

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

Overview of the Collection

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| Repository: | The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com |
| Creator: | Williams, Elynor, 1946- |
| Title: | The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Elynor Williams, |
| Dates: | April 19, 2012 |
| Bulk Dates: | 2012 |
| Physical Description: | 7 uncompressed MOV digital video files (3:19:26). |
| Abstract: | Corporate executive Elynor Williams (1946 -) became Sara Lee Corporation's first African American corporate officer serving as vice president for public responsibility. Williams was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on April 19, 2012, in Chicago, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview. |
| Identification: | A2012_048 |
| Language: | The interview and records are in English. |

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Corporate executive Elynor A. Williams was born on October 27, 1946 in Baton Rouge, Louisiana to Albert and Naomi Williams. She graduated from Central Academy in Palatka, Florida before receiving her B.A. degree in home economics from Spelman College in 1966. Williams then joined Eugene Butler High School in Jacksonville, Florida as a home economics teacher. In 1968, she became an editor and publicist for General Foods Corporation in White Plains, New York. Williams received her M.A. degree in communication arts from Cornell University in 1973. At Cornell, she worked as a tutor for special education projects.

Following the completion of her education, Williams became a communication specialist for North Carolina Agricultural Extension Service. In 1977, she became a senior public relations specialist for Western Electric Company in Greensboro, North Carolina. Williams served as director of corporate affairs for Sara Lee Corporation's Hanes Group in Winston-Salem, North Carolina from 1983 to 1986 and director of public affairs for the Sara Lee Corporation in Chicago, Illinois from 1985 to 1990. Then, she was promoted to vice president of public responsibility for the Sara Lee Corporation, becoming the company's first African American corporate officer. During Williams's time at Sara Lee, she directed the Sara Lee Foundation, served as executive secretary of the Employee and Public Responsibility Committee for the board of directors and founded the Frontrunner Awards to honor the achievements of outstanding women. After leaving the Sara Lee Corporation, Williams served as president and managing director of Chestnut Pearson and Associates, an international management consulting firm.

Throughout her long career, Williams has demonstrated a continued commitment to her community, becoming involved with numerous local and national organizations. She is a founding board member of the Executive Leadership Council and Spelman College Corporate Women's Roundtable. Williams has served on the board of directors of the American Cancer Society Foundation, Children's Memorial Hospital and the Chicago Sinfonietta. She is also deeply dedicated to the advancement of women, especially minority women and has worked with the National Women's Economic Alliance, the National Coalition of 100 Black Women, Inc., the International Women's Forum and the President's Council of Cornell University Women. Williams has been recognized many

times by national media including being named one of the 50 Top Black Executives in Corporate America by *Ebony* ; Magazine and one Chicago's most powerful women by WBBM-TV. She has received the Drum Major for Justice Award from the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and was named a National Headliner by Women in Communications. Williams lives in Chicago, Illinois.

Elynor A. Williams was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on April 19, 2012.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Elynor Williams was conducted by Larry Crowe on April 19, 2012, in Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on 7 uncompressed MOV digital video files. Corporate executive Elynor Williams (1946 -) became Sara Lee Corporation's first African American corporate officer serving as vice president for public responsibility.

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, Elynor, 1946-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Williams, Elynor, 1946- --Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Corporate Executive

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

The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Elynor Williams, April 19, 2012. 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 Elynor Williams, Section A2012_048_001_001, TRT: 1:30:01 ?

Elynor Williams was born on October 27, 1946 in Baton Rouge, Louisiana to Naomi Douglass Williams and Albert Williams. Her maternal grandfather, Thomas Douglass, was a minister in Nashville, Tennessee, where her mother was raised. Williams' paternal family was originally from Mobile, Alabama, where her grandmother, Sara Williams, worked as a maid. Later, she was sent to study at Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute in Tuskegee, Alabama by her employers. After Williams' paternal grandparents separated, her paternal grandmother continued to work as a domestic while raising four children. Her father was a gifted student and enrolled at Lane College in Jackson, Tennessee at fifteen years old. He later became a professor at Lane College, where he met Williams' mother, who was one of his students. After her parents married, they both pursued graduate degrees, and moved around frequently to find work as teachers until settling in Palatka, Florida, where her father founded Collier-Blocker Junior College.

Video Oral History Interview with Elynor Williams, Section A2012_048_001_002, TRT: 2:29:28 ?

Elynor Williams grew up in a close-knit community in Mobile, Alabama, where most of the African American families lived on the same street. She attended W.H. Council Elementary School, where her mother, Naomi Douglass Williams, was a teacher. There, she excelled in her English classes and aspired to become a writer. As a young child, she read magazines and books about influential African Americans like Booker T. Washington and Harriet Tubman. Because she excelled academically, Williams started high school at eleven years old when her family moved to Florida. First, they live in St. Augustine for one year and then settled in Palatka, Florida, where her father, Albert Williams, founded the all-black Collier-Blocker Junior College. He also taught at a nearby university, and often helped to protect the area from racist white residents who would vandalized the campus. In Palatka, Williams attended Central Academy, where she played the organ in the choir and the flute in the school band.

Video Oral History Interview with Elynor Williams, Section A2012_048_001_003, TRT: 3:30:05 ?

Elynor Williams graduated from Central Academy in Palatka, Florida in 1962, when she was fifteen years old. She received a United Negro College Fund scholarship to attend Spelman College in Atlanta, Georgia. There, she met classmates black women's studies scholar Beverly Guy-Sheftall, author Alice Walker and composer and social activist Bernice Johnson Reagon. Williams majored in and joined a theatre group, where she designed the costumes. On campus, she participated in civil rights marches, and saw Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. speak at a demonstration. In 1966, Williams graduated from Spelman College with her teaching degree, and joined the Peace Corps, but declined to relocate to her assigned location of Venezuela. She then taught at Eugene J. Butler Junior Senior High School in Jacksonville, Florida for two years, before joining the staff at General Foods Corporation in White Plains, New York. There, she worked as a food critic, and was featured in Ebony magazine.

Video Oral History Interview with Elynor Williams, Section A2012_048_001_004, TRT: 4:30:49 ?

Elynor Williams worked as a food editor for General Foods Corporation, where she was one of the few African Americans on the staff. There, she was mentored by her colleague Lenora Moragne who encouraged her to apply to graduate school at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York. Williams was awarded a full scholarship to attend Cornell University, where she majored in communication arts. For her master's thesis, she focused on teenage pregnancy and nutrition in the African American community. After graduation, Williams accepted a position with the North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service at North

Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University in Greensboro, North Carolina, where she also helped found the communication arts department. She later joined the Greensboro Chamber of Commerce who awarded her a scholarship to attend Leadership Greensboro, a nine month developmental leadership program. Williams was then hired by the Western Electric Company, the primary supplier for AT&T at the time.

Video Oral History Interview with Elynor Williams, Section A2012_048_001_005, TRT: 5:30:30 ?

Elynor Williams was working as a public affairs manager for the Western Electric Company, when she was encouraged to run for the North Carolina House of Representatives. While Williams lost by twenty votes, she went on to serve as president of the National Women's Political Caucus of North Carolina, where she helped other women to run for public office. After her campaign, she gained the attention of Robert J. Brown at Hanes Group, who offered her a position as director of public affairs. In this role, she met future U.S. Secretary of Labor Alexis Herman, and civil rights activists Coretta Scott King and Dorothy Height through her work with minority organizations like the NAACP and the National Urban League. In 1986, Williams was promoted to director of public affairs at Sara Lee Corporation, becoming the first female executive at the company. At this time, she relocated to Chicago, Illinois to work at the corporate headquarters.

Video Oral History Interview with Elynor Williams, Section A2012_048_001_006, TRT: 6:28:57 ?

Elynor Williams relocated to Chicago, Illinois to serve as director of public affairs for the Sara Lee Corporation. There, Williams started the Women of Hanes brochure, which highlighted the success of women working within the company. She also worked with the Chicago chapter of National Coalition of 100 Black Women, and created the Frontrunner Awards to honor the achievement of outstanding women in their professional fields. In an effort to mentor young African American business professionals, Williams co-founded the Executive Leadership Council with influential African American executives like Parren J. Mitchell, III, Mannie Jackson and James Kaiser. In 1990, Williams was promoted to vice president of public responsibility at the Sara Lee Corporation, becoming the company's first African American corporate executive. At fifty two years old, Williams decided to retire from the Sara Lee Corporation. She reflects on her legacy, and talks about her experiences with sexual harassment in Corporate America.

Video Oral History Interview with Elynor Williams, Section A2012_048_001_007, TRT: 7:19:36 ?

Elynor Williams was a founding member of Executive Leadership Council, where she was later joined by black female executives like Toni Faye, Ingrid Saunders Jones and Joyce Roche. She reflects on her life and talks about her family, which includes her adoptive daughter, Natalie Shelton. Williams also describes how she would like to be remembered, and concludes the interview by narrating her photographs.