Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers ® Video Oral History with Chris Simmons

Overview of the Collection

Repository: The HistoryMakers® 1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator: Simmons, Christopher, 1957-
Title: The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Chris Simmons,
Dates: May 7, 2012
Bulk Dates: 2012
Physical Description: 8 uncompressed MOV digital video files (3:59:45).
Abstract: Corporate executive Chris Simmons (1957 - ) was a pioneer of diversity recruitment and development in corporate environments. Simmons was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on May 7, 2012, in Chicago, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification: A2012_123
Language: The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Corporate executive Christopher Simmons was born on August 15, 1957 and raised in Shelby, Tennessee. His mother Dorothy Anderson was a homemaker and his father Joseph Simmons was a school principal and a minister. He is the third of six children. Simmons attended Hamilton High School where he graduated at the top of his class. He obtained his B.A. degree in economics from Harvard University in 1979. Upon graduation, Simmons began his career at IBM; he then left IBM to take a position at Wang Laboratories where he worked as a senior marketing analyst. In 1986, he earned his M.B.A degree from Harvard School of Business. That same year, he then joined the Bankers Trust Company as an associate. While there, he was responsible for analysis and structuring of large leveraged buyout finances and other transactions.

In 1992, Simmons joined PricewaterhouseCoopers as senior manager, managing mergers and acquisitions with transaction services. In 1998, he managed PwC’s internal merger and acquisitions group. In 2001, Simmons was promoted to managing partner of PwC’s Washington, D.C. Metro area office. In 2004, he was asked by the chairman to serve as Chief Diversity Officer. He also served as chair of the Partner Admission Committee, and as a member of the Human Capital Leadership Team and the Management Evaluation and Compensation Committee. In 2009, he was elected to the firm’s United States Board of Partners & Principals.

Simmons served as PwC’s charitable foundation board president, where he was responsible for PwC’s $750,000 commitment to Feeding America. In 2011, Simmons was honored with the Corporate Community Investment Award, for his involvement in youth mentoring and assisting those in need. His involvement has included the Economic Club of Washington as Chair of the Membership Committee, and the Executive Leadership Council as a board member. He has served as secretary and executive board member of the Association of Latino professionals in Finance and Accounting and is a part of the Federal City Council.

Christopher Simmons was interviewed by The HistoryMakers on May 7, 2012.
Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Chris Simmons was conducted by Julieanna L. Richardson on May 7, 2012, in Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on 8 uncompressed MOV digital video files. Corporate executive Chris Simmons (1957-) was a pioneer of diversity recruitment and development in corporate environments.

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:

Simmons, Christopher, 1957-

Richardson, Julieanna L. (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews
Simmons, Christopher, 1957--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 Chris Simmons, May 7, 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 Chris Simmons, Section A2012_123_001_001, TRT: 1:30:12

Chris Simmons was born on August 15, 1957 in Shelby County, Tennessee to Dorothy Anderson Simmons and Joseph Simmons. Simmons’ paternal grandparents, Nona Buford Simmons and Robert Simmons, traveled around Arkansas and Mississippi in search of farm work. At one point, the family fled from Arkansas after Simmons’ paternal grandfather defended the family against a racist white man. After Simmons’ father fulfilled his military duty in World War II, he completed his high school education in Memphis, Tennessee, where
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he met Simmons’ mother. Born in Yalobusha County, Mississippi, Simmons’ mother had been sent to Memphis by her parents, Zenora Jackson Anderson and Lucious Anderson, to further her education. Both of Simmons’ parents went on to attend from Tennessee Agricultural and Industrial State College in Nashville, Tennessee. His father became principal of Capeville High School in Shelby County, Tennessee while his mother tended to the home, and was actively involved in the Parent Teacher Association.

Video Oral History Interview with Chris Simmons, Section A2012_123_001_002, TRT: 2:29:03

Chris Simmons' maternal grandfather, Lucious Anderson, was one of the first African American landowners in Senatobia, Mississippi. He also provided transportation for local black farmers who were displeased with the low wages of the nearby farms. His wife, Zenora Jackson Anderson, was one of the top salespersons at Avon Products, Inc. Simmons' maternal uncle, James Anderson, was one of the first African American students to attend the University of Mississippi Law School in Oxford, Mississippi. Although he did not graduate, he later led a lawsuit against his employer for wage discrimination. Simmons' father, Joseph Simmons, became a principal in Memphis after teaching for several years. Simmons' family were active members of New Little Rock Baptist Church, where his father was a minister. Simmons and his five siblings grew up in the Prospect Park neighborhood of Memphis, where he was nurtured by his teachers at Corry Junior High School. Simmons talks about his early chores and his parents' high expectations.

Video Oral History Interview with Chris Simmons, Section A2012_123_001_003, TRT: 3:31:49

Chris Simmons often accompanied his father, Joseph Simmons, to Tennessee Agricultural and Industrial State University in Nashville, Tennessee, and read in the library while his father attended classes for his master’s degree. Simmons attended Corry Junior High School in Memphis, Tennessee, where he received many academic awards. Simmons completed his freshman year at the predominately black Hamilton High School in Memphis, and transferred to the integrated Hillcrest High School for his sophomore year. Although Simmons registered for higher level classes, he was placed in standard level courses by a racist guidance counselor. After Simmons confronted the guidance counselor and school principal, he was allowed to enroll in the advanced classes. Simmons returned to Hamilton High School, following the implementation of the citywide busing program. There, he pursued student leadership positions, and joined the football team. In 2007, he was inducted into Memphis City Schools’ Football hall of fame.

Video Oral History Interview with Chris Simmons, Section A2012_123_001_004, TRT: 4:33:04

Chris Simmons was ten years old when he witnessed the riots following Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s assassination in Memphis, Tennessee. After graduating from high school, Simmons hoped to attend Harvard University, where he had received a partial scholarship. However, his parents, Dorothy Anderson Simmons and Joseph Simmons, encouraged him to attend the University of Chicago in Illinois on a full scholarship, as it would allow them to send Simmons' brother, Bryan Simmons, to Phillips Exeter Academy, a prestigious boarding school in Exeter, New Hampshire. Simmons refused and his parents eventually agreed to send both sons to the schools of their choice. At Harvard University, Simmons majored in economics, and his classmates included Caroline Kennedy and private equity investor Asami Ishimaru. During the summers, Simmons worked at a Joseph Schlitz Brewing Company facotry in Memphis, Chemical Bank in New York City, and a Anheuser-Busch Companies plant in Baldwinsville, New York.
Chris Simmons attended Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where his peers included bank executive Deborah Wright and investment banker Raymond J. McGuire. After earning his bachelor’s degree in economics, he was then accepted to Harvard Business School, but ultimately decided to defer his enrollment for two years to gain work experience at the International Business Machines Corporation (IBM). In 1981, he entered his first year at Harvard Business School; and that following summer, worked at Holiday Inn in Memphis, Tennessee. Despite his excellent grades, Simmons could not return the next year after his financial aid was decreased. To raise money for tuition, he worked at Wang Laboratories in Lowell, Massachusetts for two years. After receiving his master’s degree in business administration, Simmons joined the leverage buyout finance department at the Bankers Trust office in Atlanta, Georgia. He went on to cultivate a strong business relationship with the office manager, James D. Zielinski.

Chris Simmons began his banking career in the acquisitions and mergers division at the Bankers Trust office in Atlanta, Georgia. Although he succeeded under James D. Zielinski’s leadership, Simmons faced challenges when Zielinski was promoted to the corporate offices in New York City. Nevertheless, Simmons was promoted to vice president of the group. When the junk bond market collapsed, Bankers Trust was acquired by Deutsche Bank, and Simmons’ office was shut down. He used the eight months of severance pay to spend time with his family. In 1992, Simmons was hired at Price Waterhouse’s office in Atlanta. He was then mentored by his former classmate, corporate banker Raymond J. McGuire, and manager J. Larry Stevens, who introduced him to prominent bankers through The Commerce Club in Atlanta. When Simmons encountered a racist client, Stevens offered to terminate the client, but Simmons convinced him to put the company first, and continued his work on the project. He also describes Atlanta Mayor Maynard Jackson.

Chris Simmons began his career at Price Waterhouse before their merger with Coopers and Lybrand in 1998. Simmons’ manager J. Larry Stevens introduced Simmons to Willard W. “Woody” Brittain, Jr., who transferred Simmons from the marginalized corporate finance consulting division of Pricewaterhouse to their newly formed in-house mergers and acquisitions group in 1998. There, he soon impressed future Price Waterhouse CEO Dennis M. Nally, who promoted him to chief diversity officer. In this role, Simmons implemented a three part plan to improve the firm’s working conditions and race relations. He encouraged the white partners to learn more about the challenges faced by their minority and women employees, and focused on empowering minority and women employees at the firm as well. Simmons also added an LGBT focus to the firm’s diversity initiatives. Later, he was promoted to managing partner of the Price Waterhouse’s Washington, D.C. Metro area; and in 2009, joined Price Waterhouse’s corporate board.

Chris Simmons was the head of PricewaterhouseCoopers Charitable Foundation, Inc., and planned to retire at sixty years old. He shares his goals for retirement, which included international travels and writing projects. With his wife, Allison Arnold Simmons, he had three sons: Christopher Simmons, Joseph Simmons and Anderson Simmons. He describes his hopes and concerns for both Corporate America and the African American community. Simmons concludes the
interview by reflecting upon his personal life, career and legacy.