

# Biographical Description for The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Willis Edwards

PERSON

Edwards, Willis, 1946-2012

**Alternative Names:** Willis Edwards;

**Life Dates:** January 1, 1946-July 13, 2012

**Place of Birth:** Houston, Texas, USA

**Residence:** Los Angeles, CA

**Occupations:** Civic Leader

## Biographical Note

Association chief executive Willis Franklin Earl Edwards was born in Carthage, Texas, outside of Houston, on January 1, 1946. Edwards was raised by his mother Anita Hudson Edwards and his stepfather Frank Edwards, in section fourteen of the Cahuilla Indian Reservation in Palm Springs, California. Edwards attended Nell Ann Kaufmann Junior High School and Palm Springs High School, where he graduated with a diploma in 1963. Edwards later attended California State University, Los Angeles where he became active in politics.

Edwards was a part of the campaign team for Senator Robert F. Kennedy. He was by Kennedy's side when he was assassinated in 1968. Edwards was drafted into the Vietnam War, where he was awarded a bronze star. In 1970, after returning from Vietnam, Edwards became the head of the California branch of the National Student Lobby. Thomas Bradley, the mayor of Los Angeles, California, appointed Edwards to the city's Social Service Commission in 1973. Edwards attended the Democratic National Convention, where he served on the delegate credentials committee and led the Pledge of Allegiance. Despite being endorsed by Thomas Bradley and Rev. Jesse L. Jackson., Edwards unsuccessfully ran for the California General Assembly. In 1982, Edwards was elected president of the Beverly Hills/Hollywood Branch of the NAACP. As a producer, Edwards persuaded NBC president Brandon Tartikoff to nationally televise the NAACP Image Awards show. Edwards also coordinated Nelson Mandela's visit to Los Angeles in 1992.

After being diagnosed with AIDS, Edwards briefly retreated to private life; he came out of seclusion to help civil rights legend Rosa Parks gain public recognition by attending the 1998 Oscars, sitting next to Hillary Clinton at Bill Clinton's 1999 State of the Union address and meeting with Pope John Paul II. After these events, Rosa Parks received

the Congressional Gold Medal. In 2000, Edwards also used his influence to raise over \$1 million for Parks. He later collaborated with U.S. Congresswoman Diane Watson to raise money for her successful congressional campaign. Edwards also served as the California representative to the National Board of the NAACP and was a member of the NAACP's HIV/AIDS subcommittee.

Willis Edwards was interviewed by The HistoryMakers on March 28, 2005.

Willis Edwards passed away on July 13, 2012.

## Related Entries

**Palm Springs High School** [STUDENTOF]  
[from ? to ?]

**Nell N. Kaufman Elementary School** [STUDENTOF]  
[from ? to ?]

**Nellie N. Coffman Middle School** [STUDENTOF]  
[from ? to ?]

**University of California, Los Angeles** [STUDENTOF]  
[from ? to ?]

**Robert F. Kennedy Presidential Campaign** [EMPLOYEEOF]  
[from 1968 to 1968]

**Aide**

**U.S. Army** [EMPLOYEEOF]  
[from 1968 to 1970]

**Private**

**National Association for the Advancement of Colored People** [EMPLOYEEOF]  
[from 1973 to 1985]

**President, Beverly Hills Branch**

**National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)** [MEMBEROF]  
[from ? to ?]

**Vice-President**

**National Student Lobby** [MEMBEROF]  
[from ? to ?]

**Vice President**

