

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Carl Ray

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## Overview of the Collection

<b>Repository:</b>	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
<b>Creator:</b>	Ray, Carl, 1944-2014
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Carl Ray,
<b>Dates:</b>	March 28, 2002
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2002
<b>Physical Description:</b>	6 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:37:33).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Educator and comedian Carl Ray (1944 - 2014 ) started as an engineer, but later in life used his experience of personal tragedy and racial injustice as inspiration for a play, motivational speaking, stand-up comedy and his work in education with African American youth. He and wife Brenda ran a school in the Bay area, and organize college tours to encourage wider enrollment of African American students. Ray was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on March 28, 2002, in San Jose, California. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2002_039
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

An engineer turned entertainer, educator, mentor and activist, Carl F. Ray was born on August 30, 1944, in Butler, Alabama, to Vidella and George Ray. In 1962, tragedy struck his life when a white man killed his father, George, because Ray did not call the man “sir.” Consumed by anger and guilt, Ray suffered from depression and nervous breakdowns. Ray persevered and graduated from Tuskegee Institute in Alabama in 1967 with a B.S. in electrical engineering.

For years Ray worked as an engineer before deciding in 1976 to try his luck as a standup comic. To support himself, Ray drove a taxi. It was a rider in his cab who made him see the value of forgiveness and acceptance. By 1989, he was host and producer of his own cable television comedy show. In 1990, he began to work also as a motivational speaker, which led Ray to write and perform a one-man play, *A Killing in Chocktaw*, dealing with the years following the tragedy of his father’s death. This play was turned into a documentary in 2004.

Since 1988, Ray and his wife, Brenda, ran Courtland Esteem School from their home in San Jose, California, where they taught African American youth in first through sixth grades. Concerned about young black students attending college, Ray escorted teams of youth on college tours. More than 1,200 students have participated in these tours. Ray received commendations for his work from Congressman Norman Mineta, Santa Clara County Supervisor Blanca Alvarado and other government officials. *CityFlight* recognized Ray as one of the "10 Most Influential African Americans in the Bay Area."

Ray passed away on September 17, 2014 at the age of 70.

Carl Ray was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on March 28, 2002.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Carl Ray was conducted by Julieanna L. Richardson on March 28, 2002, in San Jose, California, and was recorded on 6 Betacame SP videocassettes. Educator and comedian Carl Ray (1944 - 2014 ) started as an engineer, but later in life used his experience of personal tragedy and racial injustice as inspiration for a play, motivational speaking, stand-up comedy and his work in education with African American youth. He and wife Brenda ran a school in the Bay area, and organize college tours to encourage wider enrollment of African American students.

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## Restrictions

### Restrictions on Access

Restrictions may be applied on a case-by-case basis at the discretion of The HistoryMakers®.

### Restrictions on Use

All use of materials and use credits must be pre-approved by The HistoryMakers®. Appropriate credit must be given. Copyright is held by The HistoryMakers®.

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## Related Material

Information about the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview, as well as correspondence with the interview subject is stored electronically both on The HistoryMakers® server and in two databases maintained by The HistoryMakers®, though this information is not included in this finding aid.

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## Controlled Access Terms

This interview collection is indexed under the following controlled access subject terms.

### Persons:

Ray, Carl, 1944-2014

Richardson, Julieanna L. (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

### Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Ray, Carl, 1944-2014--Interviews

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African American comedians--Interviews

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African American educators--Interviews

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Community activists--Interviews

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## Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

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The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

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## Occupations:

Civil Rights Activist

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## HistoryMakers® Category:

CivicMakers

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## Administrative Information

### Custodial History

Interview footage was recorded by The HistoryMakers®. All rights to the interview have been transferred to The HistoryMakers® by the interview subject through a signed interview release form. Signed interview release forms have been deposited with Jenner & Block, LLP, Chicago.

### Preferred Citation

The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Carl Ray, March 28, 2002. The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

### Processing Information

This interview collection was processed and encoded on 5/30/2023 by The HistoryMakers® staff. The finding aid was created adhering to the following standards: DACS, AACR2, and the Oral History Cataloging Manual (Matters 1995).

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## Other Finding Aid

A Microsoft Access contact database and a FileMaker Pro tracking database, both maintained by The HistoryMakers®, keep track of the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview.

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## Detailed Description of the Collection

### Series I: Original Interview Footage

Video Oral History Interview with Carl Ray, Section A2002\_039\_001\_001, TRT: 0:30:46 ?

Carl Ray describes his family background. His mother, Vidella Harbin Ray, was born May 3, 1908 in Choctaw County, Alabama. She was the oldest of seven children. Ray's father, George Ray III was also born in Butler, Alabama in Choctaw County on March 2, 1900. Ray's parents both took an active role in raising their siblings, and their two families were very close. George Ray bought a fifty-acre farm in the 1930s after a plantation owner sold it, but also ran the church and worked in the logging industry. Ray contracted polio when he was four and remembers being isolated from the rural community because his polio prevented him from playing sports. He attended Mount Olive Baptist Church for first grade and Butler Public Elementary School, which was four miles away. In elementary school, Ray discovered his comedic talent when he realized that making people laugh protected him from bullying. As a teenager, Ray became interested in electrical engineering when his family's house got electricity.

African American comedians--Interviews.

African American educators--Interviews.

Community activists--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with Carl Ray, Section A2002\_039\_001\_002, TRT: 0:30:03 ?

Carl Ray describes the murder of his father and reflects on his experience following the murder trial at Tuskegee University. A straight A student at Rosenwald High School in New Roads, Louisiana, Ray decided to attend Tuskegee University to pursue a degree in electrical engineering. On September 6, 1962, Ray was packing for college and setting off firecrackers when he was approached by a white man named William Carlisle. When Ray did not call the man "sir," Carlisle beat him and threatened to kill him. Later that night, Carlisle returned with a gun and shot Ray's father, George Ray III, eight times in front of his family. Carlisle's trial was the first case in Choctaw County of a white person being arrested for killing an African American, but was ruled a justifiable homicide and the district attorney who took the case to trial lost his job. Ray enrolled at Tuskegee University in 1962, but suffered from depression and had a nervous breakdown which prevented him from focusing on his education.

Video Oral History Interview with Carl Ray, Section A2002\_039\_001\_003, TRT: 0:31:08 ?

Carl Ray describes his experiences at Tuskegee University, the Lockheed Corporation, and as a comedian. Shortly after the murder of his father, George Ray III, by a white man named William Carlisle, Ray enrolled at Tuskegee University in Alabama to pursue his education. Ray remembers turning to humor as a way of coping with his grief. After graduating with his B.S. degree in engineering in 1967, Ray moved to San Jose, California to work as an aerospace engineer for the Lockheed Corporation with seven of his classmates. Here he faced racism from his white managers but the work performance of he and his classmates helped build Tuskegee's reputation for engineering candidates. After nine years at Lockheed, Ray left to study at the Comedy Store in San Francisco, California in 1976; drive a taxi in Los Angeles, California; and pursue a career as a comedian. While employed as a taxi driver, Ray had a turning point when he met a customer who helped him forgive his father's murderer.

Video Oral History Interview with Carl Ray, Section A2002\_039\_001\_004, TRT: 0:28:52 ?

Carl Ray discusses his experience as a comedian, the start of his community outreach, and the origin of his Courtland Esteem School. Ray married Brenda Smith Ray in 1979, and toured the country as a comedian from 1982 to 1994. Ray was inspired by comedians such as Redd Foxx, Flip Wilson, Moms Mabley, and Richard Pryor and his comedic routine focused on women in the Bible. Ray

remembers working with comedians such as Robin Williams, Robert Wuhl, Tim Allen, Marsha Warfield, and Brad Sanders and his lack of interest in standup comedy as an antidote to depression. In the late 1980's, Ray began to lead tours of Historically Black Colleges and Universities and became a motivational speaker for black students. In 1988, Ray and his wife, Brenda, started the Courtland Esteem School in San Jose, California for their daughter and others in the community.

Video Oral History Interview with Carl Ray, Section A2002\_039\_001\_005, TRT: 0:31:00 ?

Carl Ray describes his hopes and concerns for black youth and reflects upon his legacy. As a motivational speaker, college tour organizer, and school founder, Ray believes that two of the biggest problems facing black youth are a lack of black teachers and the abundance of negative representations of African Americans on TV, both of which affect how black youth view themselves. Ray reflects upon his legacy as someone who helped to motivate black youth. He ends the interview by narrating his photographs.

Video Oral History Interview with Carl Ray, Section A2002\_039\_001\_006, TRT: 0:05:44 ?

Carl Ray continues to narrate his photographs.