

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Najwa I

---

## Overview of the Collection

<b>Repository:</b>	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
<b>Creator:</b>	Najwā
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Najwa I,
<b>Dates:</b>	December 21, 2004
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2004
<b>Physical Description:</b>	5 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:30:12).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Arts administrator and dancer Najwa I ( - ) founded the Najwa Dance Corps in Chicago. Najwa performed in Australia and New Zealand with Larry Steele through the mid-fifties, and also taught ethnic dance at the Julian Swain Dance Theatre and at Chicago's Better Boys Foundation. I was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on December 21, 2004, in Chicago, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2004_268
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

---

## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Arts administrator and dancer Najwa I was born Arnell Pugh in Clarksdale, Mississippi. Her parents, Ruby and Timothy Pugh, soon moved to Chicago where Najwa attended Medill, Smith and Howland elementary schools. As a young woman, she took dance classes at the Marcy Newberry Association in the Maxwell Street area. Under the instruction of the late Panamanian performer, Jimmy Payne, Najwa studied Afro-Cuban and Calypso dance while still in high school. She started at Farragut High School, but graduated from Harrison High School in 1954.

Soon after graduation, Najwa was approached by impresario Larry Steele's Smart Affair tour. Taking her first airplane ride, Najwa was flown to Australia, where she joined Steele's group on the road. Najwa performed in Australia and New Zealand and continued on extended international tour with Larry Steele through the mid-fifties. In her travels she learned the dance styles of different nations and peoples. Najwa performed in swing productions with icons like Duke Ellington and Count Basie. In New York City, her study of African dance was enriched by Asadata Dafora, Baba Dinizulu, Babatunde Olatunji, and Carmencita Romero. At the Cat and Fiddle Club in the Bahamas, Najwa learned to dance with fire. Performing with Julian Swain, she also taught ethnic dance at the Julian Swain Dance Theatre and at Chicago's Better Boys Foundation.

In 1977 she founded the Najwa Dance Corps in Chicago. The group presents a repertoire that spans the rituals of traditional Africa to the glamorous chorus girls of the swing era. As artistic director, Najwa is also a gifted choreographer and dance historian. The group offers classes in Dances of West Africa, Dances of the Caribbean and Dances of Contemporary African American Culture and holds public workshops, master classes, concerts, two-week residencies, and ensemble performances. The recipient of the Woman in Dance Award, the Woman of the Year Award and the African American Arts Alliance's Paul Robeson Award. The name Najwa means "one who is spiritually in tune" and because others have named daughters after her, she is now known as Najwa I.

---

## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Najwa I was conducted by Larry Crowe on December 21, 2004, in Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on 5 Betacame SP videocassettes. Arts administrator and dancer Najwa I ( - ) founded the Najwa Dance Corps in Chicago. Najwa performed in Australia and New Zealand with Larry Steele through the mid-fifties, and also taught ethnic dance at the Julian Swain Dance Theatre and at Chicago’s Better Boys Foundation.

---

## 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:

- Najwã
- Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)
- Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

### Subjects:

- African Americans--Interviews
- Najwã--Interviews
- African American dancers--Interviews
- African American dance teachers--Illinois--Chicago--Interviews
- Choreographers--Interviews

African American families--Illinois--Chicago

---

Fathers--Death--Psychological aspects

---

Migration, Internal--United States

---

Maxwell Street (Chicago, Ill.)--Ethnic relations

---

Voyages and travels--New York (State)--New York

---

Dance companies--United States

---

Dance schools--Illinois--Chicago

---

Voyages and travels--Australia

---

Dance, Black

---

Dance--Caribbean Area

---

Dance--Africa

---

Malcolm X College (Chicago, Ill.)

---

**Organizations:**

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

---

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

---

**Occupations:**

Dancer

---

Arts Administrator

---

**HistoryMakers® Category:**

ArtMakers

---

**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 Najwa I, December 21, 2004. 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 Najwa I, Section A2004\_268\_001\_001, TRT: 0:29:10 ?

Dancer and choreographer Najwa I begins by explaining her name and describing her mother and father. She details their backgrounds and personalities, and explains her life in a large family. Najwa talks about her family's frequent moves between the South and Chicago and then discusses her father's death.

African American dancers--Interviews.

African American dance teachers--Illinois--Chicago--Interviews.

Choreographers--Interviews.

African American families--Illinois--Chicago.

Fathers--Death--Psychological aspects.

Migration, Internal--United States.

Maxwell Street (Chicago, Ill.)--Ethnic relations.

Voyages and travels--New York (State)--New York.

Dance companies--United States.

Dance schools--Illinois--Chicago.

Voyages and travels--Australia.

Dance, Black.

Dance--Caribbean Area.

Dance--Africa.

Malcolm X College (Chicago, Ill.).

Video Oral History Interview with Najwa I, Section A2004\_268\_001\_002, TRT: 0:30:30 ?

Dancer and choreographer Najwa I shares memories from her childhood, including her interests and personality, and her early school life. She describes her Chicago neighborhood and the Maxwell Street Market, focusing on the ethnic diversity she observed as a child. She also recalls her early interest in dance and participating in dance performances at the Jimmy Payne School of Dance.

Video Oral History Interview with Najwa I, Section A2004\_268\_001\_003, TRT: 0:30:00 ?

Dancer and choreographer Najwa I recalls her childhood visits to Harlem and describes her impressions of New York. She speaks further of her dance career, detailing her tour of Australia as a professional dancer with Larry Steele and describing her performances and the social climate in Australia. Najwa then discusses her professional dance career in the United States, explaining the effects of being on tour. She also recalls influential dance instructors.

Video Oral History Interview with Najwa I, Section A2004\_268\_001\_004, TRT: 0:29:20 ?

Dancer and choreographer Najwa I describes her studies in African dance and Caribbean dance, and considers the increasing popularity of African dance in the United States. She then details the origins of the Najwa Dance Corps, explaining why she started the company, describing some of the innovations she incorporated, and talking about the company's signature African style.

Video Oral History Interview with Najwa I, Section A2004\_268\_001\_005, TRT: 0:31:12 ?

Dancer and choreographer Najwa I discusses the Najwa Dance Corps' philosophy, performances, and connection to Malcolm X College of Chicago. She reflects on her life and career in dance, shares her hopes and concerns for African Americans, and considers what her legacy will be.