

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Benjamin F. Chavis, Jr.

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## Overview of the Collection

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| <b>Repository:</b>           | The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com  |
| <b>Creator:</b>              | Chavis, Ben, 1948-  |
| <b>Title:</b>                | The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Benjamin F. Chavis, Jr.,   |
| <b>Dates:</b>                | December 20, 2004 and February 2, 2005  |
| <b>Bulk Dates:</b>           | 2004 and 2005   |
| <b>Physical Description:</b> | 9 Betacame SP videocassettes (4:24:30).   |
| <b>Abstract:</b>             | Nonprofit chief executive Benjamin F. Chavis, Jr. (1948 - ) had the distinction in 1993 of becoming the youngest person at the time to have served as executive director and CEO of the NAACP. In 1995, Chavis was appointed National Director of the Million Man March, and later was named East Coast Regional Minister of the Nation of Islam. In 2001, along with Russell Simmons, Chavis co-founded the Hip-Hop Summit Action Network. Chavis was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on December 20, 2004 and February 2, 2005, in Washington, District of Columbia. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview. |
| <b>Identification:</b>       | A2004_267   |
| <b>Language:</b>             | The interview and records are in English.   |

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Benjamin Franklin Chavis, Jr, was born on January 22, 1948, in Oxford, North Carolina. Chavis's parents were educators who taught at a school for African American orphans. Chavis's activism was in his bloodline; his grandfather, John Chavis, the first black graduate from Princeton University, set up an underground

school for African Americans who were forbidden to learn to read and write. Chavis became active in civil rights at the young age of thirteen when he attempted to integrate the all white library in his hometown; although he was ultimately unable to check out any books, he was the first African American to obtain a library card and to attempt to borrow books. Chavis graduated from Mary Potter High School in 1965 where he was a member of the football team and editor of the school newspaper. While a high school student Chavis also wrote for the local black paper, *The Carolinian*.

While a freshman at Saint Augustine College, Chavis served as a youth coordinator for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and on the advance team for Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Chavis received his B.S. degree in chemistry in 1969 from the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. That same year, Chavis was appointed Southern regional program director of the United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice (UCC-CRJ). In 1971, the UCC sent Chavis to Wilmington, North Carolina, to help desegregate the public school system. A year later Chavis and the now famed Wilmington Ten were arrested and falsely convicted of conspiracy and arson; after serving nearly a decade in prison and receiving international attention the charges were eventually overturned in 1980. While in prison Chavis wrote two books: *An American Political Prisoner* and *Psalms from Prison*.

In 1980, Chavis received his Master's of Divinity degree from Duke University and went on to earn his Doctorate of Ministry from Howard University. In 1985, Chavis was named executive director of UCC and CEO of the UCC-CRJ; in 1993 he became the youngest person to serve as executive director and CEO of the NAACP. After leaving the NAACP in 1994, Chavis served as executive director of the National African American Leadership Summit. In 1995, Chavis was appointed National Director of the *Million Man March*, one of the most successful gatherings of the 20th century. Chavis was later named East Coast Regional Minister of the Nation of Islam and organized the *Million Family March* in 2000. In 2001, along with Russell Simmons, Chavis co-founded the Hip-Hop Summit Action Network, a coalition of hip-hop artists and community leaders dedicated to fighting the war on poverty and injustice.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Benjamin F. Chavis, Jr. was conducted by Racine Tucker Hamilton on December 20, 2004 and February 2, 2005, in Washington, District of Columbia, and was recorded on 9 Betacame SP

videocassettes. Nonprofit chief executive Benjamin F. Chavis, Jr. (1948 - ) had the distinction in 1993 of becoming the youngest person at the time to have served as executive director and CEO of the NAACP. In 1995, Chavis was appointed National Director of the Million Man March, and later was named East Coast Regional Minister of the Nation of Islam. In 2001, along with Russell Simmons, Chavis co-founded the Hip-Hop Summit Action Network.

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## **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®.

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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.

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## **Controlled Access Terms**

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

### **Persons:**

Chavis, Ben, 1948-

Hamilton, Racine Tucker (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

## **Subjects:**

African Americans--Interviews  
Chavis, Ben, 1948---Interviews

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African American civil rights workers--Interviews

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Nonprofit organizations--Employees--United States--Interviews

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African American executives--Interviews

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## **Organizations:**

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

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The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

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## **Occupations:**

Nonprofit Chief Executive

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## **HistoryMakers® Category:**

CivicMakers

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## **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 Benjamin F. Chavis, Jr., December 20, 2004 and February 2, 2005. 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).

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## **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.

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## **Detailed Description of the Collection**

### **Series I: Original Interview Footage**

Video Oral History Interview with Benjamin F. Chavis, Jr., Section A2004\_267\_001\_001, TRT: 0:30:27 2004/12/20

Benjamin F. Chavis, Jr. was born on January 22, 1948 in Oxford, North Carolina. His mother, Elisabeth Ridley Chavis, married at sixteen, then attended North Carolina College for Negroes in Durham, North Carolina and taught school at the North Carolina Colored Orphanage. His father, Benjamin F. Chavis, Sr., fought in World War I and was the local scoutmaster and schoolteacher. His father's family traces its lineage to John Chavis, who fought in the Revolutionary War, was the first black

graduate of Princeton University, and founded a school to educate African Americans in contravention of the laws passed after Nat Turner's 1831 revolt. John Chavis was murdered for starting this school, and his grave was only discovered by his descendants in recent decades. Both sides of Chavis's family have owned land for generations near Oxford. He was an altar boy at St. Cyprian's Episcopal Church and often played marbles and baseball with friends during free time. His parents emphasized the importance of school.

African American civil rights workers--Interviews.

Nonprofit organizations--Employees--United States--Interviews.

African American executives--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with Benjamin F. Chavis, Jr., Section A2004\_267\_001\_002, TRT: 0:30:05 2004/12/20

Benjamin F. Chavis, Jr. grew up in Oxford, North Carolina, where many African Americans owned their own land, his family shopped at black-owned stores, tobacco was grown in large volumes, most public institutions were segregated, and a Confederate statue stood in the center of town. On Saturdays, the Chavis family would visit the Little Hayti neighborhood of Durham, North Carolina. Chavis and his three sisters attended Angier B. Duke Elementary School in Oxford, where his mother was a teacher and most of his classmates were African American orphans. He began writing editorials when he was in elementary school and developed an interest in chemistry due to his older sister's influence. Chavis became a youth member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. In 1960, he entered the segregated Richard H. Thornton Library in Oxford to protest unequal public institutions, and after he repeatedly requested an application for a library card from the librarian on duty, she called the police.

Video Oral History Interview with Benjamin F. Chavis, Jr., Section A2004\_267\_001\_003, TRT: 0:30:14 2004/12/20

Benjamin F. Chavis, Jr., at the age of twelve, integrated the Robert H. Thornton Library in Oxford, North

Carolina. Although successful in his efforts, his family was repeatedly harassed with phone calls afterwards, and he witnessed the backlash when he saw a black man beaten by police outside of a barbershop. His family sent him to stay with his sister in Lenoir, North Carolina his freshman year for fear of his safety. While there, he attended Freedman High School. Chavis returned to Oxford and entered Mary Potter High School, where he studied chemistry, wrote editorials against the Vietnam War for the Mary Potter Gazette, and graduated in 1965. He enrolled at his father's alma mater, St. Augustine's College in Raleigh, North Carolina. There, Chavis joined the Southern Christian Leadership Conference as a volunteer under Golden Frinks and served as a youth coordinator until 1968. His father, who warned his son of the dangers of civil rights activism but was proud of his accomplishments, passed away in 1965.

Video Oral History Interview with Benjamin F. Chavis, Jr., Section A2004\_267\_001\_004, TRT: 0:31:19 2004/12/20

Benjamin F. Chavis, Jr. was a youth coordinator for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in 1968 during Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s assassination; at the time of King's death, Chavis had been organizing a strike in Charlotte, North Carolina. He volunteered for Robert Kennedy's presidential campaign, then began spending time with the Black Panther Party as he considered various ways to bring about social change. Although a believer in non-violence, he found it necessary to buy a gun for his family's safety. In 1969, he completed his B.S. in chemistry at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. He began training for the ministry with the United Church of Christ, and returned to Oxford, North Carolina to lead demonstrations after the murder of Henry Marrow. While campaigning for school integration in Wilmington, North Carolina, Chavis and his compatriots were attacked by the Ku Klux Klan. After he pledged to fight back, Chavis and nine other people in the movement were arrested in 1972.

Video Oral History Interview with Benjamin F. Chavis, Jr., Section A2004\_267\_001\_005, TRT: 0:31:08 2004/12/20

Benjamin F. Chavis, Jr. founded the First African

Congregation of the Black Messiah in Wilmington, North Carolina. He was terrorized by members of the Rights of White People organization. In March 1971, Chavis and nine other members of his organization, known as the Wilmington Ten, were arrested on arson charges. They were tear gassed by prison guards and released after six months in jail when the United Church of Christ posted a \$500,000 bond. In June of 1972, Chavis's trial began with a majority black jury, but the prosecutor maneuvered so that a mistrial was declared. He survived the explosion of his car in August 1972. The Wilmington Ten began their second trial in September 1972, with a majority white jury. They were convicted of all charges, Chavis was sentenced to thirty-four years in prison, and he immediately filed a notice of appeal. He began his prison term at Central Prison in Raleigh, North Carolina, where he corresponded with Nelson Mandela and organized a peaceful protest for prisoners' rights.

Video Oral History Interview with Benjamin F. Chavis, Jr., Section A2004\_267\_002\_006, TRT: 0:30:49 2005/02/02

Benjamin F. Chavis, Jr. was sentenced to thirty-four years in prison as one of the Wilmington Ten in October 1972; he was determined to maintain his spirit despite the unjust conviction. He was incarcerated at Central Prison in Raleigh, North Carolina, where he did not enter the group showers because white prisoners planned to shank him. In December 1972, John Cutino, a prisoner, was burnt to death by white inmates and the prison caught fire, which led Chavis to stage peaceful protests for improved safety and prisoner treatment. Chavis and others occupied the prison cafeteria until allowed to see Commissioner Lee Bounds. After his release in December 1972 while his case was on appeal, Chavis was sent back to jail in 1976 when the appeal lost. He was transferred to McCain Correctional Hospital and confined among tuberculosis patients as retribution for his demands for prisoners' rights. While imprisoned, Chavis obtained his master's of divinity from Duke University in 1980 after attending classes in chains.

Video Oral History Interview with Benjamin F. Chavis, Jr., Section A2004\_267\_002\_007, TRT: 0:31:15 2005/02/02

Benjamin F. Chavis, Jr. was released from prison in 1979, and his conviction was overturned in 1980. That same year, he was appointed deputy national director for the United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice, which led to his campaign for environmental justice. In 1993, Chavis, with the support of Reginald F. Lewis, was elected executive director of the NAACP against opponents HistoryMakers Jewell Jackson McCabe and Reverend Jesse L. Jackson. He was elected on the platform of bringing more young people into the NAACP. On the job, Chavis responded to the firebombing of the Sacramento, California branch, started the Reginald F. Lewis Endowment for the NAACP, and settled a racial discrimination case with Denny's. Chavis also supported partnering with HistoryMaker The Honorable Minister Louis Farrakhan and disagreed with the decision to bar him from speaking at the 30th Anniversary March on Washington. He was let go in 1994 over allegations of sexual harassment and mismanaging the NAACP's budget.

Video Oral History Interview with Benjamin F. Chavis, Jr., Section A2004\_267\_002\_008, TRT: 0:31:02 2005/02/02

Benjamin F. Chavis, Jr. held a summit with gang leaders from across the nation to reduce gang violence in 1993, while he was executive director of the NAACP. He found an ally in his battle to reform gang members in HistoryMaker The Honorable Louis Farrakhan, but his relationship with Farrakhan caused tension with the NAACP, which ultimately fired him in 1994. Chavis founded the National African American Leadership Summit, with which he was a lead organizer for the Million Man March in October 1995. He credited the march with healing divisions caused by the O.J. Simpson trial, connecting civil rights leaders with the masses, and raising an international profile. Chavis joined the Nation of Islam in 1997. He led Muhammad Mosque Number Seven in New York, New York, organized the Million Family March in 2000, and became Minister Farrakhan's special assistant. He and HistoryMaker Russell Simmons founded the Hip-Hop Summit Action Network in 2001, which led youth voter registration efforts during the 2004

election.

Video Oral History Interview with Benjamin F. Chavis, Jr., Section  
A2004\_267\_002\_009, TRT: 0:18:11 2005/02/02

Benjamin F. Chavis, Jr., as one of the co-founders of the Hip-Hop Summit Action Network, battled efforts by the Federal Communications Commission to censor hip hop. He also helped establish guidelines for labeling explicit content along with the Recording Industry Association of America, campaigned to increase funding for public schools, and improved literacy in the African American community through the Hip-Hop Reader program. Out of the conviction that it was necessary to understand how the genre mirrors experience rather than dismiss it entirely, he pushed back against the label of hip hop culture as morally degenerative. He also believed that many positive elements within hip hop could be embraced and developed. In this part of the interview, Chavis reflects on his life, what he learned during his time in prison as a member of the Wilmington Ten, and describes how he would like to be remembered. He narrates his photographs.