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Posted on Sat, Aug. 03, 2002

The Beacon Journal**Finding the makers of history**

U.S. group comes to Akron to record oral histories of African-Americans

By Karalee Miller
Beacon Journal staff writer

Some people are driven to rewrite history.

Julieanna Richardson simply wants to record it.

Richardson is the founder of The HistoryMakers, a national nonprofit institution that is developing an extensive archive of African-American video oral histories.

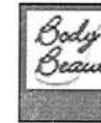
The goal: to record 5,000 interviews with well-known and unsung African-Americans from across the country who have made significant contributions to society.

The mission led the Chicago-based organization to Akron on Thursday to interview six of the city's most respected community leaders.

Art Minson, a longtime community activist and volunteer, was the first person to step in front of the camera.

For nearly three hours, the 88-year-old fielded questions from interviewer Larry Crowe. Minson talked about his family history, his educational background and his work in the community.

"I found out I could fight -- not physically, but I can fight verbally," he said.

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The Akron resident stressed the importance of having structure in a community.

“If you organize your community, you can make a difference,” he said.

Before the interview, Minson said he wanted future generations to understand the struggles African-Americans have endured.

“I want to let them know that it wasn't easy to open the doors,” he said.

Minson, who worked for Goodyear for 40 years, said volunteer work has been his way of “helping the underdog.”

“It feels good that my words didn't fall on wet ground,” he said.

“I think I planted some good seeds along the way.”

Next up was Dorothy Jackson, deputy mayor of Akron for 18 years.

As Crowe dabbed Jackson's face with anti-shine makeup, the 68-year-old lifelong Akron resident said she was honored to have been selected for the video archive.

“I want young people to know that they can strive for anything,” she said. “If they really prepare themselves, the doors will be opened.”

Crowe began the interview by asking Jackson about her favorite things. He quickly learned that her favorite color is blue, her favorite food is any dessert, and fall is her favorite time of year.

Jackson discussed her close-knit family and what it was like growing up in an integrated neighborhood in Akron.

“I remember being a happy child,” she said, easing into her chair.

“If you look at children today, you will see they are carrying the burdens of the world... but my mother never gave us the burdens of the day. We could be carefree.”

Recalling some of her favorite grade-school teachers, Jackson discussed her seventh-grade teacher and the daily ritual in his class.

“He had these words written along the top of the blackboard, and



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every day we would have to read the words out loud," she said. ``They said, 'I will study and get ready and perhaps someday my chance will come.' And I feel, as deputy mayor of Akron -- the first African-American woman, with a twelfth grade education -- that my chance did come."

The inspiration found in such personal, firsthand accounts is the heart of what The HistoryMakers is all about, Richardson said. ``The goal really is to capture these rich stories while these people are still with us and to fill in America's missing history," said Richardson, 48, of Chicago.

Before the launch of the initiative in 1999, ``people thought I had lost my mind," Richardson said. ``It's a large vision, and sometimes large visions are intimidating to people," she said.

Richardson said she is confident about the impact the archives will make. ``Out of this quilt work of these individual stories will emerge, I believe, a new and more accurate account of history," she said.

When it comes to African-American history, Richardson said, many people have limited knowledge. ``People, typically, when they think of blacks, either think of the South or urban areas," she said. ``They think of people like Martin Luther King, Harriet Tubman and Rosa Parks. There is still not enough known about the African-American experience."

Until the digital archive is assembled, people can sample the archive holdings online at www.thehistorymakers.com. Eventually, the archives will be accessible through museums, universities and other major institutions.

Before leaving Akron today, The HistoryMakers crew also is to interview Sylvester Small, the superintendent of Akron Public Schools; Joseph Roulhac, a retired Akron municipal judge; Gloria Rookard, whose full-service nursing business celebrates its 20th year this year; and Janet Purnell, the first chairwoman of the University of Akron board of trustees.

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