

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Gloria Rackley Blackwell

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Blackwell, Gloria, 1927-
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Gloria Rackley Blackwell,
Dates:	June 18, 2006
Bulk Dates:	2006
Physical Description:	9 Betacame SP videocassettes (4:24:42).
Abstract:	Civil rights activist and english professor Gloria Rackley Blackwell (1927 - 2010) led nonviolent demonstrations to desegregate the schools, hospitals and other public accommodations in Orangeburg, South Carolina. Blackwell was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on June 18, 2006, in Peachtree City, Georgia. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2006_094
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Educator and civil rights activist, Gloria Blackwell (Rackley) was born on March 11, 1927 in Little Rock, South Carolina. Her father, Harrison Benjamin Blackwell, was a barber and her mother, Lurline Olivia Thomas Blackwell, taught at the Little Rock Colored School. Blackwell attended Mather Academy in Camden, South Carolina, graduated from high school in Sumter, South Carolina in 1943 and then enrolled in Claflin College in Orangeburg, South Carolina. There, she was a favorite of President Randolph. Blackwell volunteered for NAACP Youth and was president of the Methodist Youth Fellowship. Leaving school to get married in 1944, Blackwell lived for a time in Chicago. She earned her B.S. degree in education from Claflin College in 1953 and taught in the segregated public schools of Orangeburg. In 1956, Blackwell obtained her M.A. degree in education from South Carolina State University, also in Orangeburg.

In the 1950s, Blackwell served as a recruiter for the Dillon County chapter of the NAACP. Visited often by Thurgood Marshall and Roy Wilkins, the Dillon County NAACP chapter made school integration their top priority. Inspired by the Brown v. the Board of Education decision, Blackwell, known to history as Gloria Rackley, began to participate and lead nonviolent demonstrations to desegregate the schools, hospitals and other public accommodations. In March of 1963, Blackwell joined more than 400 student demonstrators from Claflin College and South Carolina State University led by Charles McDew who marched to desegregate the downtown area. Supported by the community, but arrested countless times, Blackwell served time in prison and was fired from her job by white school officials in the spring of 1963. Blackwell's daughter, Lurma, an honor middle school student, was arrested some sixteen times by the time she was thirteen years old. Blackwell and her daughter missed a court date when they were arrested for using the White Ladies Only restroom in the courthouse. The civil rights activities in Orangeburg attracted national attention, including a visit from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and an invitation for Blackwell to speak to the National Teachers Union in New York City. Aply defended by Matthew Perry and encouraged by the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Blackwell accepted a job at Norfolk State University in Virginia in 1964.

At Norfolk, Blackwell served as a professor in the English Department and advised local civil rights efforts from 1964 to 1968. She was director of African American Studies at American International University from 1968 to 1970. She earned her Ph.D. in American Studies from Emory University in 1973 and went on to teach at Clark College until her retirement in 1993.

Blackwell, the mother of two grown daughters and two adopted boys, lived in Peachtree City, Georgia. She was featured along with the other heroes of the Orangeburg movement in the civil rights annals of black photographer Cecil J. Williams.

Blackwell passed away on December 7, 2010 at age 83.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Gloria Rackley Blackwell was conducted by Larry Crowe on June 18, 2006, in Peachtree City, Georgia, and was recorded on 9 Betacame SP videocassettes. Civil rights activist and english professor Gloria Rackley Blackwell (1927 - 2010) led nonviolent demonstrations to desegregate the schools, hospitals and other public accommodations in Orangeburg, South Carolina.

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:

Blackwell, Gloria, 1927-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews
Blackwell, Gloria, 1927---Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Civil Rights Activist

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 Gloria Rackley Blackwell, June 18, 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 Gloria Rackley Blackwell, Section A2006_094_001_001, TRT: 0:30:14 ?

Gloria Rackley Blackwell was born on March 11, 1927 in Little Rock, South Carolina to Lurline Thomas Blackwell and Harrison Blackwell. Her maternal great-grandmother, the daughter of an African slave and a French Huguenot, married John McDonald, an African American landowner who may have been related to Mary McLeod Bethune. John McDonald died while working on the railroad. Their daughter, Sarah McDonald Thomas, married LeGrand Thomas, a Methodist minister and circuit preacher. Rackley Blackwell's paternal great-grandmother and grandmother lived together near the parsonage in Little Rock. Her grandmother owned the property, as well as a small shop in town. Her son, Blackwell's father, owned a barber shop on Main Street that served a white clientele. Highly esteemed within the community, her father was once threatened by white men who were jealous of his success. Rackley Blackwell's parents married in 1915. She also describes her maternal family's values.

Video Oral History Interview with Gloria Rackley Blackwell, Section A2006_094_001_002, TRT: 0:30:00 ?

Gloria Rackley Blackwell's mother brought her children to the Chicago World's Fair in 1933 and the New York World's Fair in 1939. Rackley Blackwell's father was rumored to be the son of a white man in Little Rock, South Carolina, and as a child, a white friend once called Rackley Blackwell her cousin. Her father kept animals and a garden on his property, and loved his family dearly. Despite their close ties to the local church, he rarely stayed awake through services. She describes her parents' relationship, their personalities, and how she takes after her father. Rackley Blackwell had a privileged childhood because of her father's local prominence, but received no preferential treatment in the school where her mother taught. When Rackley Blackwell was twelve years old, her mother sent her to Mather Academy, a Methodist boarding school in Camden, South Carolina, where she saw Charlotte Hawkins Brown speak, and belonged to the United Methodist Youth Fellowship.

Video Oral History Interview with Gloria Rackley Blackwell, Section A2006_094_001_003, TRT: 0:29:58 ?

Gloria Rackley Blackwell often read when there was little else to do. Her mother organized card games for the local children, escaping the criticism of strict Christians due to her status in the community, where Rackley Blackwell's family owned one of the town's few telephones, and her mother helped neighbors in need. Rackley Blackwell lived with her cousin in Sumter, South Carolina while studying at Sumter High School. She recalls leaving the house without a slip, and secretly kissing her boyfriend over the fence. She graduated in 1943 at sixteen years old, and enrolled at Claflin University in Orangeburg, South Carolina. Her mother arranged for her to live with University President Joseph B. Randolph, with whom she grew close. Noticing other students' jealousy, Rackley Blackwell moved on campus. There, she married a fellow student who was about to be drafted into World War II, and she was allowed to stay on campus with President Randolph's help.

Video Oral History Interview with Gloria Rackley Blackwell, Section A2006_094_001_004, TRT: 0:29:41 ?

Gloria Rackley Blackwell left Claflin University, and followed her husband to Illinois, where they lived with her maternal great-uncle while he completed U.S. Navy basic training. Rackley Blackwell worked at a bookstore, where she read

constantly, and once became lost on her commute while engrossed in a book. The couple moved to Washington State, where she worked in a library, and her husband instructed incoming servicemen. When the war ended, they returned to South Carolina, because her husband was not permitted to work in the segregated Navy offices. In South Carolina, Rackley Blackwell's father was active in the NAACP, and her mother organized voter drives with a prominent Jewish businessman. Rackley Blackwell dedicated herself to reestablishing the NAACP's Dillon County chapter, aided in her mission of school desegregation by Thurgood Marshall and Roy Wilkins. Rackley Blackwell organized area parents; conducted peaceful protests; and was arrested on numerous occasions for her activism.

Video Oral History Interview with Gloria Rackley Blackwell, Section A2006_094_001_005, TRT: 0:29:38 ?

Gloria Rackley Blackwell worked with the NAACP to raise bail funds for school integration protestors arrested in Dillon County, South Carolina, and organized local Methodist ministers to spread the news of the Civil Rights Movement. She trained Dillon County youth in nonviolence, and ensured that students protestors were always under the care of an adult. Rackley Blackwell recalls when demonstrators were wrongfully arrested for lawlessness at a quiet, nonviolent protest, and were held over a weekend in a women's prison in Columbia, South Carolina. Rackley Blackwell also demonstrated in Charleston, South Carolina. Since the white media largely refused to cover the protests, a young local photographer sent photos to African American newspapers nationwide. Because of her role in school integration, Rackley Blackwell was fired from her teaching job in 1964, but successfully challenged her termination in court, thereby protecting other teachers from being wrongfully fired for their civil rights involvement.

Video Oral History Interview with Gloria Rackley Blackwell, Section A2006_094_001_006, TRT: 0:30:38 ?

Gloria Rackley Blackwell's older daughter, Jamelle Rackley-Riley, was admitted to Orangeburg Regional Hospital in 1961. Rackley Blackwell's insistence on sitting in the white waiting room resulted in her arrest, and her subsequent lawsuit ended segregation in the hospital. During another demonstration, her thirteen year old daughter, Lurma Rackley, was arrested, and jailed in solitary confinement for a week. On their way to her sentencing hearing, Rackley Blackwell and her daughter used a white restroom, and were both arrested. Although attorney Matthew Perry successfully appealed Rackley Blackwell's daughter's sentence, she risked being sent to reform school if she continued to protest. Rackley Blackwell's second husband lost his job at South Carolina State College because of his civil rights involvement, and accepted a job at Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University in Tallahassee, Florida. Rackley Blackwell's mother tried to discourage their activism, but her father was supportive.

Video Oral History Interview with Gloria Rackley Blackwell, Section A2006_094_001_007, TRT: 0:29:27 ?

Gloria Rackley Blackwell divorced her second husband in 1963, after he accepted a job at Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University. She remembers the civil rights events of that year, like the March on Washington, which was attended by a group of Dillon County NAACP members. Rackley Blackwell talks about the importance of publicity for a social movement, and recalls being honored in New York alongside James Baldwin for her civil rights work. Rackley Blackwell talks about those in the movement who were

particularly vulnerable, and the inaction of liberal whites. She reflects upon the benefits of the Civil Rights Movement to its participants, especially those in the Orangeburg Movement. After the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Rackley Blackwell moved to Norfolk, Virginia to teach social organizing at Norfolk State College. She continued to work for civil rights, and her daughter, Lurma Rackley, integrated an all-white school. In 1970, she left Norfolk, and pursued a Ph.D. degree at Emory University.

Video Oral History Interview with Gloria Rackley Blackwell, Section A2006_094_001_008, TRT: 0:29:48 ?

Gloria Rackley Blackwell wanted to obtain her Ph.D. degree at a school located near a strong African American community. She opted to attend Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia, where she taught classes while writing her dissertation on African American media. In 1973, she was offered a teaching position at Atlanta's Clark College, where she joined the English department, and mentored doctoral students, one of whom wrote a dissertation on Modjeska Monteith Simkins. Rackley Blackwell describes Simkins' life, and the difficulty of conducting research about African American organizations. Rackley Blackwell talks about how the Civil Rights Movement of the South was largely motivated by Christianity. She comments on the progress yet to be made in racial equality. Rackley Blackwell reflects upon her life and legacy, and talks about adopting two teenaged boys.

Video Oral History Interview with Gloria Rackley Blackwell, Section A2006_094_001_009, TRT: 0:25:18 ?

Gloria Rackley Blackwell talks about the value of preserving the life stories of everyday people. She hopes to be remembered foremost as a mother, and recalls the benefits of her own mother's strict parenting style. Rackley Blackwell describes the importance of family in child development. She concludes the interview by narrating her photographs.