

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Dr. Levi Watkins

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Watkins, Levi, Jr., 1944-2015
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Dr. Levi Watkins,
Dates:	February 5, 2007
Bulk Dates:	2007
Physical Description:	5 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:00:59).
Abstract:	Medical professor and cardiac surgeon Dr. Levi Watkins (1944 - 2015) was a professor of cardiac surgery and dean for Postdoctoral Programs and Faculty Development at John Hopkins University. He performed the world's first human implantation of the automatic implantable defibrillator in 1980, and established the nation's first postdoctoral association. Watkins was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on February 5, 2007, in Baltimore, Maryland. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2007_044
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Distinguished surgeon Dr. Levi Watkins, Jr., was born on June 13, 1944, in Parsons, Kansas, the third of six children; his father, Levi Watkins, Sr., was a college professor who became president of Alabama State College in Montgomery, Alabama. After graduating as valedictorian from the Alabama State Laboratory High School, Watkins entered Tennessee State University, majoring in biology and further developing his interests in political science and civil rights. After graduating with honors from Tennessee State in 1966, Watkins became the first African American to be admitted to and to graduate from Vanderbilt University's School of Medicine.

After graduating from Vanderbilt, Watkins started a general surgery residency at Johns Hopkins University Hospital in 1971, where he was the first black chief resident of cardiac surgery. Watkins continued his professional career by conducting cardiac research at the Harvard Medical School of Physiology from 1973-1975. At Harvard, Watkins investigated the relationship between congestive heart failure and the renin angiotensin system. After returning to Johns Hopkins, Watkins was a cardiothoracic surgery fellow from 1976 to 1978; he became a full-time faculty member in 1978 in the Division of Cardiac Surgery, joining the medical school admissions committee a year later.

In 1980, Watkins performed the world's first human implantation of the automatic implantable defibrillator; he also developed the cardiac arrhythmia service at Johns Hopkins. Watkins did research on coronary heart disease in African Americans through the Minority Health Commission and Panel for Coronary Artery Bypass Surgery; because of this work on behalf of minority students he was appointed to the National Board of the Robert Wood Johnson Minority Faculty Development Program in 1983.

In 1991, Watkins was promoted to full professor of cardiac surgery and dean for Postdoctoral Programs and

Faculty Development at Johns Hopkins. In these positions, Watkins revolutionized postdoctoral education in America by helping to establish the nation's first postdoctoral association. In 1992, Vanderbilt University established a Professorship and Associate Deanship in Dr. Watkins's name to honor his work for diversity in medical education.

Watkins received honorary degrees from Sojourner Douglass-College (1988), Meharry Medical College (1989), Spelman College (1996), and Morgan State University (1997); his other professional affiliations included the American Board of Surgery and the American Board of Thoracic Surgery. Watkins has been the recipient of numerous accolades over the years, including the Vanderbilt Medal of Honor (1998), the Johns Hopkins University Alumni Association Heritage Award (1999). In 2000, Watkins was honored by the Guidant Corporation for pioneering work on the automatic defibrillator.

Dr. Watkins passed away on April 11, 2015 at the age of 70.

Levi Watkins was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on February 5, 2007.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Dr. Levi Watkins was conducted by Janet Sims-Wood on February 5, 2007, in Baltimore, Maryland, and was recorded on 5 Betacame SP videocassettes. Medical professor and cardiac surgeon Dr. Levi Watkins (1944 - 2015) was a professor of cardiac surgery and dean for Postdoctoral Programs and Faculty Development at John Hopkins University. He performed the world's first human implantation of the automatic implantable defibrillator in 1980, and established the nation's first postdoctoral association.

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:

Watkins, Levi, Jr., 1944-2015

Sims-Wood, Janet (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Watkins, Levi, Jr., 1944-2015 --Interviews

Johns Hopkins University--Faculty--Interviews

Heart surgeons--Interviews

Cardiologists--Interviews

African American surgeons--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Cardiac Surgeon

HistoryMakers® Category:

MedicalMakers

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 Dr. Levi Watkins, February 5, 2007. 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 Dr. Levi Watkins, Section A2007_044_001_001, TRT: 0:28:32
?

Dr. Levi Watkins was born on June 13, 1944 in Parsons, Kansas to Lillian Varnado Watkins and Levi Watkins, Sr. Watkins' father grew up in Clarksville, Tennessee, and graduated from the Tennessee Agricultural and Industrial State College in Nashville. He later earned a doctorate from Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois. Watkins' mother was raised in Canton, Mississippi, and studied at Lane College in Jackson, Tennessee. She went on to meet and marry Watkins' father, with whom she had six children. Shortly after Watkins' birth, his family moved to Montgomery, Alabama, where his father served as the president of Alabama State College until 1981. In Montgomery, Watkins' family belonged to the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, where he was active in Reverend Martin Luther King Jr.'s Crusaders youth group. Watkins attended the Alabama State Laboratory School and the Tennessee State Agricultural and Industrial University, and then integrated Nashville's Vanderbilt University School of Medicine.

Johns Hopkins University--Faculty--Interviews.

Heart surgeons--Interviews.

Cardiologists--Interviews.

African American surgeons--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with Dr. Levi Watkins, Section A2007_044_001_002, TRT: 0:28:15
?

Dr. Levi Watkins was the first African American graduate of the Vanderbilt University School of Medicine in Nashville, Tennessee. There, he faced severe harassment; and, after the assassination of Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1968, witnessed his white peers desecrate Dr. King's portrait, which Watkins had displayed as a memorial. In 1970, Watkins began a medical internship at Johns Hopkins Medicine in Baltimore, Maryland. From 1973 to 1975, he researched heart failure treatment under A. Clifford Barger at the Harvard University School of Medicine. He then returned to Johns Hopkins Medicine to complete a heart surgery fellowship. Watkins joined the hospital's faculty in 1978; and served on the admissions committee, where he recruited African American students. He also collaborated with Dr. Michel Mirowski and Medrad,

Inc. to design an implantable cardioverter defibrillator, and placed the first device in a patient in 1980. Watkins became a full professor and dean at Johns Hopkins Medicine in 1991.

Video Oral History Interview with Dr. Levi Watkins, Section A2007_044_001_003, TRT: 0:28:47
?

Dr. Levi Watkins was a professor and cardiac surgeon at Johns Hopkins Medicine in Baltimore, Maryland. There, he was mentored by Vivien Thomas, a surgical technician whose race had prevented him from becoming a doctor; and successfully completed a triple bypass surgery on his elderly father, Levi Watkins, Sr., who passed away two years later. Watkins also served as Johns Hopkins Medicine's dean of postdoctoral affairs; and, in the early 1990s, organized the Johns Hopkins Postdoctoral Association to improve working conditions for medical fellows. He also established Johns Hopkins Medicine's Martin Luther King, Jr. Commemoration and the Unified Voices staff choir. In addition, Watkins researched healthcare inequality with Dr. David Satcher, promoted poet Maya Angelou's health equity efforts at Wake Forest University and served on the board of Bennett College with Johnnetta B. Cole. Watkins also remembers being assaulted by his white peers while studying at the Vanderbilt University of Medicine.

Video Oral History Interview with Dr. Levi Watkins, Section A2007_044_001_004, TRT: 0:29:22
?

Dr. Levi Watkins was the subject of reporter Bill Kurtis' documentary 'A Dream Fulfilled,' which aired on PBS in 1993. At the Vanderbilt University School of Medicine, he was honored with a lectureship, professorship and deanship established in his name. Watkins reflects upon his life, and his advice to aspiring medical professionals. He also describes his hopes and concerns for the African American community, his mentorship efforts and the importance of affirmative action. In addition, Watkins reflects upon his values and legacy, the role of religion in the African American community, the importance of history and how he would like to be remembered.

Video Oral History Interview with Dr. Levi Watkins, Section A2007_044_001_005, TRT: 0:06:03
?

Dr. Levi Watkins narrates his photographs.