

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Lena Williams

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Williams, Lena
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Lena Williams,
Dates:	February 8, 2007
Bulk Dates:	2007
Physical Description:	9 Betacame SP videocassettes (3:58:22).
Abstract:	Newspaper reporter Lena Williams (1950 -) was a senior writer for The New York Times. Williams was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on February 8, 2007, in Washington, District of Columbia. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2007_056
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Retired senior writer for *The New York Times*, Lena Marguerite Williams was born on March 2, 1950 in Washington, D.C. The daughter of Ralph Williams and Lena M. Adams Williams, she was raised near the Howard Theatre on T Street. She attended Cleveland Elementary School, Garnet-Patterson Junior High School and started the school newspaper at Cardozo High School where she graduated in 1968. Matriculating to Howard University, Williams served as a sports reporter for *The Hilltop* and for Howard University's radio station, WHUR-FM. She reported on Howard's historic NCAA Division I Men's Soccer Championship in 1971. Williams graduated cum laude with her B.A. degree in English in 1972 and spent that summer as an intern-reporter for *The Washington Post*. In 1973, she earned her M.S. degree from the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism.

Before joining *The New York Times*, Williams was associate editor of Allen Barron and Dick Edward's pioneering *Black Sports* magazine. She joined *The New York Times* as a clerk in the sports department in March of 1974, where she was mentored by Red Smith, Dave Anderson and Jim Tuitt. In August of 1976, she became a reporter trainee on the metropolitan desk. In 1977, Williams garnered the first of several Publishers Awards for her story on ten year old drug dealer in Harlem. That same year, *Rosario et al. v. The New York Times*, a minority employee initiated lawsuit, was settled by *The New York Times* for \$1.8 million. In 1978, she transferred to the Westchester bureau as a correspondent. From 1980 to 1981, Williams was assigned to cover the state legislature in Albany, New York. In 1986, she was transferred to Washington, D.C. to establish a new civil rights beat. There, Williams covered the NAACP, the NAACP Legal Defense Fund and the nomination struggles of Judge Clarence Thomas. Williams became a lifestyles reporter in 1998, but eventually returned to sports reporting. Retiring from *The New York Times* in 2005, she moved back to her native Washington, D.C.

Williams was a Visiting Journalist Fellow at Duke University in 1993. In 1997, she was elected vice chair and later chair of the 1,500 member, New York Times Newspaper Guild. Williams is the recipient of many awards, including the Penney-Missouri Award. The National Association of Black Journalists presented her with the 1990 Award of Excellence. Williams received the Black Achievers Award from the YMCA in 1978. She is the author of

It's The Little Things: The Everyday Interactions That Get Under The Skin of Whites and Blacks, which was published by Harcourt in 2000. The book derived from a 1997 story that appeared in *The New York Times* and was featured on ABC's 20-20.

Williams is single and lives in Washington, D.C.

Williams was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on February 8, 2007.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Lena Williams was conducted by Larry Crowe on February 8, 2007, in Washington, District of Columbia, and was recorded on 9 Betacame SP videocassettes. Newspaper reporter Lena Williams (1950 -) was a senior writer for *The New York Times*.

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:

Williams, Lena

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Williams, Lena--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

New York Times Company.

Occupations:

Newspaper Reporter

HistoryMakers® Category:

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 Lena Williams, February 8, 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 Lena Williams, Section A2007_056_001_001, TRT: 0:29:39 ?

Lena Williams was born on March 2, 1950 in Washington, D.C. to Lena Adams Williams and Ralph Williams. Williams' maternal grandfather, John Adams, came from a large family in Kentucky. When they migrated to Ohio, he moved on his own to Washington, D.C., where Williams' mother was born in 1913. There, she was raised by her father from the age of five years old, after the death of Williams' maternal grandmother, Mattie Adams; and attended Martha Washington Seminary high school. Williams' father was born in South Carolina, and moved to Newport News, Virginia with his mother, Ada Saunders, after his father's death. He attended high school in Washington, D.C., and met Williams' mother at a dance. They bonded over being the only children of single parents, and eventually had seven children, including Williams. Her father was a cook at the Willard Hotel, and her mother was a seamstress. Williams grew up in Northwest Washington, D.C., near the White House and across the street from Cleveland Elementary School.

Video Oral History Interview with Lena Williams, Section A2007_056_001_002, TRT: 0:28:10 ?

Lena Williams often visited the U.S. Capitol, Smithsonian Institution and the National Zoological Park while growing up in Washington, D.C. She also watched the Washington Senators play; saw performance by Ray Charles, Moms Mabley and Pigmeat Markham at the Howard Theatre; and attended movies at the nearby Dunbar Theater. Her father, a boxing fan, watched matches on the family's tube television, and shaved with Gillette, which sponsored the tournaments. Williams began her education at Cleveland Elementary School, although she was reluctant to start due to her mother's illness. While a student there, she had her first experience with racial discrimination at the Ringling Brothers Circus. She was also upset by the secondhand textbooks provided at her school. In 1963, Williams attended the March on Washington with her siblings, and saw the funeral procession of President John Fitzgerald Kennedy. The same year, Williams' father passed away from lung cancer.

Video Oral History Interview with Lena Williams, Section A2007_056_001_003, TRT: 0:29:56 ?

Lena Williams struggled socially at Garnet-Patterson Junior High School in Washington, D.C., but excelled when she began attending Francis L. Cardozo Senior High School in 1965. There, she was encouraged by her teachers, and was influenced by the strict discipline of the assistant principal, Miss Jackson. Williams wrote for the student newspaper, and aspired to become a fiction author. Upon graduating in 1968, Williams enrolled at Howard University, where she saw civil rights leaders like Thurgood Marshall, Stokely Carmichael and H. Rap Brown on campus. Williams majored in English; and, with the encouragement of her mother and her peers, began to write for The Hilltop student newspaper during her sophomore year. At that time, the newspaper was edited by Pearl Stewart. Williams frequently attended performances and lectures at the Cramton Auditorium, where she saw singers Smokey Robinson and Isaac Hayes. She was close friends with students Cheryl Traywick, Norma Threadgill, Richard Douglas and Cheryl Douglas.

Video Oral History Interview with Lena Williams, Section A2007_056_001_004, TRT: 0:29:44 ?

Lena Williams was a student at Howard University from the late 1960s. She studied English literature with Professor Johnson; worked with the admissions dean, Edna Calhoun; and saw performers like Roberta Flack, Herbie Hancock and Richard Pryor. They were invited to the school by trumpeter Donald Byrd, who was teaching music at the time. She also grew close to her philosophy professor, Eugene Holmes, who thanked her for voicing her classmates'

concerns about his class structure. On campus, Williams protested the Vietnam War and the imprisonment of the Chicago Seven, and her friend, Gayle Pollard, was often stopped by police because of her likeness to activist Angela Davis. Journalism professor Cato Whitley challenged Williams to interview strangers, and inspired her to question Pentagon officials about the war. Williams began to pursue sports journalism in 1971, when she covered the university soccer team's victory at the NCAA championship in The Hilltop student newspaper.

Video Oral History Interview with Lena Williams, Section A2007_056_001_005, TRT: 0:29:20 ?

Lena Williams enrolled at the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism in New York City with the encouragement of her Howard University professors, despite her reluctance to leave her mother in Washington, D.C. At the school, she was influenced by professors Luther Jackson and Judith Crist, and met journalist Charlayne Hunter-Gault, who became her mentor. Williams decided to focus on sports journalism, and met basketball players Connie Hawkins and Walt Frazier. For her master's thesis, Williams studied playground basketball in New York City. As she observed local games, Williams learned about the influence of drugs on the players, and the clout of local dealer Nicky Barnes. Upon graduation in 1973, Williams was hired to write for Black Sports magazine under editor Dick Edwards. African American athletes encouraged her work as a reporter, and often granted her access to games. However, Williams was frequently stopped by skeptical security staff on the basis of her gender despite her press credentials.

Video Oral History Interview with Lena Williams, Section A2007_056_001_006, TRT: 0:29:33 ?

Lena Williams was encouraged to apply to a clerical position in the sports department of The New York Times by reporter Charlayne Hunter-Gault. At the newspaper, Williams also worked on stories, and was mentored by sports writers like Sam Goldaper; James Tuite, who cosigned her apartment lease; and Red Smith, who once granted her entry to a previously all-male press box at Shea Stadium in Queens, New York. She was also supported by African American athletes like Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, Bobby Dandridge and Muhammad Ali. Williams was encouraged by her mentors to request a general assignment; and, in 1976, was promoted to reporter trainee. In this role, she reported on the arrest of drug dealer Nicky Barnes, and the involvement of children in the drug economy. In 1978, Williams was assigned to Westchester, New York as a suburban correspondent. Then, she was promoted to cover state politics in Albany, New York, before being reassigned to report on civil rights in Washington, D.C. under Bill Kovach and Howell Raines.

Video Oral History Interview with Lena Williams, Section A2007_056_001_007, TRT: 0:28:47 ?

Lena Williams covered civil rights for The New York Times in Washington, D.C. during President Ronald Reagan's administration. There, she met Clarence Thomas, who was head of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. Thomas felt that Williams covered him fairly despite her friendship with his predecessor, Eleanor Holmes Norton, and became Williams' personal friend. Thomas also told Williams that he was in line to be nominated for U.S. Supreme Court justice before his appointment. From 1988 to 1998, Williams wrote in The New York Times' style section. In 1997, her article, 'It's the Little Things,' about small racist actions elicited hate mail. Nevertheless, in 2000, Williams published a book that expanded on the story. Some critics wrote that the book was discriminatory, while others said it was old information. Williams was invited to speak at several universities, and was well received by students. The book was later edited and republished as a paperback.

Video Oral History Interview with Lena Williams, Section A2007_056_001_008, TRT: 0:30:22 ?

Lena Williams joined the Newspaper Guild of New York while serving on the staff of The New York Times, and became the vice chair of the union. In 1997, the union president, Thomas Keenan, fell ill, and Williams took over his position. In this capacity, she split her time evenly between reporting and union negotiations. In 2001, Williams went on tour to promote her book, 'It's the Little Things,' but remained on the staff of The New York Times as a sportswriter and union representative. In 2005, she retired from journalism to focus on her speaking engagements. She describes her plans for a book based on the conversations about race that arose at her lectures. Williams reflects upon her career at The New York Times, and how the newspaper changed during her tenure. She also describes her concerns for the African American community; her life and legacy; and how she would like to be remembered.

Video Oral History Interview with Lena Williams, Section A2007_056_001_009, TRT: 0:02:51 ?

Lena Williams narrates her photographs.