

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Janet Purnell

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Purnell, Janet, 1936-2008
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Janet Purnell,
Dates:	August 2, 2002
Bulk Dates:	2002
Physical Description:	5 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:29:36).
Abstract:	Academic administrator, elementary school principal, and elementary school teacher Janet Purnell (1936 - 2008) was the first executive director of minority development at the University of Akron. She also taught in Akron Public Schools for twenty-two years before becoming executive director of Akron Metropolitan Housing Authority and CEO of Navic & Associates. Purnell was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on August 2, 2002, in Akron, Ohio. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2002_131
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Educator and minority advocate Janet Purnell was born in Akron, Ohio on August 30, 1936 and has been a life-long resident. She studied education at the University of Akron, where she earned both her B.S. (1959) and her M.S. (1971).

For twenty-two years, Purnell worked for the Akron Public Schools as both an elementary school teacher and principal. In 1967, she led alumni in successfully

lobbying for the establishment of an anti-segregation policy on the University of Akron campus. In 1982, she became the Executive Director of the Akron Metropolitan Housing Authority. In this role, she oversaw the public housing for 20,000 residents and served as a lobbyist on behalf of the 40 largest housing authorities. She later entered the private sector, acting as the CEO of Navic & Associates, where she served as a local and national consultant on establishing diversity in the workplace. In 1990, she returned to her alma mater to sit on the president's cabinet, overseeing all minority initiatives on campus. This position led to her subsequent role as the first Executive Director of Minority Development at the University. Purnell was responsible for securing funding to support minority initiatives and distributing annual scholarship funds to minority students. In honor of Purnell's appointment to chair the University of Akron's Board of Trustees, the Zeta Theta Omega Sorority established the Janet B. Purnell Project Self-Sufficiency Endowment, which annually awards a scholarship to a single mother.

Since 1985, she has provided leadership to historic preservation efforts in Akron. She designed and implemented the Dr. Shirla R. McClain Gallery of Akron's Black History and Culture program and spearheaded the establishment of the Gallery's endowment fund and curriculum guides. She has been a member of the Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority for over forty years; has acted a Trustee for the Akron Urban League and Akron Musical Association; serves as the Secretary of the Akron Chapter of the NAACP; is the Vice-Chairman of the Akron Black Women's Leadership Caucus and Chair of the Mt. Olive Baptist Church Trustee Ministry. In 2001, Purnell was honored as one of 100 outstanding women of Summit County. She is the mother of two sons.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Janet Purnell was conducted by Larry Crowe on August 2, 2002, in Akron, Ohio, and was recorded on 5 Betacame SP videocassettes. Academic administrator, elementary school principal, and elementary school teacher Janet Purnell (1936 - 2008) was the first executive director of minority development at the University of Akron. She also taught in Akron Public Schools for twenty-two years before becoming executive director of Akron Metropolitan Housing Authority and CEO of Navic & Associates.

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®.

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.

Controlled Access Terms

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

Persons:

Purnell, Janet, 1936-2008

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Purnell, Janet, 1936-2008--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

University of Akron.

Occupations:

Academic Administrator

Elementary School Principal

Elementary School Teacher

HistoryMakers® Category:

EducationMakers

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 Janet Purnell, August 2, 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 2/5/2020 by The HistoryMakers® staff. The finding aid was created adhering to the following standards: DACS, AACR2, and the Oral History Cataloging Manual (Matters 1995).

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.

Detailed Description of the Collection

Series I: Original Interview Footage

Video Oral History Interview with Janet Purnell, Section
A2002_131_001_001, TRT: 0:30:41 2002/08/02

Janet Purnell describes her family background. Nannette Victoria Johnson was born in Roanoke, Virginia and Millard Walter Johnson was born in Mound City, Illinois. The two met in Akron, Ohio, and gave birth to Janet Purnell on August 30, 1936. Millard Johnson worked as a truck driver for Firestone Tire & Rubber Company while his wife raised the couple's six children. The Johnsons were one of the first families to move into Akron Metropolitan Housing in the 1940s. Mt. Zion Baptist Church was at the center of family life during Purnell's childhood, and her parents were involved civically. Nannette Hodge was active in Akron's Republican Party, a member of the PTA, and a member of The Order of the Eastern Star. Millard Johnson was a founding member of Akron's Prince Hall Masons. Though Nannette Johnson ran a strict household, Purnell enjoyed Sunday dinners, country outings and trips to Krispy Kreme as a girl. She attended Bryan Elementary School, as well as Jennings Junior High School during integration.

Video Oral History Interview with Janet Purnell, Section
A2002_131_001_002, TRT: 0:29:40 2002/08/02

As a youth, Janet Purnell maintained a strict schedule of

chores and become active in her church and local Akron Urban League at her parents' urging. She enrolled in Akron's predominately white North Senior High School in 1950, where she and her black classmates experienced subtle discrimination. Nevertheless, individuals like Purnell's rhetoric teacher encouraged her to strive for excellence. Purnell was also a member of the senior choir and editor of the newspaper at her high school. She graduated in 1954 with the intention of being a journalist. However, her parents encouraged her to enroll in college, or look for a job. Purnell applied for several jobs, including a switchboard operator and working with the WAVES; yet, she exceeded the height requirements for both. After being rejected from the Women's Air Force due to her height, Purnell enrolled at the University of Akron in 1955, where she majored in education. After graduating with her B.S. degree in 1959, Purnell went on to teach elementary school.

Video Oral History Interview with Janet Purnell, Section
A2002_131_001_003, TRT: 0:30:20 2002/08/02

Janet Purnell worked to develop close working relationships with her students' parents as an elementary school teacher. Purnell also worked with her colleagues to develop innovative learning experiences for her students. She partnered with a teacher at a predominately white school to develop an "integrated learning experience" in the late 1950s to expose her students to diverse cultures. Through the 1960s, Purnell worked to help her predominantly black students develop their own sense of identity and self-sufficiency, as well. Around 1970, Purnell left teaching to pursue an M.S. degree at the University of Akron. She was also an active member of Akron's Urban League and the Summit County Republican Party. Around 1971, Purnell returned to the Akron Public School system as a principal. As a principal, she found it challenging to adopt constructive ways to discipline students. However, of her most memorable experiences was setting up an interview between her students and "Roots" author Alex Haley.

Video Oral History Interview with Janet Purnell, Section
A2002_131_001_004, TRT: 0:30:53 2002/08/02

As a junior high school principal, Janet Purnell tried to become familiar with her students' personal lives to fairly assess their performance. In 1982, Purnell retired from the Akron Public School System and became Executive Director of the Akron Metropolitan Housing Authority. She faced discrimination because of her race and sex, but managed to implement a formal pest control system and a skills-based hiring system for the housing authority. In 1987 Purnell became interim Director of Minority Affairs at the University of Akron. She established a \$60,000 endowment for minority programs and was promoted to Executive Director of Minority Development in 1990. Purnell secured funds for the Dr. Shirla R. McClain Gallery of Akron's Black History and Culture, and established an endowment and curriculum guide for the gallery. Purnell served as Vice Chairman of the Summit County Republican Party from 1980-1991, and as Regional Coordinator of Leadership Development Training for Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority.

Video Oral History Interview with Janet Purnell, Section
A2002_131_001_005, TRT: 0:28:02 2002/08/02

Janet Purnell served on a Blue Ribbon Task Force to develop the Dr. Shirla R. McClain Gallery of Akron's Black History and Culture beginning in 1985. After the gallery opened in 1994, she helped establish an archive in the same space. Purnell describes the effects the gallery had on the public. In 1987, The Janet B. Purnell and W. Howard Fort Scholarship Fund was created by the University of Akron in Purnell's honor. This scholarship has helped over 600 black students graduate from the University of Akron, and is what Purnell would like to be remembered for. Purnell was also the first female in the history her church, Mount Olive Baptist Church, to serve as Chairman of the Board. Purnell closes the interview by narrating her photographs.