

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with The Honorable Melvin King

Overview of the Collection

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| Repository: | The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com |
| Creator: | King, Mel |
| Title: | The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Melvin King, |
| Dates: | December 8, 2005 and February 6, 2006 |
| Bulk Dates: | 2005 and 2006 |
| Physical Description: | 10 Betacame SP videocassettes (4:42:27). |
| Abstract: | Community activist and state representative The Honorable Melvin King (1928 - 2023) was active in the Boston community for over fifty years. He served as a Massachusetts state representative, conducted a historic run for mayor of Boston, created the Community Fellows Program (CFP) in the Department of Urban Studies and Planning at MIT, and founded several community organizations in Boston, including the South End Technology Center and The New Majority. King was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on December 8, 2005 and February 6, 2006, in Boston, Massachusetts. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview. |
| Identification: | A2005_257 |
| Language: | The interview and records are in English. |

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Across the landscape of neighborhoods and politics of Boston, Massachusetts, Melvin H. King is a household name. Simultaneously, for over fifty-five years, he was an educator, youth worker, social activist, community organizer and developer, elected politician, author, and an adjunct professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). He was responsible for creating community programs and institutions that positively changed the lives of low-income, grassroots people across the city of Boston. He was the founder and director of the South End Technology Center.

King's mother, Ursula, was born in Guyana, and his father, Watts King, in Barbados. They met and married in Nova Scotia and immigrated to Boston in the early 1920s. King, born in 1928 in Boston's South End neighborhood, was one of eight children born to the Kings between 1918 and 1938. He graduated from Boston Technical High School in 1946 and from Claflin University in Orangeburg, South Carolina in 1950 with his B.S. degree in mathematics. In 1951, he received his M.A. degree in education from Teacher's College of the City of Boston and then taught math, first at Boston Trade High School and at his alma mater, Boston Technical High School.

In 1953, King left the classroom to work with at risk youth, becoming Director of Boy's Work at Lincoln House, a settlement house in Boston's South End community. He continued his community work focusing on street corner gangs as Youth Director at United South End Settlements (USES). He also worked as a community activist and urban renewal and anti-poverty organizer. He was let go by USES when he promoted and supported neighborhood control versus USES and government control over the urban renewal and federal funds to assist poor people. King was then rehired after protests from the community over his firing and was given the job as a community

organizer. King, then founded the Community Assembly for a United South End (C.A.U.S.E.), to give tenants and community residents a voice in their communities.

In 1967, King moved to the directorship of the New Urban League of Greater Boston. He brought job training for the unemployed and organized the community around public school, employment, and human services delivery issues.

King ran three times for a seat on the Boston School Committee in 1961, 1963 and 1965, being unsuccessful each time. However, his citywide political organizing for these campaigns paid off. In 1973, he was elected as a state representative for the 9th Suffolk District and served in the Massachusetts Legislature until 1982.

In 1983, King ran for mayor of Boston and nearly beat the incumbent, Raymond Flynn. Out of this historic campaign, King established a Rainbow Coalition Party, a first for Boston and a model for the Rainbow Coalition Party created by Rev. Jesse Jackson.

In 1981, King's book, *Chain of Change: Struggles for Black Community Development*, was published by South End Press. It focused on development in housing, education, employment and politics in Boston from the 1950s through the 1970s.

In 1970, King created the Community Fellows Program (CFP) in the Department of Urban Studies and Planning at MIT. He served as an adjunct professor of Urban Studies and Planning and director of the Community Fellows Program for twenty-five years until 1996. CFP, a nine-month long program, brought community organizers and leaders from across America to reflect, research and study urban community politics, economics, social life, education, housing and media.

Upon his retirement from MIT, King established the South End Technology Center to provide computer training for low-income people.

In 2003, King created The New Majority, an organization and program uniting Boston's communities of color around candidates for elective office.

In addition to writing *Chain of Change* and journal articles, King used poetry to share his messages.

King and his wife, Joyce, married in 1951, are parents of six children.

Melvin King was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on December 8, 2005 and February 6, 2006.

Melvin King passed away on March 28, 2023 at the age of 94.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with The Honorable Melvin King was conducted by Robert Hayden on December 8, 2005 and February 6, 2006, in Boston, Massachusetts, and was recorded on 10 Betacame SP videocassettes. Community activist and state representative The Honorable Melvin King (1928 - 2023) was active in the Boston community for over fifty years. He served as a Massachusetts state representative, conducted a historic run for mayor of Boston, created the Community Fellows Program (CFP) in the Department of Urban Studies and Planning at MIT, and founded several community organizations in Boston, including the South End Technology Center and The New Majority.

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:

King, Mel

Hayden, Robert (Interviewer)

Burghelea, Neculai (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

King, Mel--Interviews

African American civic leaders--Massachusetts--Boston--Interviews

African American social workers--Massachusetts--Boston--Interviews

African American state legislators--Massachusetts--Interviews

African American college teachers--Massachusetts--Boston--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Massachusetts

Occupations:

Community Activist

State Representative

HistoryMakers® Category:

CivicMakers|PoliticalMakers

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 The Honorable Melvin King, December 8, 2005 and February 6, 2006. 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 The Honorable Melvin King, Section A2005_257_001_001, TRT: 0:30:41 ?

The Honorable Melvin King was born on October 20, 1928 in Boston, Massachusetts to Urcilla Earle King and Watts King. His maternal grandfather was Trinidadian, while his paternal grandfather was a plantation foreman in Barbados. Both King's parents grew up attending British colonial schools. At

eighteen years old, his mother moved from British Guiana to Glace Bay, Canada to find domestic work. His father was born in Barbados, and worked in the mines of Panama, Venezuela and Cuba. He eventually became a coal miner in Glace Bay, where he organized for better working conditions. An avid reader, he was also knowledgeable about British colonial history. King's parents met and married in Glace Bay, where his oldest brother, Walter King, was born. They returned to Barbados, and his oldest sister, Violet King, was born on the voyage. Later, after his family moved to Boston, King's mother helped to found the Church of All Nations. She taught King to cook and bake, and required him to clean the house on the weekends.

African American civic leaders--Massachusetts--Boston--Interviews.

African American social workers--Massachusetts--Boston--Interviews.

African American state legislators--Massachusetts--Interviews.

African American college teachers--Massachusetts--Boston--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Melvin King, Section A2005_257_001_002, TRT: 0:29:08 ?

The Honorable Melvin King's father and mother temporarily left their two children in Barbados with the extended family of King's paternal grandfather, while the couple settled in Boston, Massachusetts. His family moved to the diverse South End neighborhood of Boston in 1920; and, the next year, his second oldest brother, Everton King, was born. His father worked as a longshoreman for Domino Sugar and Revere Copper Company. Union meetings were often held at the King household, and King's father served as the secretary. King learned quickly by studying his older brother and sister's schoolwork. Although his school days were shorter during kindergarten, he often tried to return to the Andrews School after recess with the older students. King played games in the streets, and frequented the South End's ethnic bakeries. At home, his mother baked raisin and prune pies from their neighbors' unwanted welfare food, and gave doses of cod liver oil to King and his siblings each morning.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Melvin King, Section A2005_257_001_003, TRT: 0:30:48 ?

The Honorable Melvin King was subject to corporal punishment at the Andrews School in Boston, Massachusetts, but was a good student. He read newspapers like the Boston Globe and New Pittsburgh Courier; and, when his father quizzed the family on spelling, King often mastered high school level words. He attended the Quincy School for fifth and sixth grade, and then graduated to the Abraham Lincoln School, where the students were tracked into high schools. King was sent to Boston Technical High School for manual training. There, the counselors failed to give him and other African American students the career advice that was shared with white students. However, the school had an excellent athletics program, and King played baseball, football and basketball. He was offered a football scholarship to Claflin University in Orangeburg, South Carolina, and the majority Southern congregation at the Church of All Nations encouraged him to accept. However, upon arriving there, King was disappointed by the campus.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Melvin King, Section A2005_257_001_004, TRT: 0:29:50 ?

The Honorable Melvin King's older brother, Everton King, helped Jackie Robinson prepare to try out for the Boston Red Sox in 1945. King himself played baseball and football on stadium quality fields while attending Boston Technical High School, and was dismayed by the poor facilities at Claflin

University in Orangeburg, South Carolina. He recalls the town's segregated movie theaters and growing Civil Rights Movement. King majored in mathematics, and served as a physics professor's assistant. During the summers, he washed dishes on the New York, New Haven and Hartford Railroad, and visited friends in Washington, D.C. and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Upon graduating, King married his childhood sweetheart, Joyce King, and enrolled at the Boston Teachers College, where he earned a master's degree in education in 1951. He taught mathematics at Boston Trade High School and Boston Technical High School. He also worked at Cambridge Community Center and the Lincoln House, where he served as the boys' program director.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Melvin King, Section A2005_257_001_005, TRT: 0:30:33 ?

The Honorable Melvin King organized programs with the Lincoln House in Boston, Massachusetts to counter the rise of gangs and keep neighborhood youth engaged. At the settlement houses, he recreated his favorite programs from his own childhood. He also advocated for community control of federal funds, which angered the leaders of the United South End Settlements (USES), who wanted full financial authority. King was removed from his position as Lincoln House's director, but USES was forced to rehire him after the community protested his dismissal. Then, King founded the Community Assembly for a United South End (CAUSE) to advocate for the concerns of tenants and other community residents. He also organized tutoring programs to prevent African American students from leaving the schools, which had come to focus on discipline rather than education. Hoping to improve the school system, King campaigned three times for election to the Boston School Committee, without success.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Melvin King, Section A2005_257_002_006, TRT: 0:29:27 ?

The Honorable Melvin King worked at the settlement houses of Boston, Massachusetts while attending Boston Teachers College. After teaching at Boston Trade High School and Boston Technical High School, he became the boy's program director at the Lincoln House. There, King organized the local youth into football teams, which improved their behavior and lessened criminal activity. During the urban renewal of Boston, King's childhood block was redeveloped as a business area. The Boston Redevelopment Authority heard from homeowners and businesses regarding construction, but largely ignored the concerns of tenants. In response, King organized the Community Assembly for a Unified South End (CAUSE) to advocate for the construction of low income housing in redeveloped areas. In 1968, when a parking lot was to be built where there was originally housing, King organized the occupation of the lot, naming it Tent City. King also talks about Boston's successful housing cooperatives, like Inquilinos Boricuas en Accion.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Melvin King, Section A2005_257_002_007, TRT: 0:31:06 ?

The Honorable Melvin King ran for a seat on a licensing tribunal for shoe shiners and newspaper salesmen at fourteen years old, and won through word of mouth and his personal connections in Boston, Massachusetts. His next campaign for the Boston School Committee nearly two decades later was not as successful, and he lost three elections. Outside of public politics, King served as the director of the New Urban League of Greater Boston from 1967. He replaced the organization's majority white leadership, and relocated the office to the Roxbury community it served. King also publicly criticized the United Way

Worldwide for discriminating against organizations of color in their funding allocations. He was initially chastised by the National Urban League leadership, but other chapters voiced their support. King reflects upon his leadership of the New Urban League of Greater Boston, and his inspiration for the Community Fellows Program, which he helped to found at Boston's Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Melvin King, Section A2005_257_002_008, TRT: 0:30:38 ?

The Honorable Melvin King established the Community Fellows Program at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) with the support of its president, Jerome Weisner. In 1971, the program welcomed its first fellows from across the country, and provided them with access to MIT's department of urban studies and planning. In King's twenty-five years as director, he guided fellows like legislators Byron Rushing and Gloria Fox. The program was later renamed the Center for Reflective Community Practice. In 1972, King ran for the Massachusetts state legislature in an attempt to bolster social worker Hubie Jones' bid for U.S. Congress. King's campaign organized traveling meal events to introduce communities to others within King's district. Elected in 1973, King formed the Black Legislative Caucus with Massachusetts legislators Royal Bolling, Sr.; Royal Bolling, Jr.; Doris Bunte; and Bill Owens. During his legislative tenure, he focused on education, public health and environmental conservation.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Melvin King, Section A2005_257_002_009, TRT: 0:30:45 ?

The Honorable Melvin King authored legislation to create the Community Development Finance Corporation and the Community Economic Development Assistance Corporation to support neighborhood economies in Boston, Massachusetts. During his ten years as a state legislator, King advocated to establish Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, and to divest state funds from South Africa. In 1982, he published 'Chain of Change: Struggle for Black Community Development,' which garnered national recognition as a community organizing resource. The book included King's poems, one of which he recites. In 1983, King launched his mayoral campaign in Boston, but lost to Raymond Flynn. The following year, King created the South End Technology Center to ensure that all of Boston's residents had access to the internet. In 2003, he created the New Majority Coalition to unite Boston's communities of color. King reflects upon the importance of relationships in his life, particularly his marriage to Joyce King.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Melvin King, Section A2005_257_002_010, TRT: 0:09:31 ?

The Honorable Melvin King reflects upon his life and how he would like to be remembered. He concludes the interview by narrating his photographs.