

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Sharon Gist Gilliam

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Gilliam, Sharon Gist
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Sharon Gist Gilliam,
Dates:	March 8, 2006
Bulk Dates:	2006
Physical Description:	9 Betacame SP videocassettes (4:30:06).
Abstract:	Management executive and city government appointee Sharon Gist Gilliam (1943 - 2020) is the former budget director for the City of Chicago and Chairman of the Chicago Housing Authority. Gilliam was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on March 8, 2006, in Chicago, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2006_034
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Sharon Gist Gilliam was born on August 24, 1943 in Chicago, Illinois. The youngest of three siblings Gilliam was raised in the Chicago neighborhoods of West Chesterfield and Lawndale. Gilliam's parents Mr. Arthur C. Gist and Vivian M. Gist, were small business owners. She attended Burnside Elementary School and graduated from St. Mary High School in 1961. In 1965, she received her B.A. degree in history at Mundelein College. Gilliam also completed coursework in the graduate department of Public Management at DePaul University. Gilliam then became a history teacher from 1965 to 1968 in the Chicago Public School System.

Gilliam worked with the City of Chicago's Committee on Urban Opportunity in 1968 as a social planner for the poverty program. Between the years of 1973 and 1979, Gilliam became Assistant Budget Director Commissioner of Consumer Services for the City of Chicago. She then moved to Washington, D.C. and became assistant budget director for the local city government. In 1983, Gilliam relocated back to Chicago and worked as the Budget Director/Chief Operating Officer (COO) for the City of Chicago under then Mayor Harold Washington. As COO, Gilliam was responsible for policy implementation and an operating budget of \$4 billion. In 1989, Gilliam received the Marks of Excellence Award from the National Forum for Black Public Administrators.

In 1989, Gilliam also became the executive vice president of the management consulting firm of Unison-Maximus. In 1999, Mayor Richard Daley appointed Gilliam to serve as the commissioner and chairperson of the Chicago Housing Authority until July 2009.

Today, Gilliam is principal at UCG Associates, a management consulting firm. She is Chairman of the Board of the Chicago Housing Authority and serves as a board member for several organizations including Mundelein College; Illinois State Board of Education; Chicago Board of Education; and Northwestern Memorial Hospital.

Sharon Gist Gilliam was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on March 8, 2006.

Gilliam passed away on February 16, 2020.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Sharon Gist Gilliam was conducted by Julieanna L. Richardson on March 8, 2006, in Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on 9 Betacame SP videocassettes. Management executive and city government appointee Sharon Gist Gilliam (1943 - 2020) is the former budget director for the City of Chicago and Chairman of the Chicago Housing Authority.

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:

Gilliam, Sharon Gist

Richardson, Julieanna L. (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Gilliam, Sharon Gist--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Chicago (Ill.)

Occupations:

City Government Official

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 Sharon Gist Gilliam, March 8, 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 Sharon Gist Gilliam, Section A2006_034_001_001, TRT: 0:30:02 ?

Sharon Gist Gilliam was born on August 24, 1943 in Chicago, Illinois to Vivian

Montgomery Gist and Arthur Gist. The son of a landowner in Mississippi, her maternal grandfather may have passed for white to work as a railroad cook. Her maternal grandmother was born in Kentucky and moved to Chicago, a stop on the railroad, upon marrying Gilliam's grandfather. Gilliam's mother grew up in Chicago's Bronzeville neighborhood and attended the mostly white Englewood High School. Gilliam's father was born in Dallas, Texas. One of his sisters died in the flu epidemic of 1918, and his mother passed away when he was young. Gilliam's father met her mother while tutoring her for her statistics course at the Lewis Institute. He pledged Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity at Central YMCA Community College, and while her mother longed to join a sorority, she could not afford to do so. Gilliam's father owned a small business with help from his brother, an accountant. Gilliam begins the interview by narrating her photographs.

Video Oral History Interview with Sharon Gist Gilliam, Section A2006_034_001_002, TRT: 0:30:33 ?

Sharon Gist Gilliam's paternal grandfather owned small businesses, and built a two-story house without the assistance of blueprints. Gilliam's parents bought a home in a federally subsidized neighborhood in West Chesterfield, originally built for factory workers during World War II. Her uncle, William Gist, who worked at the Federal Housing Authority, moved their application to the top of the list. Gilliam caught lightning bugs outside of her home, and ate her mother's apple pie made from apple sauce. Her father bought a grocery store from a friend while working at Ford Motor Company. Gilliam attended Burnside Elementary School until the fourth grade, when the family moved into the basement behind her father's store to reduce his commute between jobs. They lived there for a year, then rented an apartment in the building upstairs. Gilliam attended William Cullen Bryant School and worked in her father's store. When the supermarket industry threatened his grocery business, her father purchased a tavern.

Video Oral History Interview with Sharon Gist Gilliam, Section A2006_034_001_003, TRT: 0:29:56 ?

Sharon Gist Gilliam grew up surrounded by Eastern European immigrants displaced by communism. She assumed that all white people were poor until her family moved to the West Side of Chicago, where she met Jewish Americans at William Cullen Bryant School. During Gilliam's childhood, the neighborhood's African American population grew rapidly. A teacher advised her to enroll at St. Mary High School in 1957 instead of the struggling neighborhood school. Gilliam was one of few African Americans in her class, and was exposed to numerous other cultures. She considered attending the University of Chicago, but ultimately decided to study at Mundelein College because of its more relaxed atmosphere. When she matriculated in 1961, Gilliam lived at home and continued to work at her father's store. To earn extra money, she secretly took a job at another grocery store and falsely told her boss that she would not return to college in the fall. However, she was eventually recognized by a delivery driver.

Video Oral History Interview with Sharon Gist Gilliam, Section A2006_034_001_004, TRT: 0:30:39 ?

Sharon Gist Gilliam studied history and secondary education at Mundelein College and graduated in 1965. After she student taught at Marshall High School and passed the Chicago Public Schools certification exam, she was offered a job teaching history at Farragut High School on the West Side of Chicago, where the community was primarily African American. Gilliam then taught at John Marshall Harlan High School to be closer to the home she shared with her sister,

Myra Gist, in West Chesterfield. Tempted by the salary increase after learning of an urban life advisor position with the Chicago Committee on Urban Opportunity, Gilliam joined the staff of the Garfield Urban Progress Center. She recalls watching the 1968 riots from within the facility. Gilliam later became a social planner with the Model Cities program, run by Erwin France. This position paid more, and involved establishing neighborhood programs like day care services at Chicago Public Schools and local health centers.

Video Oral History Interview with Sharon Gist Gilliam, Section A2006_034_001_005, TRT: 0:30:09 ?

Sharon Gist Gilliam was recruited to work at the Office of Budget and Management after representatives conducted a desk audit of the Model Cities program. In 1973, she became a federal grant coordinator under Ed Bedore, and the office's first African American professional. She married Russell Gilliam later that year. Gilliam worked as an assistant budget director until Michael Bilandic became mayor after Mayor Richard J. Daley's death. Bilandic fired Jane Byrne, the commissioner of consumer sales weights and measures, and gave her job to Gilliam. However, when Byrne was elected mayor in 1979, Gilliam lost her position. During the interview, she explains what she learned about the various departments of city government, and the difference between the budget office and the city comptroller. Gilliam later moved to Washington, D.C. to work for Mayor Marian Barry. She compares the government of a smaller city like Washington, D.C. to that of Chicago.

Video Oral History Interview with Sharon Gist Gilliam, Section A2006_034_001_006, TRT: 0:30:04 ?

Sharon Gist Gilliam returned to Chicago in 1983 to serve as the deputy budget director under David F. Schultz during Mayor Harold Washington's first term. Gilliam describes the horrendous state of the budget left by Jane Byrne. Gilliam and Schultz worked to ameliorate its problems amid the politically divisive council wars. Gilliam's duties as deputy budget director included working with Schultz to balance the 1984 budget for the City of Chicago. Schultz stepped down after a year, and Gilliam assumed the budget directorship. She was among the first African American women to serve in this post in a major city. While she faced difficulties, her knowledge of the city government was a benefit. She worked with Fred Roti, Edward M. Burke and Bernard Stone, and used these connections to her advantage. Gilliam worked closely with Mayor Washington and describes his leadership style.

Video Oral History Interview with Sharon Gist Gilliam, Section A2006_034_001_007, TRT: 0:29:21 ?

Sharon Gist Gilliam trimmed the Chicago city budget for three years to stabilize the city's finances after Mayor Jane Byrne's term. Gilliam appealed to Mayor Harold Washington to initiate a mandatory retirement age to reduce employment costs, but was ultimately unsuccessful. Her greatest challenges as budget director were funding the large police force; proper allocation of the community development block grant funding; and managing the end of the General Revenue Sharing program. Gilliam recalls Mayor Harold Washington's death and why Eugene Sawyer was chosen as acting mayor. She compares Sawyer and Washington's leadership styles. Promoted to chief operating officer (COO), Gilliam oversaw all department heads, and dealt with the fallout from Steve Cokely's anti-Semitic remarks. She compares her experiences as COO and as budget director. After Sawyer's term, Gilliam left public service, and was recruited by Anthony Drake and Judy Byrd to join their airport finance consulting firm.

Video Oral History Interview with Sharon Gist Gilliam, Section A2006_034_001_008, TRT: 0:29:49 ?

Sharon Gist Gilliam joined the airport consultancy Unison-Maximus, Inc. as chief operating officer in 1989. It was one of two minority-owned firms in the country and specialized in finance and retail. Gilliam did consulting for state and local governments and describes some of the company's milestones. In 1993, she was appointed to the Judicial Inquiry Board. In 1995, she joined the School Reform Board of Trustees, then the Illinois State Board of Education two years later, where she was the board's sole African American member. In 1999, Gilliam joined the Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) board. She explains the history of the CHA, and the tasks facing the board upon her appointment. At the time of the interview, the CHA was in the process of restoring the buildings that passed the Department of Housing and Urban Development's viability test, and redeveloping its high rise housing complexes, like Cabrini-Green Homes and Robert Taylor Homes, under the Hope VI program.

Video Oral History Interview with Sharon Gist Gilliam, Section A2006_034_001_009, TRT: 0:29:33 ?

Sharon Gist Gilliam pushed the Chicago Housing Authority to redevelop or rehabiliate its inventory of buildings while she served on the board. She also stressed the importance of providing job training and education for the residents of public housing, especially since most former public housing residents moved to a nearby area, rather than to the suburbs. Gilliam also belonged to the boards of Northwestern Memorial Hospital and the Chicago Historical Society. Outside of her organizational involvement, Gilliam spent her time working at a small startup consulting firm. She describes her hopes and concerns for the African American community and reflects upon her legacy with the Chicago Housing Authority. Gilliam reflects upon her family legacy and success in living up to her parents' expectations.