

The Miami Herald

Posted on Wed, Sep. 05, 2012

Organization preserves black history, one story at a time

By Dorothy Jenkins Fields
Special to The Miami Herald

Growing up in the 1950s, textbooks in our schools seldom included black people, except for references to slavery. Occasionally there were sentences about educators Booker T. Washington and Mary McLeod Bethune. We were proud and inspired to see a brief paragraph and picture of scientist, George Washington Carver. A teacher at Tuskegee Institute, now University, Carver was one of our nation's most prominent scientists and inventors. He is most remembered for making over 100 products using the peanut.

During racial segregation, only black-owned newspapers, specifically The Miami Times, the Miami Tropical Dispatch and the Pittsburgh Courier, and the national magazines Ebony and Jet contained information about blacks of extraordinary achievements. Since desegregation and the expansion of technology, many textbooks and the media reach out to include blacks and other groups.

In 1999, Julieanna Richardson went a step further. She created The History Makers, a national 501(c)(3) non-profit research and educational institution committed to preserving and making widely accessible the untold personal stories of both well-known and unsung black Americans. It provides access to an internationally recognized, archival collection of thousands of video oral histories educating the public and helping to refashion a more inclusive record of American history.

Richardson, herself a black high achiever, is a graduate of Brandeis University and Harvard Law School. She created her own home-shopping channel, managed several local cable channels, and started a TV production company. It was her idea to interview black Americans in business, the arts and sciences, sports, politics, and entertainment as a means of inspiring the younger generation. In a 2006 article in Chicago Magazine, Richardson said, "The African American community feels it doesn't have a history. We want to reawaken memories, to reconstruct the history of a people who didn't have time to capture it themselves."

The vision of this program is to capture America's history one person at a time, creating a priceless video collection and giving those involved their special place in history to educate the world about the struggles, determination and achievements of African American life, history and culture.

The History Makers staff travels throughout the country conducting interviews. Several Miamians who shared lessons learned and their paths to success are included in The History Makers collection. Preservationist Enid Pinkney, a retired school administrator and resident of the Brownsville neighborhood in central Miami-Dade, is a graduate of Overtown's Booker T. Washington Junior-Senior High School, Talladega College and Barry University. The former president of the Dade Heritage Trust, she is the founder of their African American Committee and

leads the efforts to preserve the Lemon City Cemetery and the historic Hampton House Hotel.

Attorney Al Dotson Jr. is a native of Detroit. His family moved to Chicago and Atlanta before relocating to Miami during his junior year in high school. He graduated from Palmetto High School, Dartmouth College and Vanderbilt University Law School. Now he is a partner with Bilzin Sumberg Baena Price & Axelrod. He participates with numerous civic and charitable organizations including the Overtown Youth Center, Miami Dade College Foundation and Alonzo Mourning Charities. He is national chairman of 100 Black Men of America, and was co-chairman of the Super Bowl XLI host committee.

A recent inductee into The History Makers is Mary Styles Harris a geneticist who grew up in Brownsville and graduated from Miami Jackson Senior High School. After finishing Pennsylvania's Lincoln University she enrolled at Cornell University, studied molecular genetics, and graduated with a doctorate. Formerly she was executive director of the Sickle Cell Foundation of Georgia and on the faculty of Morehouse College and Atlanta University. Serving mostly the minority community her life's work focuses on the application and transfer of basic research to the healthcare field. The founder, president and executive producer of Journey to Wellness, she and her husband live in Atlanta.

The History Makers oral history collection is available through The History Makers Digital Archive, The History Makers Education Institute, The History Makers Speakers Bureau, live public programs and its interactive website (www.thehistorymakers.com).

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