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: omnilights, 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.
he room she occupies is at the top of the stairs of a former automobile dealer, work on South Michigan Avenue. Richardson has made her base camp on the southernmost end of downtown Chicago. On this day she is going over her notes one last time, mapping out her strategy for praying what she hopes will be a treasure trove of memories from the man, a little-known South Side pol with a toothy smile, an unforgettable demeanor and places to go.

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

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

In 1989, Richardson, who is 48, married, and has two children, told an interviewer from the Chicago Tribune that he was surprised by the amount of research that the museum had done on African American history.

“I was a little taken aback,” Richardson said. “I thought that we had researched all the important events and figures that we needed to research.”

Richardson, who is a history major at the University of Illinois at Chicago, said that she was surprised to find that there were still many gaps in the history of African American people.

“I think that there is a lot of knowledge that needs to be shared,” Richardson said. “I want to make sure that people understand the history of African American people.”

Richardson started researching the history of African American people in the 1990s. She began by interviewing people who had lived through the Civil Rights Movement.

“I felt that it was important to hear their stories,” Richardson said. “I wanted to make sure that their stories were not forgotten.”

Richardson said that she had interviewed more than 8,000 people from all over the country.

“I wanted to make sure that nobody’s story was left out,” Richardson said. “I wanted to make sure that everybody had a voice.”

Richardson’s research has led her to write several books on African American history.

“I think that my research has helped to fill in some of the gaps in the history of African American people,” Richardson said. “I think that my research has helped to make sure that people understand the history of African American people.”

Richardson said that she is planning to continue her research on African American history.

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Richardson was working hard to make the interview a success of my teachers must have been thinking very much more. “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 appreciate the fact that as many of my teachers must have been thinking very much 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 digit sodium 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, “It meant much more. It was the ultimate in 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 stories and I also look for parts of myself that I could use from them to improve my organization, my success.”

A Harvard-trained lawyer and a magna cum laude graduate of the University of Pennsylvania, Richardson is not a professional historian or an archivist, a fact that has not weighed down her shoulders for church the next morning.

An adviser to Richardson’s project. “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 of my funding gets funky and I move a step back,” she says. “I want to be catapulted forward.”

Richardson says she has reached her goal of 5,000 interviews 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 History Makers 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. “Earth 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 she does open 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 61-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 someone who could have directed a five-camera interview 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. “Earth 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.”

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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 black 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."