

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Bishop Imogene Stewart

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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>	Stewart, Imogene Bigham, 1942-2012
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Bishop Imogene Stewart,
<b>Dates:</b>	April 28, 2008 and January 30, 2008
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2008
<b>Physical Description:</b>	7 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:46:45).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Civil rights activist and pastor Bishop Imogene Stewart (1942 - 2012 ) founded the House of Imogene Shelter and Women's Center in Washington, D.C. She became the pastor of the Greater Pearly Gates Baptist Church. Stewart was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on April 28, 2008 and January 30, 2008, in Washington, District of Columbia. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2008_002
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Social activist, pastor and founder of the Washington, D.C. based House of Imogene Shelter and Women's Center Bishop Imogene Bigham Stewart was born on January 23, 1942 in Dublin, Georgia.

Stewart arrived in Washington, D.C. in 1963 to participate in the March on Washington for jobs and freedom. After the march, she became ill and never returned home to Georgia. In the mid-1960s, Stewart was homeless and survived by living in Washington, D.C.'s Lincoln Park. She eventually found a job at the

Government Printing Office where she worked full-time. Although she was gainfully employed, Stewart never forgot the hardships she faced as a homeless person and was inspired to open her own shelter. She managed to set aside time to organize volunteers and found boarder rooms to house thirty homeless people. Stewart then gained the interest of the late Mayor Walter E. Washington with her plans of opening a shelter, and with a meager budget, she was able to purchase property for the opening of the House of Imogene Shelter and Women's Center in 1972. That same year, Stewart earned her A.A. degree from the University of the District of Columbia.

The House of Imogene is the first Washington, D.C. based shelter founded by an African American woman. It is comprised of two satellite centers: a shelter for battered women and children, and a shelter that provides temporary housing for homeless veterans and their families.

Stewart went on to become the pastor of the Greater Pearly Gates Baptist Church. She also worked as a radio personality for WOL radio in Washington, D.C. In 1992, Stewart was honored with the prestigious Living Dream Award for her service to battered women and the homeless. In 1993, Stewart served as the National Chaplain for the American Legion Auxiliary and as the director of the United States Department of Veteran Affairs.

Stewart was interviewed by the *HistoryMakers* on January 30, 2008.

Stewart passed away on May 30, 2012.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Bishop Imogene Stewart was conducted by Larry Crowe on April 28, 2008 and January 30, 2008, in Washington, District of Columbia, and was recorded on 7 Betacame SP videocassettes. Civil rights activist and pastor Bishop Imogene Stewart (1942 - 2012 ) founded the House of Imogene Shelter and Women's Center in Washington, D.C. She became the pastor of the Greater Pearly Gates Baptist Church.

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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:**

Stewart, Imogene Bigham, 1942-2012

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

### **Subjects:**

African Americans--Interviews

Stewart, Imogene Bigham, 1942-2012--Interviews

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## **Organizations:**

## **Occupations:**

Civil Rights Activist

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Pastor

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## **HistoryMakers® Category:**

CivicMakers|ReligionMakers

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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 Bishop Imagene Stewart, April 28, 2008 and January 30, 2008. 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).

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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 Bishop Imogene Stewart, Section A2008\_002\_001\_001, TRT: 0:29:40 2008/04/28

Bishop Imogene Stewart was born on September 23, 1942 in Dublin, Georgia to Mattie Watkins Bigham and J.C. Bigham. Her mother was born to Freida Watkins in Dudley, Georgia, where she worked as a domestic and had two daughters with a white man. Stewart's father, J.C. Bigham, was born in Tennille, Georgia, and met Stewart's mother while preaching at a church in Dublin. He had five children from a prior marriage, whom Stewart never met. She and her father often faced discrimination for their darker skin; and her father frequently beat her mother, who was very fair. Stewart attended Dublin's Oconee High School for one year, before becoming pregnant by a man in the choir at her father's church. After the birth of her son, Michael Johnson, Stewart appeared before the church to repent; and her second son, Jeffrey Johnson, was born less than a year later. Stewart's father then absconded with his mistress, who was a member of his congregation.

Video Oral History Interview with Bishop Imogene Stewart, Section A2008\_002\_001\_002, TRT: 0:28:20 2008/04/28

Bishop Imogene Stewart grew up in the H.T. Jones Village, a public housing development in Dublin, Georgia. She witnessed her father's physical abuse of her mother throughout her childhood, and believed it was because her mother's older children appeared white. Stewart's father preached at a circuit of churches near their home in Dublin, where his primary congregation worshipped at the Laurens Hill Baptist Church. There, the community held

large gatherings with food and singing. On the weekends, Stewart picked cotton with the community's teenagers and adults, and drank corn liquor with them when the work was complete. She attended Dublin's Susie Dasher Elementary School and Oconee High School; and joined the local NAACP branch, which was directed by Ruth W. Harvey. At fourteen years old, she became pregnant and was forced to leave school, but her mother insisted that she attend night classes. Stewart was also barred from the NAACP because of her pregnancy, and decided to join the SCLC instead.

Video Oral History Interview with Bishop Imagene Stewart, Section A2008\_002\_001\_003, TRT: 0:28:40 2008/04/28

Bishop Imagene Stewart joined the SCLC chapter in Dublin, Georgia soon after meeting its president, James Holder. She wrote a letter to Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who encouraged her to attend SCLC's Citizenship Education Program in McIntosh, Georgia, where she was taught by activists Septima Poinsette Clark and Dorothy Cotton. Upon her return to Dublin, Stewart began picketing at the Belk Matthews Company store; and, on numerous occasions, was bailed out of jail by her mother's white employer, Earl Hilburn. After several months, the protests were covered by reporters from Macon, Georgia, and the store was integrated. Stewart remained in Georgia, washing dishes at a Veterans Administration facility, until hearing about the plans for the March on Washington. She then took a bus to Washington, D.C. to participate. Later in life, Stewart was active in the Republican Party, and often clashed with other civil rights advocates over her political views.

Video Oral History Interview with Bishop Imagene Stewart, Section A2008\_002\_001\_004, TRT: 0:28:50 2008/04/28

Bishop Imagene Stewart took a bus from Dublin, Georgia to participate in the March on Washington in 1963. During the demonstration, she saw activist Fannie Lou Hamer, and listened to several speakers among the crowd, including actor Charlton Heston. Stewart then decided to move to Washington, D.C. She slept in Lincoln Park, and began working at Howard Johnson's restaurant, where she met politician Hubert Humphrey and Washington, D.C.

Mayor Walter Washington. She was then hired to work in Washington's mayoral office, and enrolled at the Washington Technical Institute. Stewart eventually bought a home on P Street, and decided to open a women's shelter. Soon after, she appeared on Carol Randolph-Jasmine's 'Harambee' talk show, where she rallied support for her plan; and then established the House of Imogene Shelter and Women's Center, where she housed and fed the homeless and abused women of Washington, D.C. Stewart also studied at the Wesley Theological Seminary, and befriended theologian James H. Cone.

Video Oral History Interview with Bishop Imogene Stewart, Section A2008\_002\_001\_005, TRT: 0:29:10 2008/04/28

Bishop Imogene Stewart felt that she was called to help the vulnerable after her experiences of homelessness and abuse. She was ordained as a Baptist minister; and, in 1972, opened the House of Imogene Shelter and Women's Center in Washington, D.C. She had an open door policy; and, because she accepted abused women, often received threats from their partners. She initially provided counseling at the shelter, but eventually partnered with the Howard University Hospital. Stewart's organization was supported by President George Walker Bush and statesman Colin L. Powell, and remained open at the time of the interview. While running the shelter, Stewart worked for the U.S. Government Printing Office, and as a substitute teacher. She also established the Ebony Women's Society, a support group for teenage mothers. Stewart talks about her sons, Michael Johnson and Jeffery Johnson, both of whom were raised by Stewart's mother, Mattie Watkins Bigham, and joined the U.S. Air Force.

Video Oral History Interview with Bishop Imogene Stewart, Section A2008\_002\_001\_006, TRT: 0:18:10 2008/04/28

Bishop Imogene Stewart participated in the Civil Rights Movement, and witnessed the commitment of white activists. She became a proponent of integrated politics, although she also joined Frances Rice's National Black Republican Association, an identity-based group. In her role as a Baptist minister, Stewart founded and ran the Pearly Gate Baptist Mission in Washington, D.C. She usually preached on the street, and used the church facility

to provide food and clothing to those in need. Stewart describes her hopes and concerns for the African American community; and talks about domestic violence, including her work on behalf of the victims. Stewart received several awards for her service to the community of Washington, D.C., including the Living the Dream Award from Mayor Sharon Pratt in 1992. Stewart also describes her family, and how she would like to be remembered.

Video Oral History Interview with Bishop Imagene Stewart, Section A2008\_002\_002\_007, TRT: 0:03:55 2008/01/30

Bishop Imagene Stewart narrates her photographs.