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Historic accounts

An ambitious project collects the stories of a variety of African-American trailblazers

By Don Aucoin, Globe Staff, 4/14/2003

Few would dispute that the civil rights struggle stands as the decisive chapter of 20th-century African-American history.

But before, during, and after that epic struggle, there was a whole other history being forged -- pioneer by pioneer, individual achievement by individual achievement -- in fields as diverse as science, politics, medicine, fashion, the armed services, the law, the arts, and education.

It is that history that Julieanna L. Richardson is out to capture.

Starting in 1999, Richardson began gathering the personal

stories of African-American trailblazers, both celebrated and unsung. Her goal, she says, is to create by the year 2007 a national archive of 5,000 videotaped oral histories that show "our history did not begin and end with the civil rights movement." "These are America's missing stories," says Richardson, 48, a graduate of Brandeis University and Harvard Law School. "America's history cannot ever really be complete without these stories."

Richardson speaks with the passion of the historian she has become and the precision of the corporate lawyer she used to be. She was in Boston Friday to record the life story of Harvard Law professor Charles Ogletree

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(the Globe interviewed her during an earlier appearance in town when she spoke at the Mary Baker Eddy Library as part of the library's "Works in Progress" series.) Associates of Richardson last week interviewed other prominent Bostonians, such as cultural leader Elma Lewis and Ted Landsmark, president of the Boston Architectural Center; today educator Calvin Hicks and artist Paul Goodnight are scheduled to be interviewed. The goal of the nonprofit archival project, called The HistoryMakers, is to compile first-person narratives from African-Americans who made their mark on the world, often after overcoming discrimination or other forms of adversity. The oral histories will become part of a digital video archive that will be available to scholars, students, and the public.

"What we're trying to do with The HistoryMakers is capture the 20th century as told by the first person," says Richardson. "It's intended to capture the whole aspect of the [black] experience. . . . We hope out of this quilt work will emerge a new and more accurate history."

That "quilt work" so far includes the personal stories of nearly 500 people nationwide, each story roughly two hours long. Some subjects are well known, such as author Terry McMillan of "Waiting to Exhale" fame, power broker Vernon Jordan, poet Nikki Giovanni, and former New York City mayor David Dinkins.

But many have walked a path that has only intermittently thrust them into the spotlight. They include New Bedford-born George Leighton, 91, who was unable to attend high school because of his family's poverty but won a scholarship to college, attended Harvard Law School, and served as a federal judge; Barbara Bowles, a 56-year-old investment manager who grew up in segregated Nashville and became the first African-American woman to start a mutual fund; Dr. Harold Freeman, 70, an oncologist who drew national attention to the link between poverty and cancer; Ruth Love, 63, the first woman to head the Chicago public schools; William Hudgins, 96, who in the 1950s joined baseball legend Jackie Robinson and others to found Freedom National Bank, which provided low-interest home loans in Harlem; Walter Massey, 65, a physicist who headed the National Science Foundation; and Colonel William Thompson, 87, an officer in the Army air squadron known as the Tuskegee Airmen that helped to integrate the armed forces.

"I'm particularly fascinated by the people before the civil rights movement," remarks Richardson. "They very much wanted to be part of the mainstream."

"These individual stories are examples of self-

determination and achievement," she adds. "The African-American experience is a Horatio Alger experience; we've taken a piece of coal and made a diamond of it." Aspects of Richardson's own life story could fit that description.

She grew up in a small town in Ohio, and her enrollment at Brandeis in the mid-1970s made her the first member of her family to go to college. It was at Brandeis, while studying for a degree in theater arts and American studies, that she made her initial foray into oral history. While doing research on the Harlem Renaissance, Richardson gathered the life stories of such figures as Butterfly McQueen, who was best known for her role in "Gone With the Wind" but also appeared in a Harlem theater production of "A Midsummer Night's Dream."

After receiving a law degree from Harvard Law School in 1980, Richardson worked as a corporate lawyer in Chicago (where she still lives) while also doing pro bono work for a black theater company. But she was drawn to the newly emerging domain of cable television, first working as cable administrator for the city of Chicago, then as founder of a regional shopping channel ("I lost my shirt on that," she says with a laugh), then as head of a production company that managed three cable channels for TCI, a leading cable operator. Throughout that period she maintained belief in the power of oral history.

She began to explore what kinds of oral histories of African-Americans existed, and found that most tended to focus on music or slave narratives, such as the Works Progress Administration project of the 1930s, which recorded the stories of former slaves. In her view, that was not a broad enough definition of the African-American experience; missing, she believed, were the everyday struggles and triumphs of people who may or may not have been famous.

So in 1999, she embarked on the project that became The HistoryMakers. At first, when she talked to colleagues about it, "I would see this glazed look come across their eyes," she says. But enthusiasm and support slowly grew: Foundations kicked in some money, the state of Illinois weighed in with a pair of grants totaling \$900,000, and celebrities including Harry Belafonte, Ossie Davis, Ruby Dee, and Dionne Warwick have taken part in fund-raisers. However, the archive project remains far from its goal of \$25 million, having raised just over \$2.4 million so far. And not every potential subject wanted to participate.

But others were eager to talk, once Richardson had created what she calls "a safe place" for them to "sit back and review their lives" and recall sometimes painful experiences.

Among the Boston-area success stories in the archive are those of Dr. Alvin Poussaint, 69, a psychiatrist and professor at Harvard Medical School; Edmund Barry Gaither, 59, a curator at the Museum of Fine Arts and founder and curator of the Museum of the National Center of Afro-American Artists in Roxbury; Harvard sociologist Charles V. Willie, 75, one of the court-appointed masters in the Boston school desegregation case of the mid-1970s; and Allan Rohan Crite, 93, an artist who has depicted the daily lives of

African-Americans in Roxbury and the South End. (Richardson hopes to interview former US Senator Edward Brooke of Massachusetts, the first African-American to serve in the US Senate since Reconstruction).

The project's website, www.the

historymakers.com, offers photos and biographical information about those who have told their stories to Richardson and her associates. She is already looking toward the day when the personal stories told by The HistoryMakers will be searchable by both image and text in a digital archive. The project has become a personal mission. "People say you reach a point in your life when you want to leave a legacy," she says. "This is about the need I have to tell stories. And I think these stories are an inspiration."

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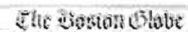
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