

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Gregory H. Williams

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## Overview of the Collection

<b>Repository:</b>	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
<b>Creator:</b>	Williams, Gregory Howard.
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Gregory H. Williams,
<b>Dates:</b>	May 16, 2007
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2007
<b>Physical Description:</b>	8 Betacame SP videocassettes (4:00:29).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Academic administrator and lawyer Gregory H. Williams (1943 - ) served as chair of the Commission on Access, Diversity and Excellence (CADE) of the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges. He was the president of New York City College, and the author of, "Life on the Color Line: The True Story of a White Boy Who Discovered He Was Black." Williams was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on May 16, 2007, in New York, New York. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2007_176
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Gregory Howard Williams was born on November 12, 1943 in Indiana. At the age of ten, Williams moved from Virginia to the Black housing projects of Muncie, Indiana, where he became aware of his father's African American heritage for the first time. Despite a period of confusion about his identity, he drew on his father's passion for education to give him strength during a challenging time in his life.

Williams graduated from Ball State University. He paid for school by working as a deputy sheriff often for more than forty hours a week. Williams then attended George Washington University, earning both his J.D. and Ph.D. degrees.

In 1993, Williams became the Dean of Law and Carter C. Kissell Professor of Law at The Ohio State University and managed to shift the school effectively, increasing both fund raising and national rankings. In 2001, just before Williams left Ohio State University, it became the recipient of the largest gift ever given to the university when Michael E. Moritz, a partner of the Baker and Hostettler firm, donated \$30 million to help Ohio State College of Law become a top ten law school nationally.

In 1995, Williams published *Life on the Color Line: The True Story of a White Boy Who Discovered He Was Black*, an autobiography. *The Los Angeles Times* selected it “Book of the Year,” and Williams was soon featured on television and radio, including *Dateline NBC*, *Larry King Live*, *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, *Nightline* and National Public Radio. The following year, the Gustavus Myers Center for Human Rights in North America selected *Life on the Color Line* as an Outstanding Book on the Subject of Human Rights.

In 1998, Williams was invited by President Bill Clinton to join Clinton’s “Call to Action” to promote law office diversity and pro bono work. The following year, Williams was chosen by the National Association of Public Interest Law as “Dean of the Year,” and he was awarded the National Bar Association’s A. Leon Higginbotham, Jr. Award for Contributions to the Preservation of Human and Civil Rights. In 2001, Williams became The City College of New York’s eleventh president. Under Williams, the college increased its enrollment, and maintained its diversity even under more rigorous admission standards. He successfully held the College’s first capital campaign, raising more than \$230 million. Williams serves as Chair of the Commission on Access, Diversity and Excellence (CADE) of the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges.

Williams was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on May 16, 2007.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Gregory H. Williams was conducted by Julieanna L. Richardson on May 16, 2007, in New York, New York, and was recorded on 8 Betacame SP videocassettes. Academic administrator and lawyer Gregory H. Williams (1943 - ) served as chair of the Commission on Access, Diversity and Excellence (CADE) of the National Association of State

Universities and Land-Grant Colleges. He was the president of New York City College, and the author of, "Life on the Color Line: The True Story of a White Boy Who Discovered He Was Black."

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## **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®.

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## **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.

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## **Controlled Access Terms**

This interview collection is indexed under the following controlled access subject terms.

### **Persons:**

Williams, Gregory Howard.

Richardson, Julieanna L. (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

## **Subjects:**

African Americans--Interviews  
Williams, Gregory Howard.--Interviews

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## **Organizations:**

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

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The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

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## **Occupations:**

Academic Administrator

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Lawyer

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## **HistoryMakers® Category:**

EducationMakers|LawMakers

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## **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 Gregory H. Williams, May 16, 2007. The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral

## 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).

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## 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.

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## Detailed Description of the Collection

### Series I: Original Interview Footage

Video Oral History Interview with Gregory H. Williams, Section A2007\_176\_001\_001, TRT: 0:29:32 2007/05/16

Gregory H. Williams was born on November 12, 1943 in Muncie, Indiana to Mary Williams and James Williams. His maternal family had Irish and German roots, and lived in Indiana for generations. Williams' paternal ancestors were enslaved in Virginia. His paternal grandmother worked as a domestic, and became pregnant by her white employer before moving to Indiana, where Williams' father was born. His father was passionate about education; and, although he attended a trade school, took additional classes to qualify for college. He hitchhiked to Washington, D.C. to enroll at Howard University, where he developed a close relationship with Professor Alain LeRoy Locke. Williams' father developed a drinking problem, but was nevertheless respected in the community. When his father was drafted into the U.S. Army, Williams' parents moved to Virginia, where interracial marriage was prohibited. As a result, Williams' father passed as Italian, and Williams was raised to believe

he was white.

Video Oral History Interview with Gregory H. Williams, Section  
A2007\_176\_001\_002, TRT: 0:28:45 2007/05/16

Gregory H. Williams was raised as white in the neighborhood of Gum Springs in Alexandria, Virginia. His father passed for Italian, and ran a tavern called the Open House Café. Williams' family lived in the tavern, until they purchased a house from Walter Washington, who had been his father's classmate at Howard University. In addition to the tavern, Williams' father ran a small septic tank cleaning business, and was a successful gambler. Although his family prospered financially, Williams' parents had a difficult relationship. They often fought, and Williams' father was physically abusive. At six years old, Williams was sent to attend one year of school in Indiana, where he lived with his maternal grandparents in their white neighborhood. He got along well with his grandfather and with his youngest aunt, who was in the tenth grade, but conflicted with his grandmother. He also recalls meeting his African American family throughout his childhood, although he did not know they were relatives at the time.

Video Oral History Interview with Gregory H. Williams, Section  
A2007\_176\_001\_003, TRT: 0:31:15 2007/05/16

Gregory H. Williams and his younger brother were visiting their maternal grandparents, when Williams' mother left their father, taking only Williams' youngest two siblings with her. Williams was in the fourth grade at the time. His father immediately retrieved him and his brother from Muncie, Indiana; and, from then on, fell on hard times. His father's alcoholism worsened as business at the tavern faltered, and Williams often went hungry. In 1954, his father announced their move to Muncie, where Williams expected to live with his maternal grandparents. However, on the bus ride, his father revealed their African ancestry. Williams' paternal aunt, Bess Pharris, took them into her home in Muncie, but his father's other family members harbored resentment. Williams' father enrolled him at Garfield Elementary School, and then returned to Virginia to sell the tavern. At first, Williams was bullied for his fair complexion, but eventually was accepted into

the African American community.

Video Oral History Interview with Gregory H. Williams, Section  
A2007\_176\_001\_004, TRT: 0:30:41 2007/05/16

Gregory H. Williams and his brother lived with their paternal grandmother, Sallie Higginbotham Williams, in Muncie, Indiana, after their uncle, Osco Pharris, refused to provide for them. Williams' father returned months later, and moved in as well. He and Williams' grandmother both suffered from alcoholism, and the brothers were adopted by Dora Terry Smith, who struggled to provide for them on her small salary as a domestic. Despite his alcoholism, Williams' father was involved in politics; and, in the 1930s, had been one of the first African American candidates for state senate. He encouraged Williams' education, and urged him to pursue a law degree. Williams studied hard, and excelled in history at Garfield Elementary School. His teachers were all white; and, although some encouraged him, he faced discrimination after his African American heritage was discovered. When Williams was in the tenth grade, his foster mother married, and refused to abandon Williams and his brother in spite of her husband's demands.

Video Oral History Interview with Gregory H. Williams, Section  
A2007\_176\_001\_005, TRT: 0:29:32 2007/05/16

Gregory H. Williams grew up in Muncie, Indiana's African American neighborhood, and befriended another fair-skinned boy his age. He attended Muncie Central High School, and despite warnings against interracial dating, began seeing a white classmate, whom he later married. He earned high grades, but received no guidance about college applications. He attended Ball State University while working as a deputy sheriff in Muncie from 1963 to 1966. He was the youngest person to serve in that role in the state, and one of few African American officers in Muncie. His experiences later influenced him to write the book 'The Law and Politics of Police Discretion.' During this time, Williams was subject to racial discrimination, and was once asked to not return to the Green Hills Country Club after golfing with a coworker there. After a decade apart, he was contacted by his mother. Upon his graduation from Ball State

University, Williams lived briefly with his mother, siblings and stepfather in Annandale, Virginia.

Video Oral History Interview with Gregory H. Williams, Section A2007\_176\_001\_006, TRT: 0:31:07 2007/05/16

Gregory H. Williams moved in with his mother in Annandale, Virginia after graduating from Ball State University. He and his brother, Mike Williams, were asked to pass as white, and neither stayed long. Williams taught high school while studying at the University of Maryland in College Park, and earned a master's degree in 1968. He also reconnected with his high school girlfriend, Sara Whitney Williams, whom he later married. From 1968 to 1970, Williams studied at George Washington University Law School in Washington, D.C. Upon his graduation, Williams earned a job with Indiana Senator Vance Hartke through his relationship with African American leaders in Muncie, Indiana, including state senator Patrick Chavis. While working in the U.S. Senate from 1971 to 1973, Williams met Charles B. Rangel, Augustus F. "Gus" Hawkins and John Conyers, Jr. Then, Williams served for four years as director of the GW-Washington Project, where he worked with communities of color in Washington, D.C.

Video Oral History Interview with Gregory H. Williams, Section A2007\_176\_001\_007, TRT: 0:29:37 2007/05/16

Gregory H. Williams joined the administration of the University of Iowa as the director of admissions and a tenure-tracked professor in 1977. He focused on increasing minority enrollment, and taught one semester each year. He also wrote two law books, 'The Iowa Guide to Search and Seizure' and 'The Law and Politics of Police Discretion.' Williams shared his life story with students and faculty members, who found it inspiring and encouraged him to write an autobiography. He began writing 'Life on the Color Line' while on a faculty exchange program in Europe, and completed the first draft in six weeks. In 1993, Williams was recruited to serve as a dean and law professor at The Ohio State University College of Law, a much larger and more conservative campus. He accepted the position, as there were fewer opportunities to advance at the University of Iowa. During

his eight year tenure, Williams tackled the school's severe financial issues, and 'Life on the Color Line' was published in 1995.

Video Oral History Interview with Gregory H. Williams, Section A2007\_176\_001\_008, TRT: 0:30:00 2007/05/16

Gregory H. Williams was interested in pro-bono legal service because of the lack of access to legal representation in his childhood community in Muncie, Indiana. While serving as dean of The Ohio State University College of Law, Williams convinced Michael Moritz to donate \$30 million, the largest gift ever received by the institution. In 2001, Williams was hired as president of The City College of New York. He was inspired by to the school's diversity, and hoped to make it a leading educator of lawyers of color. During his tenure, the school educated a live-in maid from Guatemala who became a chemical engineering Ph.D. candidate, and a Russian refugee who became a Rhodes Scholar. Williams accepted donations from U.S. Congressman Charles B. Rangel and General Colin L. Powell, and strengthened alumni relations. Williams describes his family, including his adopted twin sons from Honduras. He also reflects upon his life, and how he was influenced by the African American community.