

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Willis Edwards

---

## 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>	Edwards, Willis, 1946-2012
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Willis Edwards,
<b>Dates:</b>	March 28, 2005
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2005
<b>Physical Description:</b>	4 Betacame SP videocassettes (1:53:06).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Association chief executive Willis Edwards (1946 - 2012 ) served as the California representative to the National Board of the NAACP and as a member of the NAACP's HIV/AIDS subcommittee. He also helped restore civil rights pioneer Rosa Parks to the public eye. Edwards was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on March 28, 2005, in Los Angeles, California. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2005_081
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

---

## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

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.

---

## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Willis Edwards was conducted by Larry Crowe on March 28, 2005, in Los Angeles, California, and was recorded on 4 Betacame SP videocassettes. Association chief executive Willis Edwards (1946 - 2012 ) served as the California representative to the National Board of the NAACP and as a member of the NAACP's HIV/AIDS subcommittee. He also helped restore civil rights pioneer Rosa Parks to the public eye.

---

## 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:

Edwards, Willis, 1946-2012

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

### Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Edwards, Willis, 1946-2012--Interviews

---

AIDS activists--Interviews

---

African American civil rights workers--Interviews

---

## Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

---

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

---

## Occupations:

Civic Leader

---

## HistoryMakers® Category:

CivicMakers

---

## 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 Willis Edwards, March 28, 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 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 Willis Edwards, Section A2005\_081\_001\_001, TRT: 0:29:58 ?

Willis Edwards was born on January 1, 1946 in Houston, Texas. His mother, Aunita Hudson Edwards, was born in Carthage, Texas, where she was raised by her father, Levi Hudson, a deacon at the Central Baptist Church in Carthage who owned his own farm, and her mother, a schoolteacher. Edwards's mother contracted tuberculosis after he was born, so he was often cared for by his aunt, Carrie Hudson. His stepfather, Frank Edwards, was a businessman who ran a store and then a bar; Edwards only met his biological father, Will Smith, once. The family moved to Palm Springs, California for Aunita Edwards's health, and they settled on land within the Native American reservation. Edwards attended Nellie N. Coffman Junior High School, where his ninth grade teacher scorned his potential due to his race. Despite this, he became active in student government and determined to succeed. Edwards was an usher and sang in the choir at his church. He accompanied his mother to meetings of the local NAACP branch, which she had founded.

African American families--California.

Stepfathers--California.

Interracial friendship--California.

National Association for the Advancement of Colored People--Branches, chapters, etc.--California--Palm Springs.

Video Oral History Interview with Willis Edwards, Section A2005\_081\_001\_002, TRT: 0:30:04 ?

Willis Edwards met Louis Armstrong, Ella Fitzgerald and Johnny Mathis during his youth in Palm Springs, California; he also managed to see performances by sneaking onto the rooftop of the Chi Chi Lounge. Edwards and his three siblings were often watched over by Essaline Rougely, a supportive family friend who worked at Palm Springs High School, which Edwards attended; he was elected to student government, served on the NAACP youth chapter, followed politics on the radio and graduated in 1963. He entered California State University, Los Angeles, but left in 1968 to work on the presidential campaign of Robert F. Kennedy. He was six feet away when Kennedy was assassinated at the Ambassador Hotel. Edwards was drafted into the U.S. Army during the Vietnam War and served until 1970. Upon being discharged, he returned to Cal State, where he was elected student body president and became active in the National Student Lobby and veterans' causes. Edwards was a commissioner for the 1973 mayoral campaign of Tom Bradley.

Segregation--California--Palm Springs.

African American high school students--California.

National Association for the Advancement of Colored People--California.

Kennedy, Robert F., 1925-1968--Assassination.

Grier, Rosey

Vietnam War, 1961-1975--African Americans.

Chu Lai (Vietnam).

National Student Lobby.

Voting age--Law and legislation.

Video Oral History Interview with Willis Edwards, Section A2005\_081\_001\_003, TRT: 0:31:22 ?

Willis Edwards became president of the Beverly Hills Hollywood branch of the

National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1973. His role was to pressure movie studios to gain more jobs for blacks. To this end, he supported blaxploitation films that offered more opportunities for African Americans to work in production, but criticized films like 'The Color Purple' for negative representations of black men. Edwards served on the credentials committee at the Democratic National Convention in 1976 and delivered the Pledge of Allegiance after being selected by Los Angeles Mayor Tom Bradley. Edwards partnered with Maynell Thomas and Johnny Carson to push for nationally televising the NAACP Image Awards. Their first televised show went well due to the participation of Lena Horne and Bill Cosby, and the Image Awards continued to attract stars. Edwards defended giving awards to controversial performers, such as Michael Jackson, on the basis of the excellence of their work.

Democratic National Convention (1976 : New York, N.Y.).

National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

Racism in labor unions.

African Americans in the motion picture industry.

Discrimination in the motion picture industry.

Video Oral History Interview with Willis Edwards, Section A2005\_081\_001\_004, TRT: 0:21:42 ?

Willis Edwards worked with future foundation executive Sandra Evers-Manly and movie studio executive Roland McFarland on the NAACP Image Awards. After being diagnosed with AIDS, Edwards pulled away from public life until he was invited by Rosa Parks to work with the Rosa and Raymond Parks Institute for Self Development. He participated in the campaign for Parks to receive a Congressional Gold Medal, and was present when President Bill Clinton bestowed Parks's award, which was designed by HistoryMaker Artis Lane, in 1999. Edwards traveled with Parks when she met with Pope John Paul II, and approved of the 2002 biopic 'The Rosa Parks Story.' He met with Nelson Mandela during Mandela's visit to California in 1995. Edwards describes his hopes and concerns for the African American community and how he would like to be remembered. He reflects upon his life and legacy, and outlines his plans for the future, including his hopes to make movies about HistoryMaker Dorothy Height and baseball player Curt Flood.

African Americans in motion picture industry.

National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

Parks, Rosa, 1913-2005.

Highlander Folk School (Monteagle, Tenn.).

Civil rights movements--Alabama.

Mandela, Nelson, 1918-.

Flood, Curt, 1938-1997.