

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with David A. Thomas

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Thomas, David A., 1956-
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with David A. Thomas,
Dates:	September 18, 2005
Bulk Dates:	2005
Physical Description:	8 Betacame SP videocassettes (3:47:53).
Abstract:	Business professor David A. Thomas (1956 -) is the H. Naylor Fitzhugh Professor at Harvard Business School. He has published extensively on minority mentoring and career development. Thomas was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on September 18, 2005, in Cambridge, Massachusetts. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2005_217
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Harvard Business School professor David Anthony Thomas was born September 26, 1956, in Kansas City, Missouri, to working-class parents, Jesse and Jewel Thomas. Thomas attended Henry C. Kumpf Elementary School and for a year attended Manual High School. Thomas was influenced by Al Winder of Job Opportunities for Youth and by an American Field Service trip to France in 1973. Thomas graduated from Paseo High School in 1974, and with the help of Glenn de Chabert, was admitted to Yale University. President of Black Student Alliance at Yale, Thomas earned his B.A. degree in administrative sciences in 1978.

After graduation, Thomas directed Operation Get Ahead, a youth program in Long Island, New York. Assisted by future Howard University business pioneer Leroy Wells, he earned his M.A. degree in organizational sciences from Columbia University in 1981, his M.S. degree in philosophy and organizational behavior from Yale University, and a Ph.D. in organizational behavior in 1986; his dissertation focused on mentorship.

Thomas served as an assistant professor of management and business administration at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania from 1986 to 1990. Thomas joined the Harvard Business School in 1990 as an assistant professor, and eventually went on hold the positions of the H. Naylor Fitzhugh Professor, senior associate dean, and director of faculty recruiting; H. Naylor Fitzhugh was a Pepsi executive who earned the first black Harvard MBA in 1933.

Writing extensively on minority mentoring, career development and how organizations shape the racial dynamics of individuals and groups within, Thomas has been published in the *Journal of Organized Behavior* and the *Administrative Science Quarterly* among other periodicals. Having taught courses in self-assessment, career development and leadership, Thomas also lectures for the Harvard Graduate School of Education's Urban Superintendent Program and the Harvard Divinity School's Leadership Development Institute.

In 2001, Thomas received the George E. Terry Award for outstanding management book for his 1999 publication

of *Breaking Through: The Making of Minority Executives in Corporate America*. In his book, Thomas profiled minority executives to determine how people of color and the companies they work for can overcome barriers.

Thomas is professionally associated with the Academy of Management, the International Society for the Psychoanalytic Study of Organizations and National Training Laboratories.

Thomas married his high school sweetheart, with whom he lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts. They have two children.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with David A. Thomas was conducted by Larry Crowe on September 18, 2005, in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and was recorded on 8 Betacame SP videocassettes. Business professor David A. Thomas (1956 -) is the H. Naylor Fitzhugh Professor at Harvard Business School. He has published extensively on minority mentoring and career development.

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:

Thomas, David A., 1956-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Burghelea, Neculai (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews
Thomas, David A., 1956---Interviews

African American authors--Interviews

Business teachers--Interviews

Universities and colleges--Faculty--Interviews

African American educators--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

College President

Economist

HistoryMakers® Category:

BusinessMakers|EducationMakers

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 David A. Thomas, September 18, 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 David A. Thomas, Section A2005_217_001_001, TRT: 0:29:06
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David A. Thomas was born on September 26, 1956 in Kansas City, Missouri to Jewel Nichols Thomas and Jesse Thomas. His maternal grandparents, Rena Nichols and Dave Nichols, were farmers and laborers in Armstrong, Missouri. His paternal grandparents divorced, and Thomas' father was raised in Independence, Missouri with his mother, Irene Cooper, and stepfather, Israel Cooper. Thomas' mother was born in 1928 as one of twelve children. Nichols Thomas was taken in by Armstrong's schoolteacher and raised near her family. She left school at fifteen and went to live with one of her brothers in Boonville, Missouri. At sixteen, Thomas' mother wed her first husband, but the marriage was quickly annulled. She moved to Kansas City, Missouri with another brother, working there as a domestic until 1961. Thomas' father served in the U.S. Navy during World War II and the Korean War. He and his first wife lost everything in the flood of 1951 in Kansas City. Thomas' parents met through a mutual friend around 1952.

African American authors--Interviews.

Business teachers--Interviews.

Universities and colleges--Faculty--Interviews.

African American educators--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with David A. Thomas, Section A2005_217_001_002, TRT: 0:30:27
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David A. Thomas grew up in the segregated middle-class neighborhood of Oak Park in Kansas City, Missouri. He remembers pushing his older brother in a pump car, the smell of barbeque in his neighborhood, seeing women wearing afros and miniskirts, and attending St. Stephen Baptist Church with his family. Thomas played football with the children in the neighborhood and describes the popularity of African American football players and the Kansas City Chiefs in the city. Thomas attended primary school at Kansas City's Henry C. Kumpf School, where he befriended the only white family, and faced discrimination from an African American teacher until Thomas' father advocated on his behalf. In eighth grade, Thomas was bused to Manual High School for one year before attending Paseo High School. Thomas describes his parents' personalities, who he takes after, and the significance of wearing an afro as a statement of protest following the trial of Angela Davis.

Video Oral History Interview with David A. Thomas, Section A2005_217_001_003, TRT: 0:30:03
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David A. Thomas attended Paseo High School in Kansas City, Missouri. While in school, he met his future wife and worked in the city government's summer

youth programs with African American communist, Arthur Bronson. He finished high school in three years and left to study in France for a year through the American Field Service. Through reading and intellectual conversations, Thomas learned French and developed new political perspectives. With the help of his high school counselor, Thomas was admitted to Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut upon his return to the U.S. Despite being among the top students at his high school, Thomas was initially unprepared for his classes at Yale University and struggled academically, although he became an A student by his senior year. Thomas' wife attended community college, but her responsibility to her mother prevented her from graduating. Thomas cites his father, Jesse Thomas, as the first of his early mentors.

Video Oral History Interview with David A. Thomas, Section A2005_217_001_004, TRT: 0:30:28
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David A. Thomas recalls hearing Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. speak in 1963 in Kansas City and the influence of his high school mentor Allen Winder. Thomas was rejected and waitlisted four times at Yale University before being admitted through the efforts of Glenn de Chabert, the director of minority admissions. Thomas was elected to lead the Black Student Alliance at Yale six months after the formation of the competing Black Student Union. After graduation, Thomas worked as a researcher at the Teachers College at Columbia University and at Boy's Harbor running education programs on drugs and alcohol. Through Leroy Wells, Thomas became the director of Operation Get Ahead which provided group counseling to at-risk youth in Long Island, New York. Thomas applied to the Ph.D. program at Yale University but was rejected. He instead obtained a master's degree from Columbia University, then reapplied to Yale University and was accepted into the organizational behavior Ph.D. program.

Video Oral History Interview with David A. Thomas, Section A2005_217_001_005, TRT: 0:29:13
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David A. Thomas reflects upon the more supportive environments he found as a graduate student at Yale University in comparison with his undergraduate experience. Thomas studied organizational behavior and wrote his dissertation on the dynamics of race in mentoring and sponsorship within organizations. He talks about the theories he learned at Yale University, and how he applied them to his work at the Black Student Alliance at Yale and Operation Get Ahead. He explains the field of organizational behavior and its many practical uses in non-profit organizations, businesses and professional firms. Thomas was later named the H. Naylor Fitzhugh Professor of Business Administration at Harvard Business School. The position was established by Nancy Lane, Dennis Hightower, and James Cash, Jr. Thomas describes Fitzhugh's significance to the Harvard Business School and to targeted marketing through his work with PepsiCo. Thomas describes Fitzhugh's personality and his advocacy of affirmative action policies.

Video Oral History Interview with David A. Thomas, Section A2005_217_001_006, TRT: 0:29:02
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David A. Thomas taught at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania. Despite the doubts of his colleagues, part of Thomas' research at the Wharton School was published in Administrative Science Quarterly. After four years, Herminia Ibarra, a friend from Yale University, told him about a faculty opening at the Harvard Business School. The University of Michigan also asked Thomas to apply for a position. He was offered positions at both institutions. Thomas accepted an assistant professorship from Harvard Business

School, was promoted to associate professor in 1993, and became a full professor in 1999. He published multiple works on mentoring in organizations, including his dissertation and his book, 'Breaking Through,' which was co-authored with John J. Gabarro. Thomas describes his book and gives advice regarding how to avoid stagnation in one's career. Thomas talks about successful African American business leaders such as Lloyd Ward, Ann Fudge, and Kenneth Chenault.

Video Oral History Interview with David A. Thomas, Section A2005_217_001_007, TRT: 0:30:13
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David A. Thomas talks about the Sarbanes-Oxley Act of 2002 and the prevalence of unethical practices in both non-profit and for profit organizations. He also describes the trend, at the time of the interview, toward decentralization of organizations' leadership roles. From 1999, Thomas served as a full professor at Harvard Business School in Boston, Massachusetts. In this role, he worked in concert with the graduate school of Harvard University as well as the Harvard Divinity School, giving lectures and running programs such as the Summer Leadership Institute, an executive education program for ministers. He reflects upon his life, his career, and the collaboration between professors at Harvard Business School. Thomas describes his concerns regarding the widening class divide in the African American community, as well as his hope that those with access to knowledge and skills will use them for the whole community's benefit.

Video Oral History Interview with David A. Thomas, Section A2005_217_001_008, TRT: 0:19:21
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David A. Thomas and his wife have two sons and one daughter. Thomas describes the discrimination and other obstacles faced by different minority groups within business organizations, and talks about how to overcome those setbacks. He reflects upon his academic legacy in the study of race and organizations, and shares how he would like to be remembered by his family.