

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Standish E. Willis

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Willis, Standish E., 1941-
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Standish E. Willis,
Dates:	October 2, 2003
Bulk Dates:	2003
Physical Description:	7 Betacame SP videocassettes (3:09:11).
Abstract:	Civil rights lawyer Standish E. Willis (1941 -) is best known as an activist against police violence and for representing former street gang leader Aaron Patterson, who was convicted of double murder in 1989. Willis was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on October 2, 2003, in Chicago, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2003_247
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Criminal defense attorney Standish E. Willis is quick to make enemies in his work, but only because he insists on doing the right thing. Born in Chicago on August 16, 1941, the ex-gang member-turned-lawyer simply followed his conscience in choosing to take on unpopular clients whose civil rights are violated.

Willis grew up on the West Side, a blue-collar neighborhood and haven for gangs. When he was twelve, Willis joined the Van Dyke street gang and two years later was the leader of the Gents street gang. He became a father at age seventeen. Six months after graduating from Crane High School in 1960, Willis shipped off to the U.S. Air Force and shaped up. When he returned four years later, he took a job as a bus driver and began attending Crane College. As a student, Willis grew politically active, leading the campaign to name the new West Side campus Malcolm X College and organizing clubs and a "Communi-versity" to promote African and African American History.

In 1968, Willis completed his A.A. and transferred to the University of Chicago. He received his B.A. in 1971 and earned an M.A. in economics from the University of Illinois, Chicago, before enrolling at Chicago-Kent College of Law. He received his law degree in 1983 and joined People Law Office, a civil rights law firm.

In his career as an attorney, Willis has been an active crusader against police violence. He organized the African American Defense Committee Against Police Violence and later came full circle when he signed on to represent former street gang leader Aaron Patterson, who was convicted of a double murder in 1989. Willis took the case because Patterson claimed Chicago police beat a confession out of him, and Willis has made no apologies for offering counsel to such an unpopular figure.

In 1984, the Standish E. Willis Community Service Award was established to recognize a student for outstanding leadership and community involvement. Willis has been the recipient of several other awards for his service to civil rights and the community. Willis resides in Oak Park, Illinois. He has five children.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Standish E. Willis was conducted by Larry Crowe on October 2, 2003, in Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on 7 Betacame SP videocassettes. Civil rights lawyer Standish E. Willis (1941 -) is best known as an activist against police violence and for representing former street gang leader Aaron Patterson, who was convicted of double murder in 1989.

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:

Willis, Standish E., 1941-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Willis, Standish E., 1941- --Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Civil Rights Lawyer

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

The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Standish E. Willis, October 2, 2003. 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).

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 Standish E. Willis, Section A2003_247_001_001, TRT: 0:29:27
?

Standish E. Willis was born on August 16, 1941 in Chicago, Illinois. His father, Andrew Willis, Jr., born in Arkansas in 1913, was the son of a preacher and sharecropper. While Willis's grandparents did not have time to share many family stories, Willis does recall hearing about the racism in the South and his Aunt Ada being beaten by a white man. Willis's father came to Chicago during

the Great Migration. Willis's family settled on the West side and his father worked for the steel mills and worked as a mover on the side. Willis remembers his father as very strong, fearless, generous, and protective. His mother, Plumie Willis, was born in Arkansas in 1923. Her mother died when she was twelve or thirteen and she married Willis's father shortly thereafter. Although Willis did not know his mother's side of the family well, he recalls visiting an aunt in Paducah, Kentucky. Willis describes his mother as a bit more sophisticated than his father and an involved church member.

Video Oral History Interview with Standish E. Willis, Section A2003_247_001_002, TRT: 0:29:40
?

Standish E. Willis grew up on the Near West Side of Chicago, Illinois. He recalls playing sports, visiting the Maxwell Street area for Polish sausages, and hearing Blues legends such as HistoryMaker B. B. King performing at the nearby Club Zanzibar. He was affiliated with a local street gang that began as a friend group but evolved to have more violent consequences. He recalls being afraid to enter another gang's turf. He attended William E. Gladstone Elementary School where he encountered one stern but encouraging African American teacher. Willis then attended Cregier Vocational High School followed by Crane Tech High School where he had little encouragement or interests in his studies. Just before turning seventeen, his first child was born and he worked part-time to support him. He briefly enrolled in Crane Junior College in Chicago but dropped out to enlist in the U.S. Air Force where he was stationed in Lackland Air Force Base in Texas for training and then Selfridge Air National Guard Base in Michigan.

Video Oral History Interview with Standish E. Willis, Section A2003_247_001_003, TRT: 0:29:41
?

Standish E. Willis was stationed at the Selfridge Air National Guard Base in Michigan for two years; he spent one year stationed on Santa Rosa Island; and spent his last year in the military stationed in Madison, Wisconsin. Willis returned to Chicago, Illinois and worked as a bus driver for the Chicago Transit Authority and then enrolled in Crane Junior College. Willis was deeply influenced by Malcolm X's speeches and became involved with Black Nationalism, which he saw as more viable than the Civil Rights Movement at the time. During college, he joined and later led the Black Students Association which also included HistoryMakers Edward "Buzz" Palmer, Renault Robinson and Bobby Rush. Willis participated in the movement to change the school's name to Malcolm X College. In 1968, Willis graduated with an A.A. degree in sociology and entered the University of Chicago. Willis talks about the socioeconomic and cultural difference between the African American communities on the South and West Sides of Chicago.

Video Oral History Interview with Standish E. Willis, Section A2003_247_001_004, TRT: 0:29:54
?

Standish E. Willis attended the University of Chicago in Chicago, Illinois where he completed his B.A. degree in history in 1971 and was advised by HistoryMaker John Hope Franklin. He continued his Master's studies at the University of Chicago in Latin American history and earned a M.A. degree in economics from the University of Illinois at Chicago. While at the University of Chicago, he became involved in the Communitas movement through which he met HistoryMakers Harold Rogers and Harold Pates. Willis earned his law degree from Chicago-Kent College of Law where he continued his campus activism by joining the Black Law Students Association. Willis decided to focus on civil rights law, and accepted a position at the People's Law Office in

Chicago, which at that time, was wrapping up work on the Fred Hampton case. Willis worked on Mayor Harold Washington's re-election campaign in 1987 and joined various networks addressing police brutality and racism, including the National Conference of Black Lawyers.

Video Oral History Interview with Standish E. Willis, Section A2003_247_001_005, TRT: 0:29:46
?

Standish E. Willis and The People's Law Office brought a case against Chicago Police Commander Jon Burge and his officers for torturing suspects in 1987. The case eventually revealed systematic torture by the Chicago Police Department and led to the overturning of many wrongful convictions, including those of Aaron Patterson and John Willis. Despite his culpability, Jon Burge suffered few consequences. Willis explains that African Americans disproportionately suffer the effects of police brutality, yet they also disproportionately suffer the effects of crime, leading some in the community to accept law enforcement's encroachment on civil liberties. Willis discusses the conflicted stance around civil liberties and the death penalty in Illinois. Willis notes how the movement for reparations has been helped by the National Black United Fund under the leadership of HistoryMaker Conrad Walter Worrill; and talks about fearing retaliation for his work and the problems with the USA PATRIOT Act of 2001.

Video Oral History Interview with Standish E. Willis, Section A2003_247_001_006, TRT: 0:29:25
?

Standish E. Willis describes his concerns for the African American community particularly around mass incarceration. He notes the work that HistoryMakers Constance "Connie" Howard and Danny K. Davis have done to introduce legislation to help those accused of crimes reintegrate into society. Willis speculates about the different forms that reparations might take. Both his parents lived to see him become a lawyer and were proud of his accomplishments. Willis considers what he would have done differently, reflects upon his legacy and describes how he would like to be remembered. He concludes by narrating his photographs.

Video Oral History Interview with Standish E. Willis, Section A2003_247_001_007, TRT: 0:11:18
?

Standish E. Willis narrates his photographs.