

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Cleo F. Wilson

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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>	Wilson, Cleo
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Cleo F. Wilson,
<b>Dates:</b>	August 25, 2010
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2010
<b>Physical Description:</b>	5 uncompressed MOV digital video files (2:29:05).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Nonprofit administrator and foundation executive Cleo F. Wilson (1943 - ) served with the Playboy Foundation for twenty-five years, and was advocate of civil rights, HIV/AIDS awareness and the arts. Wilson was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on August 25, 2010, in Chicago, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2010_100
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Nonprofit administrator and foundation executive Cleo Wilson was born in 1943, and spent her early years in the Chicago housing project of Altgeld Gardens. After spending two years at Robert Crane High School, Wilson graduated from the Frances Parker High School in 1961. Later that year, Wilson enrolled at Chicago State Teacher's College, now Chicago State University. In her sophomore year, however, she left school to protest school segregation in Chicago's Englewood community and later, the Vietnam War. After leaving the activist movement to support her children, Wilson worked as a keypunch operator until deciding to

return to school in 1973. She received her B.A. degree in English from Chicago State in 1976.

In 1976, Wilson was hired as an accounting clerk for Playboy. She eventually worked her way up to supervisor of Accounts Payable. In 1982, she joined the Playboy Foundation, the philanthropic arm of Hugh Hefner's empire. After just two years, she was appointed Executive Director of the foundation. As its head, she included employees in the process, asking for their opinion on grant decisions. Wilson also engaged the Foundation in the process of "microphilanthropy," — giving smaller amounts of money to more organizations — including many grassroots efforts in Chicago. Wilson also continued to fight for civil liberties and racial equality, filing a lawsuit against the City of Chicago and State of Illinois to ensure fair voting protection for Chicago's African American residents and serving as vice president of the Illinois Chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union. She was also an early HIV/AIDS activist, beginning in the 1980s, when HIV/AIDS was still very poorly comprehended and stigmatized by the general public. She was appointed to the Chicago AIDS Foundation's Board of Directors in 1989, and starting in the next year served as president of that organization for three years.

In 2002, Wilson became president of The Center for Intuitive and Outsider Art, a Chicago nonprofit organization dedicated to highlighting self-taught and outsider art, and in 2007, she became executive director of the center. She left Playboy after 25 years of service in 2005, but has continued to tour on the lecture circuit and is a board member or advisor for many civic organizations.

Cleo Wilson was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on September 25, 2010.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Cleo F. Wilson was conducted by Larry Crowe on August 25, 2010, in Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on 5 uncompressed MOV digital video files. Nonprofit administrator and foundation executive Cleo F. Wilson (1943 - ) served with the Playboy Foundation for twenty-five years, and was advocate of civil rights, HIV/AIDS awareness and the arts.

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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:

Wilson, Cleo

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

### Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Wilson, Cleo--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:**

Nonprofit Administrator

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Foundation Executive

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## **HistoryMakers® Category:**

CivicMakers

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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 Cleo F. Wilson, August 25, 2010. 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 Cleo F. Wilson, Section  
A2010\_100\_001\_001, TRT: 0:27:57 2010/08/25

Cleo F. Wilson was born on May 7, 1943 in Chicago, Illinois to Frances Page Watson and Cleo Chancey. Her paternal grandmother, Marjorie Gay Chancey, died when Wilson's father was two years old. Her paternal grandfather, Albert Chancey, then moved to Michigan City, Indiana, where he was eventually joined by Wilson's father. Wilson's maternal grandmother, Margaret DePrad Page, was a teacher in Brownsville, Kentucky, where Wilson's mother was born in 1921. They later moved to Chicago. Wilson's parents met in Michigan City, and married shortly after Wilson's father was drafted into World War II. Upon his return, Wilson's family moved to Chicago's Altgeld Gardens Homes, where the community was tightly knit, and held events like movie screenings. Her mother became a secretary, while her father worked at a steel mill. After they divorced, Wilson entered foster care with her five siblings. She also talks about her maternal grandmother's attempts to lighten her mother's skin.

Video Oral History Interview with Cleo F. Wilson, Section  
A2010\_100\_001\_002, TRT: 0:29:18 2010/08/25

Cleo F. Wilson learned to read at a young age, and excelled as a student at George Washington Carver Primary School in Chicago, Illinois. During this time, her father, Cleo Chancey, suffered from alcoholism; and her mother, Frances Page Watson, became a Jehovah's

Witness. Wilson's parents frequently fought over finances, until her father left the home. After the death of Wilson's maternal grandmother, her mother was institutionalized for mental illness, and Wilson and her five siblings were sent to a foster home on Chicago's West Side. Her foster mother was highly religious, and considered Wilson to be mischievous and sinful. While in foster care, Wilson attended the William McKinley Upper Grade Center and Crane Technical High School. She read the books of Ayn Rand, and played bass in the school orchestra. She completed her senior year at Parker High School, where she befriended Henry Threadgill in the jazz band. After graduation, Wilson became an active participant in the struggle for school desegregation.

Video Oral History Interview with Cleo F. Wilson, Section  
A2010\_100\_001\_003, TRT: 0:29:50 2010/08/25

Cleo F. Wilson was active with CORE during the struggle to desegregate the Chicago Public Schools, and helped organize the protests against the Willis Wagons. During this time, Wilson stopped attending the Chicago Teachers College, and lived in a commune operated by the University of Chicago's Student Peace Union. She found work as a file clerk, and then began studying to become a keypunch operator. Wilson continued working with radical organizations, through which she met her first husband, Earl Silbar. They had two children; and, in response to their activism, their home was surveilled by the Chicago Police Department's Red Squad. In 1968, Wilson attended the Poor People's Campaign, where she discovered that her husband was having an affair. She divorced him; and went on to marry Freeman Wilson and earn an English degree from the University of Illinois at Chicago. Wilson remembers her criticism of Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s nonviolent philosophy, and her grief after his assassination.

Video Oral History Interview with Cleo F. Wilson, Section  
A2010\_100\_001\_004, TRT: 0:29:39 2010/08/25

Cleo F. Wilson graduated from the University of Illinois at Chicago in 1976. Shortly afterwards, she was hired as an accountant at Playboy Enterprises, Inc., which was a strong supporter of civil rights activism. In 1982, Wilson

began working for the Playboy Foundation, which funded organizations like Operation PUSH and People for the American Way, as well as the arts community. She became the foundation's executive director in 1984. During her career at the Playboy Foundation, Wilson developed a system of micro philanthropy, in which the organization disbursed a large number of small grants rather than a few large donations. She solicited her staff's input while selecting grantees, and often supported local causes in Chicago, Illinois, including the Will Feed Community Organization, which was based at the Christ United Methodist Church on Chicago's South Side. Wilson also served on a number of charitable boards, including the Illinois Arts Council and the American Civil Liberties Union.

Video Oral History Interview with Cleo F. Wilson, Section  
A2010\_100\_001\_005, TRT: 0:32:21 2010/08/25

Cleo F. Wilson served as the executive director of the Playboy Foundation, which worked to protect civil rights and free speech. She eventually returned to the staff of Playboy Enterprises, Inc., and retired as the company's vice president of public affairs in 2005. At that time, Wilson became the executive director of Intuit: The Center for Intuitive and Outsider Art in Chicago, Illinois. She reflects upon her legacy and how she would like to be remembered, and concludes the interview by narrating her photographs.