Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers ® Video Oral History with Julius Chambers

Overview of the Collection

Repository: The HistoryMakers®
1900 S. Michigan Avenue
Chicago, Illinois 60616
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Creator: Chambers, Julius

Title: The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Julius Chambers,

Dates: December 6, 2002

Bulk Dates: 2002

Physical Description: 4 Betacam SP videocassettes (1:50:51).

Abstract: Civil rights lawyer Julius Chambers (1936 - ) worked on the benchmark Supreme Court case, Swann vs. Charlotte Board of Education. Chambers was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on December 6, 2002, in Charlotte, North Carolina. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.

Identification: A2002_220

Language: The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Born in Mount Gilead, North Carolina, in 1936, veteran civil rights lawyer, activist and educator Julius L. Chambers was influenced by the racial intolerance he saw growing up in a rural community east of Charlotte. After graduating from high school in 1954, he entered North Carolina Central University, where he graduated summa cum laude with a B.A. in history and was president of the student body. He then attended the University of Michigan, earning an M.A. in history. Chambers began law school at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 1959, where he became the first African American editor-in-chief of the school’s law review. Upon graduating in 1962, Chambers ranked first in his class of 100 students. He went on to earn his LL.M. from Columbia University Law School in 1964.

Chambers became the first intern with the new NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund (LDF) in 1963. Subsequently, in June 1964, he opened his own practice in Charlotte, which eventually became the first integrated law firm in North Carolina. Together with his founding partners, James E. Ferguson II and Adam Stein, this firm is credited with influencing more landmark state and federal legislation in school desegregation, employment and voting rights than any other in the United States. Together with lawyers of the LDF, they helped shape civil rights law by winning benchmark United States Supreme Court rulings such as the famous decision of 'Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education' (1971), which led to federally mandated busing, helping integrate public schools across the country. Chambers and his team also won in two of the Supreme Court’s most monumental Title VII employment discrimination decisions, 'Griggs v. Duke Power Co.' (1971) and 'Albemarle Paper Co. v. Moody' (1974).

In 1984, Chambers left his firm to become director-counsel of the LDF. Under Chambers' leadership, the organization fought for civil rights legislation and affirmative action programs that began in the 1970s and 1980s. Remaining devoted to education, however, he returned to his alma mater, North Carolina Central University, where he served as chancellor for eight years. Chambers has published numerous books, teaches at various law schools, and is a member of many boards and organizations.
Chambers is married to Vivian Giles Chambers and has two adult children, Derrick and Judy, and two granddaughters.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Julius Chambers was conducted by Larry Crowe on December 6, 2002, in Charlotte, North Carolina, and was recorded on 4 Betacam SP videocassettes. Civil rights lawyer Julius Chambers (1936 - ) worked on the benchmark Supreme Court case, Swann vs. Charlotte Board of Education.

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:

Chambers, Julius L. (Julius LeVonne), 1936-
Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)
Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews
Chambers, Julius L. (Julius LeVonne), 1936---Interviews
African American lawyers--Interviews.
Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

HistoryMakers® Category:

LawMakers

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


Processing Information

This interview collection was processed and encoded on 2/5/2013 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, December 6, 2002

Video Oral History Interview with Julius Chambers, Section A2002_220_001_001, TRT: 0:29:20 2002/12/06

Julius Chambers gives his favorites and talks about his family background. His father’s name was William Lee Chambers and he was born on May 10, 1903 in Richmond County, North Carolina. His mother’s name was Matilda Alma (née Bruton) Chambers and she was born October 19, 1910 in Wakefield, North Carolina in Montgomery County. Chambers father was an auto mechanic, who
owned his own repair shop, called Chambers’ Garage. He was also the first African American in the country to be able to sell gas and oil at retail prices when—most distributors would not sell to minorities. Chambers’ mother kept the books for her husband’s repair shop/service station business and raised their four children. Chambers recalls that race relations in the town of Mount Gilead, where he grew up were typical of the relations throughout North Carolina at the time; it was rigidly segregated and as a result, limited the aspirations of its black children. Chambers remembers the sights, sounds and smells of growing up in Mount Gilead and bemoans the lack of social activities the town had for blacks.

Video Oral History Interview with Julius Chambers, Section A2002_220_001_002, TRT: 0:29:45 2002/12/06

Julius Chambers discusses what his plans were, following his graduation from high school. He really wanted to go to the same school his brother attended, North Carolina Central University. Chambers had visited the university several times and was impressed by the campus. He discusses the North Carolina Central’s history and founder, Dr. James E. Shepard, and reflects on his experiences and expectations of the school. Chambers studied History at North Carolina Central; he recalls the professors he had at the university that stood out to him the most, Dr. Helen Edmonds, Caulbert Jones and Joe Taylor. When Chambers graduated from North Carolina Central, he wanted to go directly to law school; however, he received a Woodrow Wilson Fellowship at the University of Michigan, where earned his Master’s degree in History. The University of Michigan was his first experience in an integrated school. Chambers noticed stark differences between North Carolina Central and the University of Michigan, early on and details some of the most startling contrasts he observed between the two schools’ educational programs.

Video Oral History Interview with Julius Chambers, Section A2002_220_001_003, TRT: 0:29:20 2002/12/06

Julius Chambers discusses how he met Thurgood Marshall and Jack Greenberg through Kelly Alexander, who used to be a president of one of the branches of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Chambers was invited to meet with Marshall and Greenberg in Philadelphia at an annual meeting of the NAACP; when the three met, they discussed Chambers’ interest in coming to work for the Legal Defense Fund (LDF). He was elated by the offer and subsequently, agreed to come and work for the fund. In 1964, Chambers came to Charlotte, North Carolina and opened a private law practice—which was affiliated with LDF. He was known as a
cooperating attorney; and as such he would assist LDF as a local defense attorney with cases in the Charlotte area. Chambers talks about his involvement in the famous case of Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education, which held that bussing was an appropriate measure to promote integration and achieve a greater degree of desegregation in public schools.

NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund.
Greenberg, Jack, 1924-
Constitutional law--United States--Cases.
School integration--United States.
Race discrimination--United States.

Video Oral History Interview with Julius Chambers, Section A2002_220_001_004, TRT: 0:22:26 2002/12/06

Julius Chambers talks about his commitment to legislation in order to influence social change. He remarks that while you cannot make somebody love somebody by way of a court decision, you can help enact laws that bring people together in ways that encourage respect and eventually change attitudes. He mentions that his law practice had a number of other court cases like Albemarle Paper Co. v. Moody, which helped to bring about social change in the U.S. and discusses how he became chancellor of his alma mater, North Carolina Central University. In addition, Chambers served as the head of the NAACP Legal Defense Fund (LDF) from 1984 to 1992. He discusses the highlights of those eight years, which were focused on preserving the legal gains he and the LDF had made. Chambers also talks about his work in directing the Center for Civil Rights at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, which was established in 2001.

Civil rights Law and legislation.
Supreme Court decisions—United States.
NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund.
North Carolina Central University.
Reagan, Ronald.
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Center for Civil Rights.
Social change--United States--History--20th century.