

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Karen DeWitt

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	DeWitt, Karen, 1944-
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Karen DeWitt,
Dates:	June 16, 2012
Bulk Dates:	2012
Physical Description:	8 uncompressed MOV digital video files (3:44:31).
Abstract:	Newspaper reporter Karen DeWitt (1944 -) who worked as a journalist for the three largest papers in the country, is one of Washington D.C.'s most notable media figures. DeWitt was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on June 16, 2012, in Washington, District of Columbia. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2012_120
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Newspaper journalist and communications executive Karen DeWitt was born in Washington, Pennsylvania on April 18, 1944. DeWitt graduated from Miami University with her B.A. degree in english and philosophy. From 1966 to 1968, she enrolled in the U.S. Peace Corps. DeWitt began her journalism career in 1977 when she was hired by the *Washington Post* as a staff writer for its style section. That same year, the *New York Times* hired DeWitt as its national correspondent for its Washington D.C. bureau, where she served until 1981. In 1982, she was hired as a columnist for *USA Today*. While at *USA Today* DeWitt served as a foreign correspondent, White House correspondent and national editor. After six years, she was rehired as the national correspondent for the *Washington Post*. Then in 1997, DeWitt was hired as a senior producer for the critically acclaimed ABC News television magazine *Nightline*. After four years with ABC News, in 2001, she launched her own media and communications consultation company.

In 2003, DeWitt served as the communications consultant for several municipalities and non-profits, like the Washington D.C. Water and Sewer authority. She also served as editor and columnist for the *Washington Examiner* a year after being named director of communications for The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights, a civil and human rights coalition. In 2011, DeWitt was named communications manager for the prisoners' rights advocacy group The Sentencing Project.

Throughout her career, DeWitt has amassed notable honors, including a 1999 award for best feature from the New York Association of Black Journalists for coordinating a *Nightline* show that featured the recorded recollections of former slaves. DeWitt also garnered a journalism award from the University of the District of Columbia and a research fellowship from the Japan Society.

Karen DeWitt was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on June 16, 2012.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Karen DeWitt was conducted by Larry Crowe on June 16, 2012, in Washington, District of Columbia, and was recorded on 8 uncompressed MOV digital video files. Newspaper reporter Karen DeWitt (1944 -) who worked as a journalist for the three largest papers in the country, is one of Washington D.C.'s most notable media figures.

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:

DeWitt, Karen, 1944-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

DeWitt, Karen, 1944- --Interviews

African American Journalists--Interviews.

African American executives--Interviews.

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Newspaper Reporter

HistoryMakers® Category:

MediaMakers

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 Karen DeWitt, June 16, 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 Karen DeWitt, Section A2012_120_001_001, TRT: 1:28:56 ?
Karen DeWitt talks about her family background. Raised in Staunton, Virginia, DeWitt's grandmother, Helen Jones, moved to Washington, Pennsylvania as a teenager where she met Harrison Striebiling, and the two married. Jones gave birth to Geraldine Streibiling on December 1, 1921 in Washington,

Pennsylvania. Streibiling began attending Wilberforce University in Wilberforce, Ohio between 1940 and 1941, where she met Donald DeWitt. DeWitt was born in Upstate New York in October of 1917. Streibiling dropped out of college to marry DeWitt in 1943, and gave birth to Karen DeWitt in 1944. She returned to Wilberforce University and graduated in 1946, after which the family moved to Dayton, Ohio. Donald DeWitt worked as a meter man until Dayton Public Schools integrated, after which he worked as a teacher. Geraldine Streibiling was a clerk typist, and eventually obtained a job procuring plane parts. DeWitt's earliest memories include her grandmother's Singer sewing machine and the smell of burnt green peppers.

Wilberforce University.

African American families.

African American mothers.

African American fathers.

Relocation (Housing)--Ohio.

Video Oral History Interview with Karen DeWitt, Section A2012_120_001_002, TRT: 2:31:02 ?

Karen DeWitt describes the sights, sounds, and smells of her childhood, including walking along the banks of the Miami River and making grape jelly with her family. DeWitt grew up taking art classes at the Dayton Art Institute, and enjoyed playing cowboys and Indians with the children in her Dayton, Ohio neighborhood. DeWitt's household was very structured. She and her younger brother, Donald DeWitt, Jr., had daily chores, and the family's meals were planned monthly. Though her family subscribed to publications like Jet, Ebony, and The Negro Digest, DeWitt gravitated towards reading books. She attended public school up to seventh grade, after which she was enrolled in Chaminade Julianne Catholic High School. Her exposure to Catholic rituals and theology inspired her to convert to Catholicism at the age of thirteen. DeWitt remembers her awareness of racism, her grandmother's civic disobedience towards segregation, and the murder of Emmitt Till, which left a strong impression on her.

Childhood and youth--Activities--Ohio--Dayton.

African American children--Religion--Ohio--Dayton.

Brothers and sisters--Ohio--Dayton.

African Americans--Education--Ohio--Dayton.

Racism--Ohio--Dayton.

African American grandmothers.

Video Oral History Interview with Karen DeWitt, Section A2012_120_001_003, TRT: 3:30:24 ?

Karen DeWitt began attending Chaminade Julianne Catholic High School, a predominately white, all-girls Catholic school, in 1959 in Dayton, Ohio. DeWitt was a member of the school newspaper staff, and elected class president. She also had jobs working as a babysitter and at the Dayton Public Library. DeWitt describes writing one of her earliest stories in high school, entitled "Anemone." Though she wanted to attend Antioch College in Yellow Springs, Ohio, DeWitt's parents enrolled her at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio in 1962. DeWitt recalls the harsh rules the university applied to its female students, and becoming more aware of race when she went on a date with a white classmate her sophomore year. In the summer of 1963, DeWitt took a job writing for the Pittsburgh Courier, where she was exposed to the Civil Rights Movement. DeWitt spent the summers of 1964 and 1965 in the Peace Corps' Advanced Training Program in Los Angeles, California preparing to serve in Ethiopia.

African Americans--Education, Secondary--Ohio--Dayton.

Childhood and youth--Activities--Ohio--Dayton.

Miami University (Oxford, Ohio).

Race awareness.

Pittsburgh courier.

Civil rights movements.

Peace Corps (U.S.).

Video Oral History Interview with Karen DeWitt, Section A2012_120_001_004, TRT: 4:29:15 ?

In the summers of 1964 and 1965, Karen DeWitt traveled to Los Angeles, California to train in the Peace Corps' Advance Training Program. Following her graduation from Miami University in Oxford, Ohio in 1966, DeWitt traveled to Ethiopia to serve with the Peace Corps. DeWitt describes her experiences in Ethiopia, and shares stories about her time there. DeWitt finished her tenure with the Peace Corps in 1968, after which she spent a few months hitchhiking throughout Europe. When DeWitt returned to the United States, she was hired at the New York Post. While at the Post, she was recruited by Robert C. Maynard to work at the Washington Post. As a result, she met Washington Post correspondent Jesse W. Lewis, whom she married in 1969. The couple moved to Beirut soon thereafter, where DeWitt worked for the Beirut Daily Star. The couple divorced after they returned to the United States in 1973. Following the divorce, DeWitt was hired to work for the National Journal.

Peace Corps (U.S.).

Travel.

New York post.

Washington Post Company.

National Journal, Inc.

Marriage.

Journalism--Beirut (Lebanon).

Video Oral History Interview with Karen DeWitt, Section A2012_120_001_005, TRT: 5:30:20 ?

Karen DeWitt talks about losing her job at the National Journal in 1974. DeWitt freelanced for multiple publications from 1974 to 1976, including the Washington Post. She was hired by the Washington Post in December of 1976, and describes the first story she wrote for the publication. In 1978 the New York Times offered DeWitt a position, which she accepted. DeWitt recalls not enjoying her position at the New York Times, and quitting in 1981. DeWitt performed freelance work until getting hired as a columnist for USA Today in 1982. That same year, DeWitt hosted a half-hour cooking show on BET entitled "Karen's Kitchen." DeWitt describes her experiences being a foreign correspondent and a White House correspondent for USA Today, including covering President Ronald Reagan and First Lady Nancy Reagan. DeWitt also remembers taking leaves of absence from USA Today in the mid-1980s to teach at American University in Washington, D.C., and in 1989 to teach at Kansas State University in Manhattan, Kansas.

National Journal, Inc.

Washington Post Company.

Brzezinski, Zbigniew, 1928-

USA Today (Firm).

American University (Washington, D.C.).

Kansas State University.

New York times.

Video Oral History Interview with Karen DeWitt, Section A2012_120_001_006, TRT: 6:28:45 ?

In 1989, Karen DeWitt took a leave of absence from USA Today to teach at Kansas State University in Manhattan, Kansas. She officially left her post at USA Today in 1990 to take a job with the New York Times. DeWitt worked for the New York Times until 1997, after which she took a position as a senior producer for ABC News' "Nightline." DeWitt talks about her responsibilities as a senior producer for the newsmagazine, the work culture, and her award-winning piece "Found Voices." After her contract with ABC News ended in 2001, DeWitt struggled as a freelance writer. She eventually took a job as the Director of Communications for the Washington, D.C. Water and Sewer Authority from 2003-2004. DeWitt returned to newspaper work in 2004 as an editor and columnist for the Washington Examiner. Burdened by the responsibilities at The Examiner, she left the newspaper to become the Director of Communications for the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights in 2006, where she worked on the renewal of the Voting Rights Act.

Kansas State University.

USA Today (Firm).

New York times.

Journalism--Study and teaching.

Leadership Conference on Civil Rights.

Washington DC Examiner (Firm).

New York times.

Video Oral History Interview with Karen DeWitt, Section A2012_120_001_007, TRT: 7:30:23 ?

Karen DeWitt describes the free newspaper, The Washington Examiner, where she worked as an editor and columnist from 2004 to 2005. DeWitt began working for the Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights in 2006 as the director of communications. She talks about what contributions she has made to the organization, as well as the things she learned from her coworkers. In 2010, DeWitt worked for Sheriff Michael A. Jackson when he ran for executive director of Prince George's County, Maryland. She recalls this campaign, as well as the Jack B. Johnson scandal that took place around the same time. DeWitt began working as the communications manager for the Sentencing Project in 2011. DeWitt comments on the injustices of drug laws, race and ethnicity in the United States, and the failure of social services. DeWitt also talks about her ideas for future writing projects and what fuels her writing.

Free circulation newspapers and periodicals.

Leadership Conference on Civil Rights.

Political campaigns--Maryland.

Sentencing Project (U.S.).

Race and society.

Video Oral History Interview with Karen DeWitt, Section A2012_120_001_008, TRT: 8:15:26 ?

Karen DeWitt reflects upon her legacy. She notes that if she could have done anything differently in life, she would have been braver. DeWitt talks about her friends, godchildren, and her mother, Geraldine Streibiling Moran. DeWitt talks about how she would like to be remembered as creative, artistic, and someone who did something for humanity. She concludes the tape by narrating her photographs.

African American mothers.

Photographs.