Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with George R. Lewis

Overview of the Collection

Repository: The HistoryMakers®
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www.thehistorymakers.com

Creator: George R. Lewis

Title: The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with George R. Lewis,

Dates: September 7, 2007

Bulk Dates: 2007

Physical Description: 7 Betacam SP videocassettes (3:09:03).

Abstract: Corporate executive George R. Lewis (1941 - ) was President and CEO of the Philip Morris Capital Company between 1997 and 2001. Lewis was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on September 7, 2007, in Stamford, Connecticut. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.

Identification: A2007_247

Language: The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Pioneering corporate executive George Ralph Lewis was born on March 7, 1941, in Burgess, Virginia, a small Chesapeake Bay fishing village. His mother, Edith Toulson Lewis, was a homemaker, and his father, Spencer Lewis, was very enterprising and held several jobs to support his family, including working on the docks, cooking and later, starting his own business renovating homes. Expected by his parents and community to go to college, Lewis enrolled at Hampton University in Hampton, Virginia. Following his first year of college, Lewis spent the summer working for his uncle, a Philadelphia restaurant owner. Delivering food downtown, Lewis overheard businessmen talking about their deals, and he decided to pursue a career in business. Returning to school that fall, Lewis changed his major to accounting and earned his B.S. degree in 1963. Later, in 1968, he earned his M.B.A. degree from Iona College in New Rochelle, New York.

Lewis’ first major job was with General Foods Corporation as a sales analyst for the Kool-Aid division in New York. In 1966, he moved to W.R. Grace, a specialty chemical company, where he worked as a financial analyst. In 1967, Philip Morris hired Lewis as a corporate analyst, and the next year, he became a senior planning analyst. He was promoted to Manager of Industrial Relations in 1970, Manager of Financial Services in 1972 and Assistant Treasurer in 1973. In 1975, Lewis became Treasurer and Vice President of Financial & Planning for Philip Morris Industrial, a subsidiary company. In 1982, he moved to Milwaukee, Wisconsin, where he worked for a different subsidiary, the Seven-Up Company, as Vice President of Finance. After two years, Lewis returned to the parent company, Philip Morris Companies, Inc., as Vice President and Treasurer. At that time, one of the highest-ranking blacks in finance, he was in charge of Philip Morris’ worldwide treasury activities. He oversaw the company’s takeover of General Foods in 1985 and of Kraft in 1988. In 1997, Lewis became President and CEO of Philip Morris Capital Company, the finance and investment subsidiary of Philip Morris. He retired from this position in 2001.
Lewis has received numerous awards for his pioneering business achievements. Both Iona College and Hampton University have recognized him, and in 2000, he received a CNN Trumpet Tower of Power Award. In 2006, the Jackie Robinson Foundation honored him with a lifetime achievement award. He has served on the boards of several large corporations and organizations, including the Professional Golfers’ Association of America, where he became the board’s first black member in 1995.

George Lewis was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on September 7, 2007.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with George E. Lewis was conducted by Adrienne Jones on September 7, 2007, in Stamford, Connecticut, and was recorded on 7 Betacam SP videocassettes. Corporate executive George E. Lewis (1941 - ) was President and CEO of the Philip Morris Capital Company between 1997 and 2001.

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:

Lewis, George R.

Jones, Adrienne (Interviewer)

Burghelea, Neculai (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews
George R. Lewis--Interviews

African American corporate executives.

Organizations:

HistoryMakers (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Philip Morris Group of Companies

HistoryMakers® Category:

BusinessMakers

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


Processing Information

This interview collection was processed and encoded on 8/2/2011 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, September 7, 2007
George Ralph Lewis slates the interview. He was born on March 7, 1941, in Burgess, Virginia, a small Chesapeake Bay commercial fishing village. His mother, Edith Toulson Lewis was born in Northumberland County, Virginia, a rural community in Burgess. Lewis describes her as strong, determined, family-oriented, supportive and very generous. His father, Spencer Lewis, started working when he was seven years old to help support his family. Lewis describes him as the hardest working person he had ever known—noting that he worked until he was 75 years old. Spencer worked had a number of jobs, including working on the docks, cooking and later, starting his own business renovating homes. Both Edith and Spencer lived to be 91 and 92, respectively. Lewis elaborates on his father’s acquisition of land. According to Lewis, Spencer accumulated hundreds of acres in valuable land, namely, water and timberland. He also discusses his maternal and paternal grandparents briefly.

African American families—Virginia—Burgess.
African American parents—Virginia—Burgess.
African American grandparents—Virginia—Burgess.

George Lewis continues to discuss his childhood in Burgess, Virginia, which had a population of approximately 2,000. Of this number, 40% constituted Burgess’ African American demographic, and the other 60% were white. Lewis describes the conditions of black life in the segregated neighborhoods and schools—noting that his family was the first to have running water and electricity in the area and the black schools were old, dilapidated, and ill-equipped. Despite this however, Lewis states that the neighborhood in which he was bred was very supportive of the community’s youth, especially the black teachers and clergymen. He recalls how they all expected him to go Virginia Union, in Richmond, Virginia, however; in 1959, Lewis left his hometown for Hampton, Virginia, where he attended Hampton University. Lewis initially wanted to be a teacher; however, once he got to Hampton, he became fascinated with the fields of accounting and business management. Lewis also elaborates the important role his place of worship, Shiloh Baptist Church, played in his upbringing.

African American life—Poverty—Virginia—Burgess.
Segregation in education—Virginia—Burgess.
Segregation in housing—Virginia—Burgess.
African American children—Education—Virginia—Burgess.
Hampton University (Va.)
African American churches—Virginia—Burgess.

George Lewis discusses his summer work experience, selling sandwiches and sodas in Philadelphia’s downtown corporations, after his first year at Hampton. He enjoyed hearing the businessmen talk about the work they were doing. He also noticed the dearth of African Americans in these corporations—a reality that inspired his enterprising spirit. Lewis recalls a number of corporations that visited Hampton to recruit African American students, the first of which was Sun Oil Company, who hired its first black accountant in 1962. By 1963, the year Lewis graduated, more companies began recruiting Hampton students,
including, General Foods, Pepsi, and DuPont. Lewis attributes the increased interest in black students to the Civil rights movement, affirmative action and the growth of black consumers. After graduating with his B.S. in accounting, Lewis worked for General Foods in White Plains, New York, where he was the first African American in a financial position. Deciding he wanted to be a senior executive, Lewis enrolled in a MBA program at New York University. He also talks about the important role his wife, Lillian Glen Lewis, played in helping him maneuver corporate America. Lewis goes on to discuss the various companies that began to recruit African Americans, particularly Philip Morris, Incorporated, where he was offered a position in strategic planning in 1967.

George Lewis discusses his family life during his tenure at Philip Morris. More specifically, Lewis reflects on the challenge of balancing his efforts to climb the corporate ladder with family time. He credits his wife, Lillian, with keeping the family grounded and caring for their two daughters, Tonya and Tracy. Lewis spends a great deal of time talking about his experiences and advancement within corporate America. Though ultimately interested in being the CFO at Philip Morris, Lewis worked in several capacities with the company. He worked in investor relations, treasury and finance departments. Lewis goes on to discuss his love of golf, its cathartic qualities, and the challenge African Americans encountered in gaining access to country clubs on the east coast in the 1970s. While in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, where he worked as Senior Vice President of finance for Philip Morris, Lewis mentions the much earlier integration of Milwaukee’s country clubs. Lewis also discusses his position with Philip Morris, Incorporated’s subsidiary company, Seven-Up Company, as Vice President of Finance. After two years, Lewis returned to the parent company, Philip Morris Companies, Inc., in New York.

George Lewis continues to discuss his return to Philip Morris Companies Inc. in 1984. There, he served as the Corporate Vice President and Treasurer of the company. In this position, Lewis was in charge of all of Philip Morris
Company Inc.'s world-wide treasury activities and was able to arrange $50-60 billion in financing and acquisition. Lewis also talks about the discrimination he experienced joining golf country clubs in New York. He eventually gained membership in the St. Andrew’s Golf Club in Yonkers, New York, making him one of the first African American to integrate golf clubs in the New York area. He goes on to elaborate on the history of race relations in the Professional Golf Association of America (PGA) and the impact golfer Tiger Woods made on the industry. Lewis also discusses golf’s importance to the corporate business world. He then returns to his ascent to power at Phillip Morris as CEO and as a member of their management committee.

Philip Morris Incorporated.
African American corporate executives.
St. Andrew's Golf Club (Yonkers, N.Y.)
Professional Golfers' Association of America--Race relations.
Woods, Tiger--Influence.

George Lewis discusses the litigation against Philip Morris and the company’s success in defending their business interest. He also talks about his retirement, accolades and his role as a board member for Wachovia Corporation and his alma mater, Hampton University. Lewis mentions other African American corporate executives, including Earl Graves, founder of Black Enterprise; Ann Fudge of Kraft Foods and Dick Parsons of Time Warner. He goes on to assess the progress of African Americans within corporate America—noting that it is not quite a level playing field yet and corporations still need to be pressured to diversify their companies. Lewis also discusses his children and grandchildren. His daughter, Tonya, who was a corporate attorney, was actively engaged in Philip Morris’ litigation proceedings. She is also the wife of filmmaker Spike Lee, who Lewis describes as a wonderful son-in-law. Lewis’ youngest daughter, Tracy, resides in Chicago, Illinois.

Philip Morris Incorporated--Trials, litigation, etc.
African American corporate executives.
Graves, Earl G., 1935-.
Parsons, Richard D., 1948-
Lee, Spike.
Lee, Tonya Lewis.

George Lewis briefly discusses whether African American corporate executives will ever receive the kind of public profile reserved for entertainers. He then narrates photographs on this tape.