who lived in her head,” she says.

Her father had wanted to be a lawyer, but he stayed in the military to support his growing family. He eventually became a professional golf instructor. Richardson used to caddy for him.

He pushed the education of his children hard. He even enrolled in education classes at the University of Pittsburgh so he could better help his daughters in school. He told everyone that some day his little Julie was going to go to Harvard.

“My husband always challenged her,” Richardson’s mother says. When Richardson was a child she’d build a castle out of wooden blocks. Her father would knock

it down and have her build it again. “He instilled in her [a philosophy] of no complaints,” says her mother, the receptionist at The HistoryMakers. “You might fall but you get right back up. He never allowed anyone to make him feel inferior.”

When Richardson was 9 and her father had retired from the Army, the family moved to Newark, Ohio. One day when Richardson was in 4th grade, the teacher asked the students to talk about their family backgrounds. A boy said he was half-German. A girl said she was part-Irish.

Richardson was getting more and more nervous as it got closer to her turn. She was the only African-American in the class and had no idea what to say. She didn’t want to just say she was black or Negro. All she could remember studying about black people was the remarkable things George Washington Carver could do with a peanut and the shame of slavery. “It was hard for my 9-year-old mind to think positively about black history,” she says.

It was her turn.

She said she was part Cherokee, part black and part French.

“The teacher looked at me like I was the biggest fraud of all time,” Richardson says. “I was a child without a history.”

For high school, Richardson attended the Interlochen Arts Academy in Michigan. At Brandeis University, she majored in American studies and theater arts, still planning a life as an actress.

But in her sophomore year of college, there came a turning point she wouldn’t fully understand until several years later.

Richardson did an independent study project on the Harlem Renaissance. She spent much of the year in Harlem, a tape recorder slung over her shoulder, interviewing people about that African-American cultural explosion of the 1920s. She interviewed Butterfly McQueen, the squeaky-voiced actress from “Gone With the Wind.”

“She sounded just like she did in the movie,” Richardson says.

More importantly, Richardson discovered the treasures contained in the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in Harlem. She spent hours there, immersing herself in black culture, fortifying her soul, building her confidence. “I knew the white community inside out,” she says. “I did not know the black community.”

She remembers sitting in the Schomburg on a gray afternoon, listening to “I’m Just Wild About Harry,” a song written by Eubie Blake and Noble Sissle for the 1921 groundbreaking “Shuffle Along,” the first successful Broadway show to have an all-black cast.

“I felt a whole part of me had been hidden from me,” she says. “It gave me a sense of myself as a black person. It’s like a whole world had opened up to me. It was liberating.” □

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