

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Evelyn Cunningham

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Cunningham, Evelyn Elizabeth, 1916-2010
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Evelyn Cunningham,
Dates:	December 7, 2006
Bulk Dates:	2006
Physical Description:	6 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:56:36).
Abstract:	Civil rights activist and newspaper reporter Evelyn Cunningham (1916 - 2010) worked at the Pittsburgh Courier as a reporter and columnist for twenty-two years. Between 1964 and 1990, Cunningham was appointed to more than a dozen government commissions and served as special assistant to U.S. President Gerald Ford. Cunningham was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on December 7, 2006, in New York, New York. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2006_153
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Evelyn Elizabeth Long Cunningham was born on January 25, 1916 in Elizabeth City, North Carolina to Clyde Long and Mary Whitehurst. Cunningham's grandmother was named Ellen Whitehurst, and she worked as a reporter for the *Elizabeth City Daily News*. Cunningham's family relocated to New York City when she and her brother, Clyde, were young. Cunningham's parents decided to relocate after hearing Cunningham say that her life ambition was to pick cotton

when she grew up. Cunningham attended P.S. 9 Elementary School and P.S. 136 High School in New York City. She later attended and graduated from Hunter High School in 1934. Cunningham then attended Hunter College and transferred to Long Island University where she earned her B.A. degree in social science in 1943. She also attended Columbia University School of Journalism and the New York School of Interior Design.

Before finishing her undergraduate study, Cunningham began writing for the *Pittsburgh Courier*. She remained at the publication from 1940 to 1962 working as a reporter, columnist and editor, reporting and commentating on social issues and the Civil Rights Movement. In 1961, Cunningham started her own radio show called *At Home with Evelyn Cunningham* on WLIB Radio, where she further discussed and commentated on social and racial issues. Her first guest was Malcolm X. In 1966, she served as Jackie Robinson's executive assistant. From 1967 to 1969, Cunningham worked as special assistant of community relations to then New York Governor Nelson Rockefeller and worked as Deputy Campaign Manager for the National Rockefeller for President Committee in 1968. In 1970, Cunningham served on the Rockefeller Latin America Mission, and between 1969 and 1974, she worked as special assistant to New York Governors Rockefeller and Malcolm Wilson, and was Director of the Women's Unit for the Office of the Governor of New York. Between 1975 and 1976, Cunningham served as special assistant to U.S. President Gerald Ford, Office of Vice President Rockefeller. Between 1964 and 1990, Cunningham was appointed to more than a dozen government commissions.

Cunningham has received several awards during her career including New York City's Century Club's Women of Year Award, 1998; the Harlem Renaissance Award from the Abyssinian Development Corporation, 1998; and an honorary doctorate from the City University of New York, 1997.

Cunningham is still active today. She has been married three times and lives in New York City.

Cunningham was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on December 7, 2006.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Evelyn Cunningham was conducted by Shawn Wilson on December 7, 2006, in New York, New York, and was recorded on 6 Betacame SP videocassettes. Civil rights activist and newspaper reporter Evelyn Cunningham (1916 - 2010) worked at the Pittsburgh Courier as a reporter

and columnist for twenty-two years. Between 1964 and 1990, Cunningham was appointed to more than a dozen government commissions and served as special assistant to U.S. President Gerald Ford.

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:

Cunningham, Evelyn Elizabeth, 1916-2010

Wilson, Shawn (Interviewer)

Burghlea, Neculai (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Cunningham, Evelyn Elizabeth, 1916-2010--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Pittsburgh Courier Publishing Co.

Occupations:

Civil Rights Activist

Newspaper Reporter

HistoryMakers® Category:

CivicMakers|MediaMakers

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 Evelyn Cunningham, December 7, 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 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 Evelyn Cunningham, Section A2006_153_001_001, TRT: 0:30:19 2006/12/07

Evelyn Cunningham was born on January 25, 1916 in Elizabeth City, North Carolina to Mary Whitehurst Long and Clyde Long. Her maternal grandmother, Ellen Whitehurst, wrote for the society section of Elizabeth City's local newspaper, the Daily Advance. As a child, Cunningham was impressed to see her grandmother's name in print. Her grandmother was related to North Carolina's white governor, J.C.B. Ehringhaus, and forced him to provide equal compensation to African American and white teachers in the public schools. Cunningham's mother was a talented dressmaker, while her father owned a pool room in town, and played the piano there. Her father also brought Cunningham and her brother to watch the Wright brothers work on their airplanes in Elizabeth City. When Cunningham was about five years old, her family moved to New York City, where her father hoped

to become a famous pianist. Unable to find work in a nightclub, he initially worked as an elevator operator, and later purchased three taxi cabs.

Video Oral History Interview with Evelyn Cunningham, Section A2006_153_001_002, TRT: 0:29:30 2006/12/07

Evelyn Cunningham lived in a basement apartment near Central Park, where she often visited with her family, upon moving to New York City. They later moved to Harlem's Lenox Avenue, and then to the Sugar Hill community. In Harlem, her parents joined a bridge group, and Cunningham annually attended a summer camp, where she later worked. To support the family, her mother made dresses for wealthy white women, which Cunningham delivered. Upon her mother's instruction, Cunningham never used the service entrance. Instead, Cunningham's mother required her customers to instruct their doormen to allow Cunningham through the front door. Cunningham became interested in writing at a young age. She read several newspapers, and her favorite reporters were Heywood Broun and Westbrook Pegler. As a student at P.S. 90, she was influenced by Principal Florence Black Henderson, the mother of musician Luther Henderson. Cunningham went on to P.S. 136, before qualifying to enter the prestigious Hunter College High School.

Video Oral History Interview with Evelyn Cunningham, Section A2006_153_001_003, TRT: 0:30:05 2006/12/07

Evelyn Cunningham attended New York City's Hunter College High School. She enjoyed writing poetry and short stories, but did not participate in extracurricular activities, and was eager to graduate. Cunningham went on to study journalism at Long Island University. There, she was assigned to the basketball team due to her race, but quit to pursue fencing. She became the fencing team's captain, and won a tournament against Wagner College, who had tried to cancel after learning that Cunningham was black. Upon graduation, Cunningham was hired by Edgar Rousseau at the Pittsburgh Courier, where she soon began writing a women's interest column. Frustrated by the lack of humor in the social section, and preferring to report on controversial news stories, she requested to

cover the Civil Rights Movement in the South. There, she met Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., who once joked that she was too violent for his movement. Cunningham also explains the difficulty of covering figures like Dr. King and Thurgood Marshall.

Video Oral History Interview with Evelyn Cunningham, Section A2006_153_001_004, TRT: 0:30:04 2006/12/07

Evelyn Cunningham was welcomed into African American communities in the South while covering the Civil Rights Movement for the Pittsburgh Courier, but also experienced discrimination. On one occasion at a sit-in with Percy Sutton and other NAACP leaders, the men were arrested, and Cunningham had to wait alone for a female police officer while the diner's employees threatened her. Cunningham was refused an interview with Commissioner Bull Connor in Birmingham, Alabama, but wrote about Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., who became her close friend. Upon returning to New York City, Cunningham began hosting 'At Home with Evelyn Cunningham,' a WLIB Radio program, and interviewed Malcolm X for her first show. She was later hired by New York's Governor Nelson Rockefeller, after impressing him during an interview for the Pittsburgh Courier. Rockefeller named Cunningham the special assistant to Jackie Robinson, who had just retired from baseball, and later the head of his office of women.

Video Oral History Interview with Evelyn Cunningham, Section A2006_153_001_005, TRT: 0:29:24 2006/12/07

Evelyn Cunningham served as the head of the Office of the Governor's Women's Unit under Governor Nelson Rockefeller. Although her mission was to improve the lives of women in New York, she did not focus on the women's rights movement. Cunningham explains how the feminist movement excluded African American women, as white activists fought for rights that were still withheld from black women. She knew few black women with close white friends, although Cunningham was a friend of socialite and philanthropist Brooke Astor. Cunningham describes a few of her other white friends, as well as her admiration of politician Shirley Chisholm, whom she befriended as a young woman. Cunningham also respected

Hillary Rodham Clinton, although Cunningham was a Republican, and believed Clinton would be elected president before an African American. She concludes this part of the interview by describing the growing coverage of African American news in majority newspapers like The New York Times at the time of the interview.

Video Oral History Interview with Evelyn Cunningham, Section A2006_153_001_006, TRT: 0:27:14 2006/12/07

Evelyn Cunningham founded National Coalition of 100 Black Women after becoming frustrated with the social elitism of organizations such as The Links, Incorporated. She was active on numerous other charitable boards, including the Apollo Theater Foundation, the Citizens Committee for New York City, the New York Urban League, Jazzmobile Inc., Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, Dance Theatre of Harlem and the Studio Museum in Harlem. Cunningham also talks about the encroachment of Columbia University into the nearby Harlem neighborhood. She feuded with New York City politician Charlie B. Rangel, who failed to credit Governor Nelson Rockefeller, a Republican, with constructing the Harlem State Office Building. However, despite Cunningham's Republican Party affiliation, she was disappointed by President Richard Nixon's administration. She concludes the interview by reflecting upon the continuing need for African American newspapers; her legacy; and how she would like to be remembered.