

Biographical Description for The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with William Lester, Jr.

PERSON

Lester, W.A.

Alternative Names: William Lester, Jr.;

Life Dates: April 24, 1937-

Place of Birth: Chicago, Illinois, USA

Residence: Oakland, California

Occupations: Chemist;

Biographical Note

Distinguished theoretical chemist William Lester, Jr., was born on April 24, 1937, in Chicago, Illinois, where he attended all-black elementary schools due to racial segregation. After World War II, Lester's family moved and he attended a formerly all-white high school; he went on to receive his B.S. degree in 1958, and his master's degree in chemistry in 1959 from the University of Chicago. Lester obtained his Ph.D. in chemistry from the Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C., in 1964.

Lester developed his interest in science at an early age; during his senior year in high school, he used his typing skills to obtain a part-time job in the physics department of the University of Chicago, which gave him a chance to explore the potential of a future career in the sciences. Entering the University of Chicago on a history scholarship, Lester set scoring records in basketball, two of which were still standing after forty-eight years. While at Catholic University, Lester worked at the National Bureau of Standards as a member of the scientific staff; his work at the Bureau helped him to meet the requirements for his doctoral dissertation on the calculation of molecular properties. Lester obtained a postdoctoral appointment at the University of Wisconsin in Madison where he worked on the molecular collision theory. The IBM Corporation then hired Lester to work at its research laboratory in San Jose, California. Later, as the director of the National Resource for Computation in Chemistry, Lester organized and led the first unified effort in computational chemistry in the United States.

Lester later joined the faculty of the University of California at Berkeley as a professor of chemistry, where his research focused on the theoretical studies of the electronic structure of molecules. Lester's efforts at Berkeley extended the powerful quantum Monte Carlo method to a wider range of chemical problems. In 2002, Lester became the president of the Pac-10 Conference.

Throughout his career, Lester published over 200 papers in his field, and was awarded numerous honors for his research and teaching. Lester held memberships in several professional organizations including the American Physical and Chemical Societies, and the American Association for the Advancement of Science. He was also elected a fellow of the APS, ACS, and AAAS. In addition to his professional activities, Lester remained committed to science education and sparking an interest in pursuing science careers in minority students.

Lester and his wife, Rochelle (deceased), raised two children: son, William A. Lester, III, and daughter, Allison L. Ramsey.

Related Entries

McCosh Elementary School [STUDENTOF]
[from ? to ?]

Frank L. Gillespie Technology Magnet Cluster School [STUDENTOF]
[from ? to ?]

Diploma

Calumet Career Prep Academy High School [STUDENTOF]
[from ? to ?]

Diploma

University of Chicago [STUDENTOF]
[from ? to ?]

B.S.

University of Chicago [STUDENTOF]
[from ? to ?]

M.S.

Washington University in St Louis [STUDENTOF]
[from ? to ?]

Catholic University of America [STUDENTOF]
[from ? to ?]

Ph.D.

[EMPLOYEEOF]
[from 197407 to 197807]

National Resource for Computation in Chemistry [EMPLOYEEOF]
[from 1983 to 1998]

Director

University of Wisconsin, Madison [EMPLOYEEOF]
[from 196411 to 196506]

Postdoctoral Associate, Theoretical Chemistry Institute

National Bureau of Standards (NBS) [EMPLOYEEOf]

[from 1962 to 196411]

Physical Chemist

Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory [EMPLOYEEOf]

[from 197802 to ?]

Director, NRCC; Associate Director, LBL/Faculty Senior Scientist/Associate Dean, College of Chemistry

National Science Foundation (NSF) [EMPLOYEEOf]

[from 199503 to 199612]

Senior Fellow for Science & Engineering and Assistant to the Director of Human Resource Development

National Bureau of Standards (NBS) [EMPLOYEEOf]

[from 196106 to 196108]

Summer Intern

University of Wisconsin, Madison [EMPLOYEEOf]

[from 196506 to 196808]

Assistant Director, Theoretical Chemistry Institute

University of California, Berkeley [EMPLOYEEOf]

[from 198107 to ?]

Professor of Chemistry

IBM [EMPLOYEEOf]

[from 196808 to 197801]

Staff Scientist/Technical Planning Staff/Manager, Molecular Interactions Group

Pac-10 Conference [MEMBEROf]

[from ? to ?]

President

American Chemical Society (ACS) [MEMBEROf]

[from ? to ?]

American Physical Society (APS) [MEMBEROf]

[from ? to ?]

National Organization for the Professional Advancement of Black Chemists and Chemical Engineers (NOBCChE) [MEMBEROf]

[from ? to ?]

American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) [MEMBEROf]

[from ? to ?]

Sigma Xi, The Scientific Research Society [MEMBEROf]

[from ? to ?]

California Academy of Sciences [MEMBEROF]

[from ? to ?]

Chabot Space & Science Center [MEMBEROF]

[from ? to ?]

Museum of African American Technology (MAAT) [MEMBEROF]

[from ? to ?]

Air Force Office of Scientific Research Chemistry Research Evaluation Panel

[MEMBEROF]

[from ? to ?]

United States National Committee [MEMBEROF]

[from ? to ?]

National Science Foundation (NSF) [MEMBEROF]

[from ? to ?]

Atlanta University Center Science Research Institute [MEMBEROF]

[from ? to ?]

National Bureau of Standards [MEMBEROF]

[from ? to ?]

Committee to Survey Opportunities in the Chemical Sciences, National Research Council [MEMBEROF]

[from ? to ?]

Journal of Computational Chemistry [MEMBEROF]

[from 1979 to 1987]

International Journal of Quantum Chemistry [MEMBEROF]

[from 1979 to 1987]

Advisory, Editorial Board Member

Journal of Physical Chemistry [MEMBEROF]

[from 1979 to 1981]

Computer Physics Communications [MEMBEROF]

[from 1981 to 1986]

Specialist Editor for Quantum Chemistry

