

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Cheryl Blackwell Bryson

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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>	Bryson, Cheryl Blackwell, 1950-
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Cheryl Blackwell Bryson,
<b>Dates:</b>	November 20, 2008
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2008
<b>Physical Description:</b>	8 Betacame SP videocassettes (3:29:41).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Corporate lawyer Cheryl Blackwell Bryson (1950 - 2012 ) was a partner at the law firm of Duane Morris LLP, and served as the Deputy Corporation Counsel for the City of Chicago Law Department, where she directed contract administration and collective bargaining for the city's 35,000 unionized employees. Bryson was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on November 20, 2008, in Chicago, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2008_138
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Corporate lawyer Cheryl Blackwell Bryson was born on May 28, 1950 in Baltimore, Maryland to Connie Blackwell and Clarence D. Blackwell. Bryson received her B.S. degree from Morgan State University, graduating magna cum laude in 1972. In 1977, Bryson received her J.D. degree from Ohio State University, College of Law. She was the associate editor of Ohio State University's Law Journal in 1976.

From 1976 to 1980, Bryson worked as a labor law associate for the law firm Friedman & Koven. She was then an associate at Katten, Muchin & Zavis, in Chicago, Illinois from 1980 through 1989. Bryson also worked as the Deputy Corporation Counsel for the City of Chicago Law Department where she established the Labor Relations Division and directed contract administration and collective bargaining for the city's 35,000 unionized employees. From 1989 to 1992, Bryson was a partner at the law firm of Bell, Boyd & Lloyd, in Chicago. She was a partner at Rivkin, Radler & Kremer from 1992 to 1995 and at Holleb & Coff from 1995 to 1999. Since 1999, Bryson was a partner at Duane Morris LLP where she was head of the Chicago office's Employment Law and Management Labor Relations Practice and a former member of the firm's board of managers. A frequent author and lecturer on labor and employment law issues, Bryson was a member of the Labor and Employment Law Section of the American Bar Association, the Labor and Employment Law Committee of the Chicago Bar Association and the Cook County Bar Association. She successfully defended both public and private sector employers from unfair labor practice charges and directed employer's strike planning when a union threatened to strike. Bryson also successfully defended a major bank before the Chicago Commission on Human Relations against claims of sexual discrimination. She counseled a client in the securities industry on efforts to coach senior executives on effective management strategies, reductions in force, workforce restructuring and litigation avoidance.

Bryson served on numerous boards as an advisor and trustee including The DuSable Museum of African-American History, The Neighborhood Institute Development Corporation, and the Cook County Economic Development

Advisory Committee. In addition, Bryson was part of Illinois Governor Rod Blagojevich's transition team. She was the recipient of numerous awards including the Hermann Sweatt Award from the National Bar Association in 2007.

Bryson passed away on January 20, 2012 at age 61.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Cheryl Blackwell Bryson was conducted by Larry Crowe on November 20, 2008, in Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on 8 Betacame SP videocassettes. Corporate lawyer Cheryl Blackwell Bryson (1950 - 2012 ) was a partner at the law firm of Duane Morris LLP, and served as the Deputy Corporation Counsel for the City of Chicago Law Department, where she directed contract administration and collective bargaining for the city's 35,000 unionized employees.

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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:

Bryson, Cheryl Blackwell, 1950-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

### Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Bryson, Cheryl Blackwell, 1950- --Interviews

## Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

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The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

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## Occupations:

Corporate Lawyer

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## HistoryMakers® Category:

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 Cheryl Blackwell Bryson, November 20, 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).

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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 Cheryl Blackwell Bryson, Section A2008\_138\_001\_001, TRT:

0:29:02 ?

Cheryl Blackwell Bryson was born on May 28, 1950 in Baltimore, Maryland to Connie McCreary Blackwell and Clarence Blackwell, Sr. Her maternal family had roots in Beatrice, Alabama, a town founded by Scots-Irish slaveholders who raised children with their African American slaves. As a result, many of her relatives were able to pass for white. In Alabama, Blackwell Bryson's maternal great-great grandfather, John McClammy Griggs, Sr., worked as an overseer, and was also loaned as a servant to the Griggs family. His descendants included Blackwell Bryson's maternal great-aunt, Florida McClammy Pierce, whose branch of the family fled from Alabama to Chicago, Illinois, fearing a violent reprisal after a young cousin whistled at a white woman. In Chicago, Blackwell Bryson's relatives included Harold Pierce, who founded Harold's Chicken Shack. The rest of Blackwell Bryson's maternal family remained in Alabama; where, in 1994, her uncle, Thad McClammy, Jr., was elected to the Alabama House of Representatives.

Video Oral History Interview with Cheryl Blackwell Bryson, Section A2008\_138\_001\_002, TRT: 0:28:37 ?

Cheryl Blackwell Bryson's paternal great-grandmother, Ketty Carpenter Blackwell, was the enslaved daughter of a white plantation owner in Virginia. After emancipation, she was held captive until being rescued by her son, Reginald Blackwell. Blackwell Bryson's paternal great-grandfather, David Blackwell, inherited the family's land in Virginia, and his descendants eventually left to find work in the steel industry of Baltimore, Maryland. There, Blackwell Bryson's father, Clarence Blackwell, Sr., graduated from Frederick Douglass High School before enlisting in the U.S. military during World War II. He was stationed briefly in Mobile, Alabama, where he met Blackwell Bryson's mother, Connie McCreary Blackwell, who was working as a riveter at an airplane plant. They married; and, after he returned from the war, raised six children in Baltimore. There, Blackwell Bryson's father studied at Morgan State College and secured a promotion at the steel mill, which enabled him to purchase a home in East Baltimore.

Video Oral History Interview with Cheryl Blackwell Bryson, Section A2008\_138\_001\_003, TRT: 0:30:32 ?

Cheryl Blackwell Bryson grew up in East Baltimore, Maryland. Her neighborhood was initially integrated, but eventually became all-black. During this time, African Americans were barred from the Ritz Theatre and many downtown restaurants, and risked reprisals for speaking to white acquaintances in public. Blackwell Bryson began her education at Baltimore's Elmer A. Henderson School, where African American explorer Matthew Henson once gave a lecture. She participated in an experimental summer program for gifted students, where she experienced integrated education for the first time, and faced discrimination from her white teacher. She went on to attend Baltimore's Clifton Park Junior High School, and participated in the March on Washington in 1963. Blackwell Bryson continued to face racial discrimination at the majority-white Eastern High School, an all-girls school where the black students were excluded from the college counseling program. She also remembers the influence of her father's high expectations.

Video Oral History Interview with Cheryl Blackwell Bryson, Section A2008\_138\_001\_004, TRT: 0:29:11 ?

Cheryl Blackwell Bryson attended Eastern High School, a majority-white preparatory school for girls in Baltimore, Maryland. There, she experienced frequent discrimination, and was denied college counseling because of her race.

During her senior year of high school in 1968, Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated. She remembers the riots that followed Dr. King's death, and their impact on the African American community in Baltimore. Blackwell Bryson matriculated at Baltimore's Morgan State College, where she became a leader of the civil rights activities on campus. After graduating in the early 1970s, Blackwell Bryson enrolled in the experimental psychology graduate program at The Ohio State University in Columbus, Ohio, where she studied under Professor Harvey Shulman. She eventually transferred to The Ohio State University College of Law. Blackwell Bryson also talks about her experiences of discrimination in graduate school, where professors sometimes assigned lower grades on the basis of race.

Video Oral History Interview with Cheryl Blackwell Bryson, Section A2008\_138\_001\_005, TRT: 0:28:41 ?

Cheryl Blackwell Bryson completed her graduate education at The Ohio State University in Columbus, Ohio, where she initially studied experimental psychology. After her second year, she transferred to The Ohio State University College of Law. There, he was discouraged from pursuing a position as a summer associate, and worked as a department store cashier after her first year. During her second year, Blackwell Bryson became the first black woman to serve as an editor of the Ohio State Law Journal. She secured a summer position at the firm of Friedman and Koven in Chicago, Illinois, where she accepted a full time position as an employment attorney after earning her law degree in 1977. Three years later, Blackwell Bryson joined the firm of Katten Muchin and Zavis, where she became the first African American female partner. She served as deputy corporation counsel for the City of Chicago from 1986 to 1989, and then returned to the private sector at the firm of Bell Boyd and Lloyd LLP.

Video Oral History Interview with Cheryl Blackwell Bryson, Section A2008\_138\_001\_006, TRT: 0:29:57 ?

Cheryl Blackwell Bryson worked at the Katten Muchin and Zavis law firm in Chicago, Illinois, where nearly all her colleagues were white men. She was instrumental in the creation of a maternity leave policy, and was the first African American female associate to become partner, although she was initially passed over in favor of a black attorney from outside the firm. Blackwell Bryson left in 1986 to work for Chicago Mayor Harold Washington. She returned to the private sector in 1989, and worked at a number of firms while seeking fair compensation. She had extensive connections and a large clientele, and was often among her firm's top 5% of income generators. Then, from 2000 to 2003, Blackwell Bryson experienced the deaths of seven family members, including her husband, James Bryson; and eldest son, Bradley Bryson. Due to the stress of these losses and her hardworking lifestyle, Blackwell Bryson began experiencing severe pain, and was diagnosed with a number of congenital and degenerative spinal conditions.

Video Oral History Interview with Cheryl Blackwell Bryson, Section A2008\_138\_001\_007, TRT: 0:27:09 ?

Cheryl Blackwell Bryson's spinal conditions became debilitating after the death of her mother, Connie McCreary Blackwell. She consulted a number of doctors, but was dissatisfied with their treatment options. When Blackwell Bryson's son, Blake Bryson, graduated from high school, she organized a celebratory trip to Jamaica, where she visited Jackies on the Reef, a holistic spa. There, spa owner Jackie Lewis introduced Blackwell Bryson to alternative medicine, and influenced Blackwell Bryson's decision to change her lifestyle to treat her disability. She talks about her exercise regime and her manuscript on alternative

treatments for back pain, as well as her hopes and concerns for the African American community. Blackwell Bryson reflects upon her life, legacy and how she would like to be remembered. She also talks about the legacy of her father, Clarence Blackwell, Sr., who often helped the homeless and needy residents in his hometown of Baltimore, Maryland.

Video Oral History Interview with Cheryl Blackwell Bryson, Section A2008\_138\_001\_008, TRT: 0:06:32 ?

Cheryl Blackwell Bryson narrates her photographs.