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Julieanna
Richardson:
Chronicling
African
American
Contributions
Through
The
History
Makers

Special Reprint



November 2, 2000, I — and hundreds of others — sat in the audience at the Art Institute awaiting the launch of *The History Makers* project, one of whose first initiatives was to be a live interview of performer/activist Harry Belafonte by actor Danny Glover.

As the evening got underway, there was much discussion about the creation of the project and details on what was in store by various participants, including the Mistress of Ceremonies, Channel 7 news reporter and anchor Cheryl Burton; guest announcer, Channel 2 reporter John Davis; representatives of one of the project's major contributors from Northern Trust Bank; and the project's founder Julieanna Richardson.

With so much talk about the contributions made to ensure the launch and success of the project, we all became excited and felt as if we were going to be a part of history being made that very night.

The sensation heightened as participants of the project were introduced on stage to the audience and as highlights of the lives and careers were announced of such noteworthy people as Elta Moten Barnett, Margaret Burroughs, Vernon Jarrett, Senator Emil Jones, Congressman Bobby Rush and Dempsey Travis.

The stories of people whose history I was already familiar with through books and other literary and media sources had come to life as they stood before me on the stage.

Amidst the excitement of the presentation, before "the interview" got underway, anticipation built as dozens of questions raced through all of our minds as to what exactly was about to take place. The most central question every guest had was, "What exactly is *The History Makers* project?"

That question was frequently asked of the project's creator and director Julieanna Richardson, while she plotted the development of her first-person narrative archive during its incipient stages.

What's This Whole Thing About?

"I remember when I first had the idea, my friends asked, 'What are you doing? An archive? You must mean a cable channel Julie,' and I'd tell them no, and they'd say, 'A documentary?' and the documentary was absolutely the opposite of what I wanted to do because people already make beautiful documentaries," explains Richardson, describing the meandering road she took that led to *The History Makers*' growing success.

The History Makers at its conclusion will be a compilation of video interviews of well known and unknown leaders in the Black community. Each two hour interview is structured so as to present a conversation between the History Makers and the viewer. The conversation is videotaped, put on audiocassette, sent out for transcription, archived, encoded. Each tape is catalogued with a Library of Congress subject heading and then digitized so that the interview can be sampled at *The History Makers*' website.

The general theme of each interview is what really has made each person successful. Richardson elaborates, "Success is defined broadly because it doesn't mean people have led perfect lives, but they have made contributions in many ways."

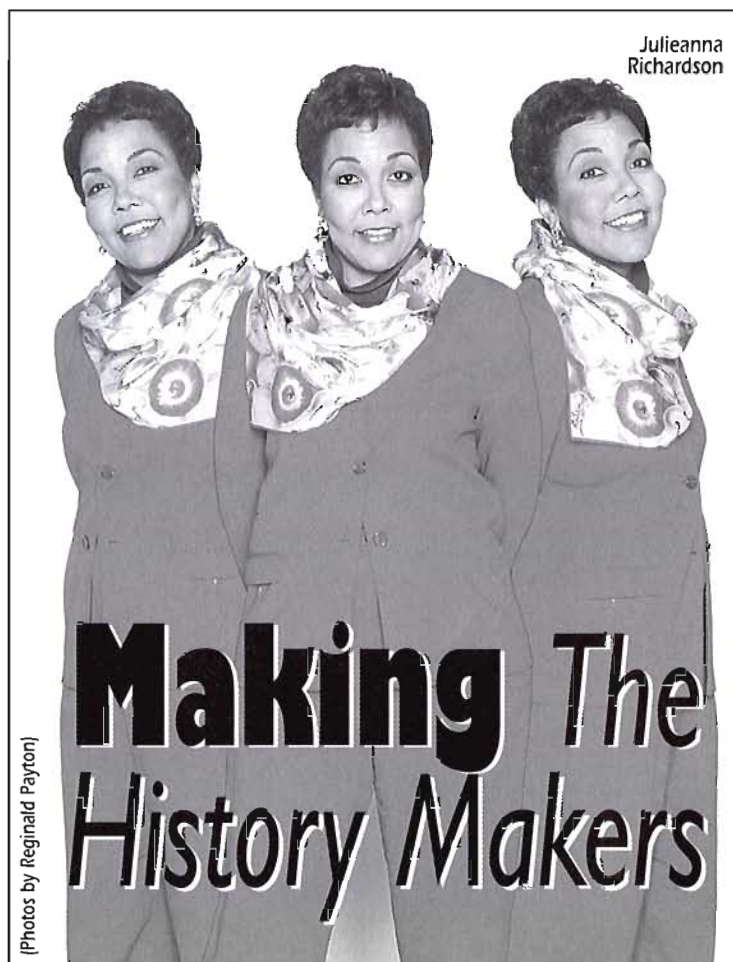
In addition to celebrities, Richardson also looks at people who have played a role in significant organizations like the Pullman Porters, Urban League, NAACP and The Links. She has already scheduled an interview with the remaining Negro League baseball players. Newly completed interviews include Alvin Poussaint, Katherine Dunham, Gordon Parks, and a special on the 111 African Americans who have served in the Illinois General Assembly.

Richardson planted the seeds for the project over 20 years ago when she was doing independent research on members of the Harlem Renaissance while she was an undergraduate attending Brandeis University.

"In 1973, I was doing independent research on the Harlem Renaissance, and that's really when I became aware of the (Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture) and its holdings and what a wonderful resource it is," beams Richardson.

"I interviewed people like Butterfly McQueen and Lee Whipple and there were a couple of things that struck me: Butterfly McQueen had made \$3,000 when she did *Gone With the Wind*, but she was working at a community center up in Harlem when I met with her, and living a not so good life at that point — but she still had that same voice," Richardson said with a smile.

"The stories struck me, as a young African American person. That, combined with spending time at the Schomburg and listening to tapes of different recordings of



different shows that came out during the Harlem Renaissance, made the history really come alive for me."

Poignant personal stories that augment the cold facts and dates of historical events are exactly what made Harry Belafonte's life story come alive the night of the launch of the project. Tales about his boyhood; detailed description about the stages of his career in the arts; breathtaking accounts of his involvement in the civil rights movement, as well as about the intimate relationships and lifelong bonds formed between him and many of this country's national heroes, brought Belafonte's story alive.

Notably, the historic period during which most of Belafonte's life took place could also be seen on videotape and felt by all of us who sat captivated and totally immersed in his sharing.

The interview that we witnessed that night in the audience, which was also seen by those watching the program air live on Chicago's WTTW/Channel 11, is an example of the 200 interviews that Richardson and her staff have completed and edited to date.

A Lofty Goal

The project's goal is to complete 5,000 interviews over an initial five-year period. Fortunately Richardson's initial request for support was readily granted by a variety of sources, including the State of Illinois, Northern Trust Bank, the A&E Network, AT&T Broadband, The Playboi Foundation, BET Holdings, and the Chicago, Illinois Chapter of The Links, Inc., among others.

Before embarking upon this project, Richardson had been a former thespian, lawyer, cable administrator for the City of Chicago, and manager of Chicago cable Channel 25.

"As things happen they stick with you," Richardson says, describing the directions her life took after graduating from Brandeis. "My goal at that time was to go to Yale drama school and pursue a career in theatre, which is the love of my life. Then I got disillusioned. I didn't want to go to New York and drive a taxi, and you know as a Black female the roles available would be really small, and I had sort of had a charmed existence," Richardson confided.

"I ended up taking a year off because I was trying to decide what I wanted to do. Then I ended up going to law school because I still didn't know what I wanted to do."

After graduating from Harvard Law School, Richardson moved to Chicago to accept a job at a law firm where she was able to do pro bono work for artists. When she began doing more corporate and commercial work, for a change of pace, she accepted a position as the City of Chicago's Cable Administrator. After completing that post, she created her own home shopping program, *Shop Chicago*, on a cable channel.

Richardson describes her work in cable production and how it contributes to *The History Makers*:

"My program went belly up and at the time TCI asked us to take over management of Channel 25. We ended up managing that channel plus two others for them. It was interesting because I got heavily involved in production, I already had my own equipment, and I was managing a facility that had extra equipment. I also learned how to produce things on a budget, which is always very helpful for what I'm doing right now."

Under Richardson's management, Channel 25 served as C-Span's local production arm. So besides managing the channel, anything that C-Span shot in Chicago, C-Span's national office in Washington D.C. would assign to Richardson and her staff to tape. She is going to use this same approach for setting up *The History Makers'* regional operation.

The paths of her varied careers had merged into a meaningful blend of expertise and relationships, all of which provided a network of resources that she used to lay the foundation for *The History Makers* project. Richardson explains, "I feel in many ways very inspired about this project and I'm a spiritual person, I believe that really God brought me to this project, and that in many ways, all roads have led to this point."

Describing the connections between her numerous work experiences, Richardson says, "My legal background helped me tremendously, for example, when I trademarked the name and got the Internet domain made. It helps with a lot of things that people don't necessarily think of — like, we own our own production equipment. Ownership allowed me to prototype and show people what we had and what we wanted to do, which is a big, big thing."

Richardson also credits her college studies that inspired the idea of *The History Makers* project. She explains, "My American Studies background — I had really sort of forgotten about that, because I have a really diverse background. But I want this collection to be academically sound and to be done the right way."

In her pursuit to create *The History Makers*, Richardson took the advice of friends who suggested she do research to determine if such an archive already existed. And if it didn't exist, and one was created, would anyone be interested?

"That's where I started out in earnest two years ago," Richardson says. "I checked out the other archives that exist, and all the African American organizations. I wanted to find out what oral histories existed. I started talking to historians, just testing the waters, asking if they thought this would be a good idea, and they said yes."

Advancing An Unadvanced Field

Richardson uncovered startling facts about recorded historical data on Blacks in the U.S. With respect to documentary and taped footage, Facets Multimedia in Illinois has a 36-page catalog of its holdings that were primarily produced by PBS. The Smithsonian has a collection of holdings that mainly cover musical accomplishments, though a few holdings do exist there on slavery and the civil rights movement. The Library of Congress has a recorded collection of slave narratives, *Remembering Slavery*, which was featured on a 60-minute feature and funded largely by the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Of the 200 Black newspapers that exist in the United States, only three have archives: the *Chicago Defender*, the *Afro-American* in Baltimore, Maryland, and the *Philadelphia Tribune*. Richardson attributes the lack of historical collections in part to a belief system that has built upon itself within the community for years.

She explains, "A lot of times, our mentality is that if you were told that you're not worth anything, it's hard to value what you have. So much of the Black experience has been running away from the past, forgetting, and okay, wanting the best for future generations, but cutting off the past because it had no value."

During her research, Richardson came across information about the Shoah Visual History Foundation that was created by Steven Spielberg after he made the movie *Schindler's List*. The Shoah Foundation has created an almost identical archive of first-person narratives of Holocaust survivors and their families. Within the first year of the Shoah project, 50,000 interviews were completed.

At the beginning, 300 interviews were completed a week. Currently, 16 interviews are completed per week. Richardson visited the Shoah Foundation and found their representatives to be supportive. Since her initial visit, the Shoah Foundation has provided technical assistance to *The History Makers* project.

Richardson also sought out partnerships with experts in academia, technology, media and community groups, in order to ensure that the information could reach a large percentage of the population and be used in a variety of contexts.

She says, "I saw the academic as being important because I wanted to have credibility at its base. I wanted to develop this core of scholar consultants. We have 14 different categories of History Makers and we want to have people assigned who will act as the experts who can help guide us. Similarly, because a lot of this history is not known, or people are not necessarily easily accessible, we felt that through community groups, we could better identify people."

Richardson's experience in cable production helped her to appreciate and develop distribution resources to make the archive accessible and widely used.

"Distribution is important if you don't have it," she says. "This is what is extremely important to me about *The History Makers*; it's not going to exist as some dirty old archive for people not to see. For me, what goes through my mind constantly is, 'How do I get something distributed before I ever produce it?'"

The Internet Connection

Richardson explains that by making parts of the archive available on the Internet through video streaming — which is a way of showing video on the Internet — it ensures one method of distribution. Entire interviews cannot be sampled because streaming is still an imperfect art form, but, as Richardson explains, "people can go to the site and hear History Makers talking about different subject matters."

The website (www.thehistorymakers.com) also has a variety of different links that are related to the site, including sections called "Ask the Expert" and "Nominate a History Maker."

Global educational publishing groups like Adventions, Lightspan.com, and US Educators have already used the archive to provide online multicultural material for teachers creating lesson plans. Last summer, *The History Makers* was part of two experimental programs, one with the University of Chicago and the other with Northwestern, in which teachers were taught how to develop a lesson plan using the Internet.

Now that Richardson's project is launched, she shares her concerns about the logistics of furthering the project's possibilities. "Right now it's important to develop the infrastructure," says Richardson as she describes her search for a librarian archivist, interviewers, writers, researchers, and administrative assistants to become volunteers and part of her staff.

"We also have to raise money," she notes. "Our goal is to do one of those (a live interview such as with Harry Belafonte) a year as a fundraising event and to just give it exposure."

The project requires a substantial amount of funding to ensure quality. For instance, she says the Shoah Foundation raised \$100 million and has already spent about \$70 million on what they've completed. "We're not going to stop at 5,000 interviews," Richardson adds, "but to reach that 5,000 goal, we need \$25 million."

Richardson has a list of about 600 names of History Makers to be interviewed, and this year she plans to focus her coverage on subjects in Boston, New York, Washington, D.C., Atlanta, Memphis and Detroit.

The History Makers' staff is working to make the archive available to Historically Black Colleges and Universities, as well as to African American museums that are in need of content. The archives that exist now are either at academic institutions or in public libraries, and while Richardson says she feels "there's nothing wrong with that," she does add, "I would like this to be controlled by the Black community if possible."

Richardson has high hopes for the success and future of her project, feeling that "the time is right, and this needs to be done. It also needs to have ongoing support, which I really hope is out there," she says.