Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Charles Ogletree

Overview of the Collection

Repository:  The HistoryMakers®
             1900 S. Michigan Avenue
             Chicago, Illinois 60616
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Creator:  Ogletree, Charles J.

Title:  The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Charles Ogletree,


Bulk Dates:  2003, 2005 and 2014

Physical Description:  17 Betacam SP videocassettes uncompressed MOV digital video files (8:20:17).

Abstract:  Civil rights lawyer and law professor Charles Ogletree (1952 - ) is a public defender and teaches at Harvard University. He is also a television commentator and moderator. Ogletree was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on April 11, 2003, August 10, 2014, June 27, 2003, September 17, 2005 and September 18, 2005, in Boston, Massachusetts, Cambridge, Massachusetts and Oak Bluffs, Massachusetts. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.

Identification:  A2003_075

Language:  The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Outspoken civil rights attorney and educator Charles Ogletree was born December 31, 1952, in Merced, California. Ogletree graduated with distinction from Stanford University with a B.A. in 1974 and an M.A. one year later, both in political science. At Stanford, his civil activism was born. Ogletree attended Harvard Law School, where he worked as editor of the Harvard Civil Rights-Civil Liberties Law Review and on the board of the Harvard Prison Legal Assistance Program. Earning his J.D. in 1978, Ogletree was also national chairperson of the Black American Law Students Association.

Upon graduation from Harvard Law School, Ogletree began his career working for the Washington, D.C., Public Defender's Office. At the time of his departure in 1985, he had risen to the position of deputy director. Between 1982 and 1984, Ogletree began teaching law as an adjunct professor at both Antioch Law School and American University School of Law. In 1985, Ogletree became a partner in Jessamy, Fort & Ogletree, and remains today counsel to Jessamy, Fort & Botts. In 1989, Ogletree returned to his alma mater as an assistant professor of law. He was also given responsibility for overseeing Harvard Law School's trial advocacy workshop. Today, Ogletree works as faculty director of clinical programs, associate dean for clinical programs and the Jesse Climenko Professor of Law.

Ogletree's career has focused on securing equal rights for everyone. He was on the team that represented Anita Hill during the Clarence Thomas confirmation proceedings. He is also active in the area of reparations to the descendants of slaves, such as the survivors and descendants of the Tulsa race riot of 1921. Ogletree has filed suit on behalf of the survivors of that incident in federal court.

Ogletree continues to serve as a television commentator and moderator. He is chairman of the Stanford University
Task Force on Minority Alumni Relations, a founding member of the Harvard Law School Black Alumni Association and chairman of the Southern Center for Human Rights Committee. Ogletree has been named one of the 100 Most Influential Lawyers in America by *The National Law Journal*. He also is the recipient of numerous awards and honorary degrees including the NAACP's Universal Humanitarian Award.

Ogletree and his wife, Pamela, have two children. They live in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

**Scope and Content**

This life oral history interview with Charles Ogletree was conducted by Julieanna L. Richardson on April 11, 2003, August 10, 2014, June 27, 2003, September 17, 2005 and September 18, 2005, in Boston, Massachusetts, Cambridge, Massachusetts and Oak Bluffs, Massachusetts, and was recorded on 17 Betacame SP videocassettes uncompressed MOV digital video files. Civil rights lawyer and law professor Charles Ogletree (1952 - ) is a public defender and teaches at Harvard University. He is also a television commentator and moderator.

**Restrictions**

**Restrictions on Access**

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

**Controlled Access Terms**

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

**Persons:**

Ogletree, Charles J.

Richardson, Julieanna L. (Interviewer)

Burghelea, Neculai (Videographer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)
Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews
Ogletree, Charles J.--Interviews

African American lawyers--Interviews

African American law teachers--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Harvard Law School

Occupations:

Civil Rights Lawyer

Law Professor

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 6/7/2022 by The HistoryMakers® staff. The finding aid was created adhering to the following standards: DACS, AACR2, and the Oral History Cataloging Manual
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 Charles Ogletree, Section A2003_075_001_001, TRT: 0:30:40
2003/04/11

Charles Ogletree was born on December 31, 1952 in Merced, California. His father, Charles Ogletree, Sr., was born in Birmingham, Alabama and migrated to California in 1950 where he drove trucks and worked as a laborer in the San Joaquin Valley. Ogletree’s mother, Willie Mae Reed, was born in 1933 in Pop Spurs, Arkansas. Her parents, Willie and Essie Reed, worked as laborers in Arkansas before moving the family to California in the 1940s. Despite their twenty-four year age difference, Willie Mae and Ogletree, Sr. married in 1951. Ogletree was raised in a working class African American and Mexican American neighborhood in Merced. His mother was active in the community, taking people to doctor’s appointments and delivering food to people. During his childhood, Ogletree also lived with his maternal grandparents who taught him how to fish and cook family recipes. As a child, he remembers buying candy from the grocery store, admiring goods in the local pawnshop, and attending Pentecostal church services.

African American lawyers--Interviews.
African American law teachers--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with Charles Ogletree, Section A2003_075_001_002, TRT: 0:31:16
2003/04/11

Charles Ogletree describes the sights, sounds and smells of his childhood in Merced, California. His parents divorced in the 1960s; and, his four siblings and he lived with his maternal grandparents and in various foster homes throughout the decade. As the oldest, Ogletree was responsible for taking care of his siblings. By the time he was in high school, Ogletree’s mother was able to take care of all of her children. Ogletree attended Weaver and Galen Clark Elementary Schools in Merced. At both schools his teachers expressed concern about his physical well-being and hygiene, which made him realize that he was poorer than other students. His teachers also encouraged him to take upper level classes and take on leadership roles in school. In high school, the dean of students encouraged him to run for student body president. He became the first African American student body president in the school’s history. Ogletree talks about his family’s connection to Merced and returning to his childhood homes in the 1990s.

Video Oral History Interview with Charles Ogletree, Section A2003_075_001_003, TRT: 0:12:30
2003/04/11

Charles Ogletree mentally escaped the poverty of his childhood in Merced, California through reading and developed a curiosity about the world through
Galen Clark Elementary School’s curriculum which exposed him to other cultures. Ogletree intended to become a postal worker after high school, but a guidance counselor encouraged him to apply to Stanford University in Stanford, California. After meeting a black admissions counselor on his first campus visit, he decided to enroll at Stanford in 1970. Ogletree became president of the Black Student Union as a freshman. He organized the group, Stanford Students for the Defense of Angela Davis, which became Stanford Students for the Defense of Angela Davis and All Political Prisoners after Ogletree visited HistoryMaker Angela Davis in prison. Ogletree and his group protested her incarceration by unfurling a banner reading “Free Angela Davis” at the 1972 Rose Bowl. In 1972, he was elected co-president of the Stanford student body.

Video Oral History Interview with Charles Ogletree, Section A2003_075_002_004, TRT: 0:31:14 2003/06/27

Charles Ogletree attended Black Panther Party meetings, heard HistoryMaker Louis Farrakhan preach, and was a research assistant for Dr. St. Clair Drake as an undergraduate at Stanford University in Stanford, California. In 1974, Drake gave Ogletree the opportunity to travel to Dar es Salaam, Tanzania to attend the Sixth Pan-African Congress where he heard Queen Mother Audley Moore advocate for reparations. While at Stanford, Ogletree organized a debate between William Shockley and Cedric Clark to disprove Shockley’s theory of black intellectual inferiority; and, wrote his senior thesis on economic sanctions on Zimbabwe and South Africa. In 1975, Ogletree helped organize a black graduation to protest the choice of Daniel Patrick Moynihan as Stanford’s commencement speaker. Ogletree and other African American students also walked out of the main graduation ceremony, prompting other students and parents to walk out as well. Stanford and other elite schools continue the tradition of black graduation ceremonies.

Video Oral History Interview with Charles Ogletree, Section A2003_075_002_005, TRT: 0:31:15 2003/06/27

Charles Ogletree considered dropping out of Stanford University in California to commit himself to activism, but was advised against it by his family and his mentor, St. Clair Drake. Ogletree ultimately decided to use the skills he gained through his education as the foundation for his activism. At Stanford, he wrote his senior honors thesis on economic sanctions on Zimbabwe’s and South Africa’s apartheid governments. Though he advocated for economic sanctions in his paper, personally, he thought the method was too conservative. Later in his career, Ogletree represented Randall Robinson, the president of TransAfrica, who was arrested protesting South African apartheid. Ogletree graduated from Stanford University with B.A. and M.A. degrees in political science in 1975. He applied to Harvard Law School in Cambridge, Massachusetts at the prompting of friends and his mentor, St. Clair Drake. His wife, Pamela Ogletree, influenced his final decision to enroll at Harvard Law in 1975.

Video Oral History Interview with Charles Ogletree, Section A2003_075_002_006, TRT: 0:30:31 2003/06/27

Charles Ogletree started at Harvard Law School (HLS) in Cambridge, Massachusetts in the fall of 1975. His experience at Harvard was framed by white Bostonians’ violent reaction to court-ordered school desegregation. Ogletree and his wife lived in East Cambridge, a multiethnic, working class community. At HLS, Ogletree was uncomfortable revealing his poor background to his wealthy classmates and frustrated by the ambiguities of the law. Ogletree planned to practice international or criminal justice law. He volunteered as counsel for a Prison Legal Assistance Project case, was an editor
on the Harvard Civil Rights-Civil Liberties Law Review and worked with the Boston NAACP recording complaints from black families of police harassment. Ogletree worked for Pillsbury, Madison & Sutro law firm in San Francisco, California during the summer of 1976. At Harvard, he studied with notable legal scholars including Richard Parker and HistoryMaker Derrick Bell who introduced him to the field of critical legal studies.

Video Oral History Interview with Charles Ogletree, Section A2003_075_002_007, TRT: 0:31:15 2003/06/27

Charles Ogletree served as president of the National Black Law Students Association while at Harvard Law School (HLS) in Cambridge, Massachusetts in 1977. At the time the University of California v. Bakke, which challenged the constitutionality of affirmative action, was going through the court system. Ogletree and BLSA organized demonstrations across the country. He discussed the case with Archibald Cox and Wade McCree, attended a meeting where the Ivy League universities agreed to submit an amicus brief to the case supporting the Harvard Plan for admissions diversity, which was crafted by HistoryMaker Walter Leonard, and attended oral arguments for the case at the Supreme Court. The high court’s ruling against Bakke in 1978 seemed like a victory, but the decision demonstrated to Ogletree that the Supreme Court had never shown a true commitment to racial justice. Ogletree details the history of black HLS graduates, including the first George Lewis Ruffin and the most significant Charles Hamilton Houston.

Video Oral History Interview with Charles Ogletree, Section A2003_075_002_008, TRT: 0:08:15 2003/06/27

Charles Ogletree talks extensively about lawyer Charles Hamilton Houston. Houston earned his B.A from Amherst College in Amherst, Massachusetts and then graduated from Harvard Law School in Cambridge, Massachusetts in 1923. As dean of Howard University School of Law in Washington, D.C. he raised admissions standards and trained future civil rights lawyers Thurgood Marshall, Constance Baker Motley, and HistoryMakers Oliver Hill and Robert L. Carter. Houston also established a relationship between Harvard’s and Howard’s law schools. Houston advocated for an indirect strategy of challenging segregation and was instrumental in building the cases and arguments that would ultimately result in the Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas decision of 1954. However, he died in April 1950, before he could see the success of his work.

Video Oral History Interview with Charles Ogletree, Section A2003_075_003_009, TRT: 0:31:10 2005/09/17

Charles Ogletree began working as a public defender for the prestigious Public Defender Service for the District of Columbia (PDSDC), a reform-minded legal organization that offered rehabilitative services in addition to legal counsel, in 1979. He defines his legal philosophy as empathetic. Early in his career, Ogletree defended an Iranian client accused of assaulting a police officer. He explains how the case illustrated the interconnectedness of law and politics. While at PDSDC, Ogletree represented clients in rape, murder and discrimination cases and won most of his cases. He describes winning a case where his client was accused of a particularly heinous crime and another case in which, after winning, the jury threw his client a party. The number of black professionals in Washington, D.C. attracted Ogletree to the city. During the late 1970s and 1980s, African Americans had a significant presence in D.C.’s judiciary system, including HistoryMaker Theodore Newman, Jr.
Charles Ogletree worked for the Public Defender Service of the District of Columbia (PDSDC) from 1978 to 1985. He believed strongly in being an advocate for his clients and their right to a fair trial. Outside of his work for the PDSDC, he has represented Randall Robinson, John Gotti, Tupac Shakur, Anita Hill, and HistoryMaker Al Sharpton. After his sister’s murder in 1982, Ogletree questioned whether he was able to continue in his line of work. In 1985, he left PDSDC after he was passed over to be the next director, and joined the Harvard Law School (HLS) faculty. At HLS, Ogletree founded the Criminal Justice Institute in 1990 and founded the Charles Hamilton Houston Institute for Race & Justice in 2004. When Ogletree graduated from HLS in 1978, there were three black tenured professors, when he returned in 1985 there were only four. HistoryMaker Derrick Bell was a vocal critic of the lack of diversity on HLS’s faculty. In the 1990s, Leon Higginbotham and HistoryMaker Lani Guinier joined HLS’s faculty.

Charles Ogletree represented apartheid protestors, including HistoryMaker Walter Fauntroy and TransAfrica founder Randall Robinson, as a partner at Jessamy, Fort & Ogletree in 1984. He remained of counsel at the law firm when he began teaching at Harvard Law School in 1985. Ogletree quickly transitioned into teaching, assuming responsibilities for Charles Nesson’s criminal law class. Ogletree’s experience as a public defender informed his work ethic, teaching style and course content. He founded the Criminal Justice Institute at HLS in 1990, and in 1993, he became a tenured professor at HLS. His tenure article was on the ethics of public defense. Ogletree’s mentor, HistoryMaker Derrick Bell, paved the way for other African Americans on the HLS faculty. Ogletree was initially nervous to talk with the notable legal scholars on HLS’s faculty, but has developed good relationships with many of them, such as Charles Fried. Ogletree acknowledges that the culture of HLS can seem isolating to visiting professors.

Charles Ogletree became interested in international relations after visiting Tanzania in 1974 for the Sixth-Pan African Congress and Cuba while an undergraduate student at Stanford University. Throughout the 1970s, Randall Robinson developed TransAfrica into a major Washington D.C. lobbying organization supported by prominent individuals such as HistoryMakers Harry Belafonte, Earl Graves, Edward Lewis, Danny Glover, and Harriet Michel. The Regan administration refused to work with TransAfrica on the issue of South African apartheid, despite increasing pressure from people like Reverend Leon Sullivan and Belafonte. In 1984, Robinson was arrested with HistoryMaker Walter Fauntroy and others after refusing to leave the South African Embassy. Their sit-in sparked a series of demonstrations in Washington, D.C., which coincided with the movement to establish a national holiday in the memory of Martin Luther King. Ogletree represented many of the protestors after their arrests and serves on the TransAfrica board.

Charles Ogletree was asked to prepare Anita Hill to testify against U.S. Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas during Thomas’ 1991 Senate Confirmation Hearing. Hill’s friend, Emma Coleman Jordan, later convinced Ogletree to be the lead counsel for Hill at the hearing because there were no other African
American men on her legal team. Ogletree barely knew Hill, but was committed
to advocating for her because she was his client and advised her to take a
polygraph test. Ogletree notes that the National Bar Association, which
represents African American lawyers, voted not to endorse Thomas’ nomination.
Ogletree was moved that his young daughter understood the impact of Hill’s
testimony.

Video Oral History Interview with Charles Ogletree, Section A2003_075_005_014, TRT: 14:34:42 2014/08/10

Charles Ogletree founded Harvard Law School’s Criminal Justice Institute (CJI)
in 1990 with the blessing of HLS dean Jim Vorenberg. Ogletree convinced Dean
Robert Clark to continue supporting CJI and now the program in endowed.
Many of CJI’s original staff members have started similar programs at other
universities. Ogletree led Anita Hill’s legal counsel during Clarence Thomas’
1991 Senate Confirmation Hearing. During the hearing neither Democratic
Senator Joseph Biden nor Edward Kennedy seemed supportive of Hill. Hill
testified once during the hearing and Thomas testified three times. During his
testimony, Thomas successfully portrayed himself as the victim of racism. The
Senators on the committee were unable to understand how Hill was also
impacted by racism and sexism. Ogletree identifies Hill’s testimony as one
impetus for the Women’s Movement of the late 20th century. Ogletree praises
HistoryMaker President Barack Obama’s U.S. Supreme Court appointments,
Justices Elena Kagan and Sonya Sotomayor.

Video Oral History Interview with Charles Ogletree, Section A2003_075_005_015, TRT: 15:29:49 2014/08/10

Charles Ogletree successfully lobbied Harvard Law School (HLS) Dean Robert
Clark in the early 1990s for tenured clinical faculty positions in the Criminal
Justice Institute (CJI). In 1990, HistoryMaker Derrick Bell left HLS in protest of
the lack of African American women on the tenure track, Ogletree offered to
resign as well, in solidarity, but Bell convinced him to stay. In 1992, Ogletree
represented Desiree Washington who accused Mike Tyson of rape. Ogletree was
awarded tenure at HLS in 1993, though it was almost jeopardized by charges he
plagiarized a Harvard Law Review article. He was the seventh black tenured law
professor at Harvard. HistoryMaker David Wilkins was the eighth. In 1994, the
CJI released ‘Beyond the Rodney King Story,’ a study of police violence in
minority communities. Ogletree began representing Tupac Shakur while Shakur
was in prison in 1995. Ogletree lists African American professors at HLS and
reflects upon the lack of African American males in U.S. graduate schools.

Video Oral History Interview with Charles Ogletree, Section A2003_075_005_016, TRT: 16:32:22 2014/08/10

Charles Ogletree became formally involved in the reparations movement in the
early 2000s at the behest of Randall Robinson, founder of TransAfrica. Ogletree
advocates for investment in education and social programs as a form of
reparations and notes the success of the reparations movement for people of
African descent in other parts of the world. In 2004, Ogletree published ‘All
Deliberate Speed: Reflections on the First Half-Century of Brown v. Board of
Education,’ in which he examines the delayed realization of the case’s aims. In
2005, Ogletree founded Harvard Law School’s Charles Hamilton Houston
Institute for Race & Justice to continue the legacies of Houston and his students,
Thurgood Marshall and HistoryMaker Oliver Hill. Harvard Business School
graduate Alan Haymon has supported the institute since its inception. He talks
about his relationships with Archibald Cox and retired Harvard Law professor
Alan Dershowitz, his views on affirmative action and a former student.
Charles Ogletree was given the nickname, “Tree,” when he was running for national president of the Black Law Students Association. During the late 1980s, Ogletree taught Michelle Obama and HistoryMaker Barack Obama at Harvard Law School in Cambridge, Massachusetts. He later served as a special advisor during Obama’s 2008 and 2012 presidential campaigns. He talks about the Let’s Move campaign, the Obamas’ personalities, President Obama’s U.S. Supreme Court nominations, and Obama’s 2004 Democratic National Convention speech. Ogletree has mentored several political and academic leaders in addition to the Obamas and hopes to write books on Barack Obama and Nelson Mandela as well as a follow-up to his 2004 publication, ‘All Deliberate Speed.’ Ogletree recalls experiences from the early years of him and his wife’s thirty-nine year relationship and talks about his reputation, his plans for the future and spoiling his grandchildren. He concludes by reflecting upon his legacy.