

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

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Williams, Rufus, 1956-
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Rufus Williams,
Dates:	February 22, 2008
Bulk Dates:	2008
Physical Description:	7 Betacame SP videocassettes (3:21:16).
Abstract:	Accountant, education chief executive, and financial chief executive Rufus Williams (1956 -) was the president of the Chicago Board of Education. Williams founded his own company, Olympus LLC, which provides business management, contract negotiations and career development sources for its clients, after working as a certified public account at Arthur Anderson & Company and as senior manager at Harpo Studios. Williams was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on February 22, 2008, in Chicago, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2008_025
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Accountant and Chicago Board of Education President Rufus Williams, Jr. was born on December 30, 1956 in Chicago, Illinois to Dicye Belle and Rufus Williams, Sr. Williams was raised in a household of six children in the North Lawndale and West Garfield Park communities on Chicago's Westside. During his childhood, he attended Crown Elementary School and Dvorak Elementary School before graduating from Morton Upper Grade Center. In 1974, he graduated from Orr High School where he was a member of the school's basketball team.

Without the finances to pay for a higher education, Williams postponed his plans of attending college to work at a fast food restaurant. He eventually earned enough money, received a scholarship and with the help of his parents, enrolled at Southern University in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. In 1978, he graduated magna cum laude with his B.S. degree in accounting in 1978. Williams was then hired as a certified public accountant for Arthur Anderson & Company. He worked there until 1988 when he became the corporate audit manager for the Baxter Healthcare Corporation. Williams later went on to work for Harpo Entertainment Group as a senior manager. There, he was instrumental in establishing the operational structure and financial management of Harpo Studios. Oprah Winfrey then encouraged him to follow his dreams of becoming an entrepreneur. In 2000, Williams founded Olympus LLC and began providing business management, contract negotiations and career development sources. His clients consisted of a variety of entertainers and athletes including veteran baseball player Gary Sheffield.

Williams was appointed to the Chicago Public School (CPS) Board in 2005 and served on the board of trustees of the CPS Teachers Pension and Retirement Fund before succeeding Michael Scott as the school board president in 2006. As president, Williams has helped to form the Charitable Fund for Inner-City Athletic Equipment, a fund that provides athletic shoes to CPS student athletes from low income families. In 2007, Williams launched Real Men Read which was designed to encourage a love of literacy in young boys, while encouraging long lasting

school-community partnerships.

In addition to serving as president for the Better Boys Foundation, Williams has served as Vice Chairman and Treasurer of the Board of Trustees of Providence-St. Mel School and as the president of the Local School Council of Whitney M. Young Magnet High School.

Williams was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on February 22, 2008.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Rufus Williams was conducted by Larry Crowe on February 22, 2008, in Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on 7 Betacame SP videocassettes. Accountant, education chief executive, and financial chief executive Rufus Williams (1956 -) was the president of the Chicago Board of Education. Williams founded his own company, Olympus LLC, which provides business management, contract negotiations and career development sources for its clients, after working as a certified public account at Arthur Anderson & Company and as senior manager at Harpo Studios.

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, Rufus, 1956-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews
Williams, Rufus, 1956- --Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Accountant

Civic Leader

HistoryMakers® Category:

BusinessMakers|CivicMakers

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 Rufus Williams, February 22, 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 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 Rufus Williams, Section A2008_025_001_001, TRT: 0:28:30 ?

Rufus Williams was born on December 30, 1956 in Chicago, Illinois. His mother, Dicye Ward Williams, the daughter of sharecroppers in Mangham, Louisiana, migrated north to Chicago in 1949, while her siblings settled in Detroit, Michigan and Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Williams' father, Rufus Williams Sr., worked in agriculture in Rayville, Louisiana until his migration to Chicago in 1950. He married Williams' mother and began working for Sun Chemical. The Williams family moved from East Garfield Park to North Lawndale and finally to the West Garfield neighborhood in 1967. Being the fifth of six children, Williams learned to read and write early on, and remembers, at four years old, being disappointed that he had to wait a year to start kindergarten. He recalls his mother's meals, playing outside with the other neighborhood children, visiting Louisiana and his exposure to the Almighty Vice Lord Nation's gang activities as a child.

Video Oral History Interview with Rufus Williams, Section A2008_025_001_002, TRT: 0:29:11 ?

Rufus Williams briefly attended Sol R. Crown Elementary School in Chicago, Illinois before moving to the newly opened Anton Dvorak Elementary School. There, Williams completed second and third grade simultaneously and was influenced by its principal, HistoryMaker Barbara A. Sizemore, and his second-grade teacher. He attended Morton Upper Grade Center from sixth to eighth grade. In 1966, he met Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. while walking home from the Boys Brotherhood Republic and was impressed by the emerging Black Panthers. Williams later began high school at Albert Grannis Lane Technical High School, where he stayed for a year before transferring to Orr Academy High School and graduating in 1974. The Williams family attended Garfield Park Missionary Baptist Church in Chicago. Williams remembers the fashion styles of the 1960s and 1970s, his experience with segregation while visiting Louisiana and the 1968 Chicago Riots. He describes his changing religious views after his sister's suicide in 1977.

Video Oral History Interview with Rufus Williams, Section A2008_025_001_003, TRT: 0:30:14 ?

Rufus Williams attended Morton Upper Grade Center in Chicago, Illinois. Although he did not make the basketball team or become student council president in eighth grade as hoped, he learned about honor and preparation. In 1970, he enrolled at Albert Grannis Lane Technical High School, but transferred to Orr Academy High School after a difficult freshman year. At Orr, Williams made good grades and the basketball team, which, coupled with his dreams of attending the University of California, Los Angeles to play college basketball, kept him away from gang activity in his neighborhood on the West Side of Chicago. By graduation in 1974, he had been recruited to play basketball for Lake Forest College in Lake Forest, Illinois on a partial scholarship, but was unable to attend when his parents were unable to afford the difference. Williams describes his siblings' educational backgrounds and the events of his sister's suicide in 1977. He remembers being robbed at gunpoint while working at Burger King in high school.

Video Oral History Interview with Rufus Williams, Section A2008_025_001_004, TRT: 0:28:52 ?

Rufus Williams enrolled at Wilbur Wright Junior College in Chicago, Illinois, taking the advice of his trusted former history teacher from Orr Academy High School, who also suggested he apply to historically black colleges and

universities. Williams applied to Grambling State University in Louisiana where two of his sisters had attended, and their rival school, Southern University and Agricultural and Mechanical College in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Williams' parents were able to help pay his freshman year tuition, and he chose Southern when they accepted him first, matriculating in 1974. After his first year, he was awarded an academic scholarship from the Better Boys Foundation through A.G. Becker & Company in Chicago, which funded his next three years at Southern. Williams played intermural basketball, joined Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity and became an economics major at Southern. He describes advice which made him successful at Southern and the benefits of attending an HBCU.

Video Oral History Interview with Rufus Williams, Section A2008_025_001_005, TRT: 0:29:43 ?

Rufus Williams graduated in December of 1978 from Southern University and Agricultural and Mechanical College in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. He immediately joined the accounting firm of Arthur Andersen and Co. in Chicago, Illinois where he went through a rigorous training process. Over the next ten years, he slowly climbed the corporate ladder, beginning as an inexperienced assistant and leaving as audit manager. He performed well and received above-average evaluations during his time at Andersen, but was given assignments in areas known for their racism and denied timely promotions. He finally left in 1988 for Baxter Healthcare Corporation in Deerfield, Illinois. In 1990, Williams moved to the Lincoln Park neighborhood of Chicago and was invited to work at Oprah Winfrey's Harpo Studios, Inc. as vice president controller. In 1985, after serving as treasurer for many years, Williams became the president of the Better Boys Foundation, which was the same group who helped him obtain a scholarship for college.

Video Oral History Interview with Rufus Williams, Section A2008_025_001_006, TRT: 0:29:39 ?

Rufus Williams joined Harpo Studios, Inc. in Chicago, Illinois in 1990 where he worked closely with Oprah Winfrey to start the Oprah Winfrey Foundation. After starting as vice president controller, Williams eventually became the chief financial officer and vice president of strategic planning at Harpo. In late 1991, he was asked to return to Baxter Healthcare Corporation in the position of his former boss, but he declined after speaking with Oprah. Williams had the opportunity to pursue his interest in entrepreneurship and wealth management when he met Deleon Richards Sheffield, the wife of major league baseball player Gary Sheffield, in 1999. The Sheffields needed a money manager, which led Williams to leave Harpo in 2000 to start his own wealth management firm for athletes and entertainers called Olympus LLC. Williams remembers his experience at Harpo, helping Gary Sheffield negotiate his baseball contract and the events leading up to his appointment as president of the Chicago Board of Education in 2006.

Video Oral History Interview with Rufus Williams, Section A2008_025_001_007, TRT: 0:25:07 ?

Rufus Williams became Chicago Board of Education president in 2006. During his tenure, he began programs such as Real Men Read and invited Bill Cosby to speak at the Power of Parents conference in 2006. He describes his goal of providing children with positive role models and making sure every child succeeds. He talks about the ways in which the education system can improve, the challenges he faces in his role and the achievements of former Chicago Board of Education presidents, HistoryMakers The Honorable Kenneth Smith, Sr. and Michael Scott, Sr. Williams remembers a conversation with HistoryMaker Barbara A. Sizemore, his former principal at Anton Dvorak Elementary School in Chicago, Illinois. He considers how long he might remain in his current role as board of education president, reflects upon his life and

legacy and describes how he would like to be remembered.