

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with James G. Potter

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Potter, James G., 1957-
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with James G. Potter,
Dates:	September 17, 2005
Bulk Dates:	2005
Physical Description:	8 Betacame SP videocassettes (3:38:01).
Abstract:	Corporate lawyer James G. Potter (1957 -) served as chief legal officer of Prudential Direct, a business unit of Prudential Insurance that included Prudential Bank and Trust Company. Potter also served as executive vice president, general counsel and secretary of Provident Mutual Life Insurance Company. Potter was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on September 17, 2005, in Cambridge, Massachusetts. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2005_216
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Corporate attorney James G. Potter was born August 1, 1957 in Muncie, Indiana. Orphaned with three brothers and a sister when his parents passed away, Potter was raised in Richmond, Indiana by librarian Maxine Embry. He attended Vaile Elementary School, Hibbard Junior High School and graduated from Richmond High School in 1975 as the top male student. Majoring in philosophy and behavioral science, Potter worked as a dialysis technician and graduated from the University of Chicago in 1978. In 1982, Potter graduated from Harvard Law

School.

Potter worked for the firm of Keck, Mahin and Cate of Chicago in the corporate and securities area. His clients included Morgan, Lewis and Bockius of Philadelphia. From 1989 to 1997, Potter served as chief legal officer of Prudential Direct, a business unit of Prudential Insurance that included Prudential Bank and Trust Company. In this capacity, he provided direct support in the areas of banking, corporate, finance and securities law, and managed the law departments of the Prudential subsidiaries that make up the business unit. Potter served as executive vice president, general counsel and secretary of Provident Mutual Life Insurance Company, which comprises the fifth largest share of the variable life insurance market in the United States. At Provident, Potter managed the law, compliance, and corporate secretary departments. Joining Del Monte Foods Company in 2001, Potter was appointed general counsel and secretary for the food and pet products giant. He is now the company's senior vice president and corporation counsel.

Concerned about diversity in the workplace, in 1999, Potter joined the legal counsels of 500 major U.S. corporations in signing a document entitled, "Diversity in the Workplace, A Call to Action". He is a member of the American Bar Association, the Minority Corporation Counsels and the Coalition to Promote Minority Health. He is also chairman of the steering committee of the California Minority Counsel Program.

Potter, the father of a son, Jameson, and daughter, Lauren, lives and works in San Francisco, California.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with James G. Potter was conducted by Larry Crowe on September 17, 2005, in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and was recorded on 8 Betacame SP videocassettes. Corporate lawyer James G. Potter (1957 -) served as chief legal officer of Prudential Direct, a business unit of Prudential Insurance that included Prudential Bank and Trust Company. Potter also served as executive vice president, general counsel and secretary of Provident Mutual Life Insurance Company.

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:

Potter, James G., 1957-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Burghelea, Neculai (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Potter, James G., 1957---Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Corporate Lawyer

HistoryMakers® Category:

LawMakers

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 James G. Potter, September 17, 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).

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 James G. Potter, Section
A2005_216_001_001, TRT: 0:28:58 2005/09/17

James G. Potter was born on August 1, 1957 in Muncie, Indiana. His biological mother died when he was young, and he, his two brothers and his sister were sent to an orphanage in Muncie. When he was five, Potter and his brothers were adopted by Maxine Embry Potter and James G. Potter, Sr. His adoptive mother's family moved from West Virginia to Richmond, Indiana, where she was raised by her aunt after her parents died. She attended Richmond's Earlham College for a year before becoming a librarian at Morrison-Reeves Library. His adoptive father was born in 1921 in Liberty, Indiana and gambled away his earnings as a seasonal construction worker. Potter's parents divorced when he was ten years old. He grew up in an integrated middle-class neighborhood near his sister, who was adopted by another couple in the area. He enjoyed spending time outdoors and at the Glen Miller Park zoo. As a child, Potter was most influenced by his adoptive mother and his sister's adoptive mother, whom he called Aunt Callie.

Video Oral History Interview with James G. Potter, Section
A2005_216_001_002, TRT: 0:30:47 2005/09/17

James G. Potter attended public, integrated schools in Richmond, Indiana. At Vaile Elementary School, he was generally a good student, but once was lectured and disciplined by his principal after punching another boy who called him a racial epithet. He was often the only black student in the class. His mother was related to basketball players Wayne Embry and Lenny Rhodes.

Growing up, Potter enjoyed reading, participated in wrestling and attended church regularly. In 1975, he graduated at the top of his class at Richmond Senior High School. Acting on his English teacher's advice, Potter applied to the University of Chicago and enrolled without ever visiting the campus. The school prioritized academics over athletics or social events. Potter enjoyed his studies, although he found the other students' lack of social skills a challenge. Potter also describes the historic homes of Richmond.

Video Oral History Interview with James G. Potter, Section
A2005_216_001_003, TRT: 0:29:15 2005/09/17

James G. Potter struggled to adjust to the University of Chicago as he encountered students whose cultural beliefs about respectful behavior differed from his. Ultimately, Potter enjoyed his social life. He explored Chicago, Illinois more than some of his Chicagoan classmates. Reluctant to talk in class, he never developed close relationships with his professors. Although William Julius Wilson and HistoryMaker John Hope Franklin taught at the university during his time there, Potter only had white professors. In 1978, he graduated three years early with a degree in behavioral science and a minor in philosophy. He spent a year working as a dialysis technician to overcome his fear of blood. While working at a clinic on Chicago's north side, Potter saw doctors profit from reusing equipment. In 1979, he entered Harvard Law School. When the school did not give him a room in the dormitories, he spent the first two weeks of classes living out of a U-Haul truck.

Video Oral History Interview with James G. Potter, Section
A2005_216_001_004, TRT: 0:29:43 2005/09/17

James G. Potter attended Harvard Law School in Cambridge, Massachusetts because he wanted to attend a top law school. At Harvard, he was taught by HistoryMaker Derrick A. Bell, Jr. His self-confidence protected him from the cut-throat environment of law school. He describes teaching techniques that he sees as counterproductive and damaging to future lawyers' confidence. In law school, Potter first met affluent African Americans, and was motivated to increase the number of

African Americans in the business world. He skipped his 1982 graduation ceremony. He returned to Chicago to join the law firm Keck, Mahin and Cate. He worked on Harold Washington's campaign and married Myrtle Stephens Potter, whom he had met as an undergraduate at the University of Chicago. After two years, she was offered a job in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Wesley Walton, Potter's mentor at Keck, helped him secure a position at Morgan, Lewis and Bockius, and the pair moved to Philadelphia. Potter also explains how lawyers are promoted.

Video Oral History Interview with James G. Potter, Section
A2005_216_001_005, TRT: 0:29:57 2005/09/17

James G. Potter worked at Morgan, Lewis and Bockius in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. As a corporate lawyer, he learned to negotiate and rely on his judgment of people's characters. However, he also saw many instances of lawyers compromising their professional standards when they were motivated by money. Conversations with an older partner in the firm showed Potter how the law profession used to be practiced in earlier generations. Potter reflects upon how he maintained his morals in this business, attributing it to childhood experiences such as his family recovering from bankruptcy and serving as a role model for his brothers. Because he never knew wealth as a young man, Potter was never attracted to material goods. By 1989, his classmates had all left the firm, and he noticed how unhappy the partners seemed, so Potter left Morgan, Lewis and Bockius. He recounts a few humorous stories from his time there.

Video Oral History Interview with James G. Potter, Section
A2005_216_001_006, TRT: 0:29:58 2005/09/17

James G. Potter joined The Prudential Financial Insurance Company of America in Newark in 1989. As general counsel, he worked with banking clients in Atlanta. Although undermining others was accepted in the company's culture, Potter decided to maintain his integrity while advancing his career. After Prudential sold its banks in 1997, Potter left. He joined Provident Mutual Life Insurance Company to assist in their conversion from a mutual company to a public one. During his three years there, he was impressed by the CEO's commitment to

diversity, which he demonstrated with his hiring practices. In 2000, his wife at the time, Myrtle Stephens Potter, was offered a lucrative job with the biotech company Genentech in San Francisco. Recognizing that her new position would enable them to provide for their autistic son, Jameson Potter, the family moved to California. Potter joined the Del Monte Corporation as the company prepared to acquire Heinz. He was promoted to senior vice president within his first year.

Video Oral History Interview with James G. Potter, Section
A2005_216_001_007, TRT: 0:29:14 2005/09/17

James G. Potter served as senior vice president and general counsel for Del Monte Corporation. When he joined the company, he decided to become more involved in community outreach and in advocating for workplace diversity. He joined the Minority Corporate Counsel Association and the California Minority Counsel Program to speak about the need for making law firms more committed to diversity. Concerned about the impact of the obesity epidemic on the African American community, he worked with the Coalition to Promote Minority Health. At the time of the interview, he anticipated leaving law to become more civically involved. Potter reflects upon his concerns for the African American community and his legacy. He concludes by describing his family, including his two children, Jameson Potter and Lauren Potter. He and his wife divorced in 2001. His mother, Maxine Embry Potter, still remained in Richmond, Indiana at the time of the interview.

Video Oral History Interview with James G. Potter, Section
A2005_216_001_008, TRT: 0:10:09 2005/09/17

James G. Potter attended a reunion for African American graduates of Harvard Law School in Cambridge, Massachusetts. He describes the event and how many alumni used their talents in industries outside of the law profession. In reflecting upon his life story, Potter acknowledges that many others succeeded despite even greater challenges, particularly low-income parents of children with autism. He notes how their stories of struggle and success often go unrecorded. Potter concludes by describing how he would like to be

remembered.