

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with The Honorable Sylvester Turner

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Turner, Sylvester
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Sylvester Turner,
Dates:	August 15, 2012
Bulk Dates:	2012
Physical Description:	7 uncompressed MOV digital video files (3:26:23).
Abstract:	Mayor, state representative, and lawyer The Honorable Sylvester Turner (1954 -) represented district 139 in the Texas House of Representatives from 1988 to 2016, when he became the mayor of Houston, Texas. He also founded the law firm of Barnes and Turner LLP. Turner was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on August 15, 2012, in Houston, Texas. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2012_156
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

State representative and lawyer Sylvester Turner was born on September 27, 1954 in Acres Homes, Texas. His mother was a maid at the Rice Hotel and his father, a commercial painter. Turner was raised with eight brothers and sisters. In 1973, he graduated as the valedictorian of Klein High School. Four years later, Turner received his B.A. degree in political science from the University of Houston, after which he attended Harvard Law School, where he received his J.D. degree in 1980.

Turner was hired at the Houston-based law firm Fulbright & Jaworski. After three years, Turner left and formed his own law firm with partner Barry M. Barnes. Barnes & Turner specialize in corporate and commercial law. In 1984, Turner ran for a Harris County Commissioner seat, but he lost to El Franco Lee. In 1988, he won the seat in the Texas House of Representatives for District 139, a mostly minority district. Turner also taught at the Thurgood Marshall School of Law at Texas Southern University, the South Texas College of Law, and at the University of Houston Law School's continuing legal education program. He also ran for the mayor of Houston twice, once in 1991 where he lost in a hotly contested race, and again in 2003, where he lost to Bill White. In 2003, Turner became the Speaker Pro Tempore in the Texas House of Representatives, a post he held until 2009. His major legislative accomplishment, HB 109, expanded access to the children's health insurance program and was passed in 2007.

Turner sits on the State Affairs committee and is the Vice Chair of the Appropriations Committee. He is also on the Subcommittee on the Current Fiscal Condition. He is a member of Brookhollow Baptist Church and has one daughter, Ashley Paige Turner.

Sylvester Turner was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on August 15, 2012.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with The Honorable Sylvester Turner was conducted by Larry Crowe on August 15, 2012, in Houston, Texas, and was recorded on 7 uncompressed MOV digital video files. Mayor, state representative, and lawyer The Honorable Sylvester Turner (1954 -) represented district 139 in the Texas House of Representatives from 1988 to 2016, when he became the mayor of Houston, Texas. He also founded the law firm of Barnes and Turner LLP.

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:

Turner, Sylvester

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Turner, Sylvester--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

State Representative

Mayor

HistoryMakers® Category:

PoliticalMakers

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 The Honorable Sylvester Turner, August 15, 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 The Honorable Sylvester Turner, Section A2012_156_001_001, TRT: 1:29:26 ?

The Honorable Sylvester Turner was born on September 27, 1954 in Houston, Texas to Ruby Mae Turner and Eddie Turner. Both of his parents were born in

Chappell Hill, Texas, which was a rural town located sixty miles west of Houston. The community was settled in the late 19th century by freed slaves, who migrated west from Galveston, Texas. Turner's father, a farmer, was born in Chappell Hill in 1904. After his first wife died, he married Turner's mother, who was born in 1924 and grew up on her family's cotton farm. In 1954, Turner's parents moved to the Acres Homes section of Houston, where Turner was raised. At the time, the neighborhood was among the nation's largest unincorporated African American communities. The town operated its own transit companies and city services, and the residents owned cattle and small farms. Turner and his thirteen siblings worked for their father's lawn service business, and on the farm in Chappell Hill during the summers.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Sylvester Turner, Section A2012_156_001_002, TRT: 2:30:05 ?

The Honorable Sylvester Turner grew up in Acres Homes, a historically black neighborhood of Houston, Texas. The community was home to many black-owned businesses and public services, including the Acres Homes Transit Company. Turner attended the neighborhood's all-black Garden City Elementary and Junior High School until the eighth grade, when he was bused eighteen miles away to attend the integrated Klein Intermediate School and Klein High School in Klein, Texas. There, Turner and his black peers frequently faced racial discrimination and violence from their white classmates. The teaching staff was also integrated, and Turner received support from African American teachers like Mr. Jennings, who encouraged him and supervised his academic performance. During this time, Turner attended Bethel Baptist Church in Acres Homes. The congregation was led by Pastor W.H. Dudley, who became Turner's mentor after his father, Eddie Turner, passed away when Turner was thirteen years old.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Sylvester Turner, Section A2012_156_001_003, TRT: 3:29:13 ?

The Honorable Sylvester Turner was raised in the Acres Homes neighborhood of Houston, Texas, where he attended the Bethel Baptist Church with his father, Eddie Turner. After his father's death in 1968, Turner was mentored by the church's pastor, W.H. Dudley, who encouraged his participation in Bible study, Sunday school and the Baptist Training Union. Turner was also influenced by his neighborhood peers in Acres Homes, who motivated him to succeed and kept him out of trouble. During this time, Turner was bused to the recently integrated Klein High School in Klein, Texas, where the police were often called to stop the frequent fights between the white and black students. Despite the turbulence of integration, Turner excelled academically. He became a champion member of the debate team, was elected student body president, and won the Mr. Klein High School contest. After graduating as valedictorian of his class, he matriculated at the University of Houston.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Sylvester Turner, Section A2012_156_001_004, TRT: 4:33:36 ?

The Honorable Sylvester Turner attended the University of Houston in Houston, Texas, where he majored in political science and minored in speech. He was a member of the Black Student Union, and speaker of the student senate. He planned to attend the University of Texas at Austin School of Law; but, after receiving encouragement from several professors, decided to accept an offer of admission to Harvard Law School. There, Turner was elected president of the Harvard Black Law Students Association, and was mentored by Harvard Law School's first black faculty member, Derrick A. Bell, Jr. He also befriended

future Supreme Court of Virginia Chief Justice Leroy Hassell and The HistoryMakers founder Julieanna Richardson. While living in Cambridge, Massachusetts, Turner attended the Union Baptist Church in Central Square. There, he began to reconsider the traditional Baptist sanction against women in the ministry when his friend and classmate, Gina Tillman Young, became a preacher at the church.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Sylvester Turner, Section A2012_156_001_005, TRT: 5:30:52 ?

The Honorable Sylvester Turner served as a summer associate at the law firm of Fulbright and Jaworski LLP in Houston, Texas, and was offered a full time position there. After graduating from Harvard Law School in 1980, Turner considered joining a law firm on the East Coast, but decided to return to Houston to be with his family. He accepted the position at Fulbright and Jaworski LLP; and, in 1983, founded his own law firm, Barnes and Turner LLP. At that time, Turner became involved in local politics in Texas. In 1984, he lost his campaign for a seat on the Harris County Commissioners Court. Four years later, he was elected to the Texas House of Representatives, where he represented the majority-white Texas House District 139. Turner also talks about his interest in healthcare reform, and remembers securing a settlement for Janet Little, who was injured in the Phillips Petroleum Company plant explosion of 1989.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Sylvester Turner, Section A2012_156_001_006, TRT: 6:29:11 ?

The Honorable Sylvester Turner mounted his first campaign for the mayoralty of Houston, Texas in 1991. One week before the election, local news outlet KTRK-TV falsely alleged that Turner was tied to an insurance scandal, and he lost the mayoral race. He sued the station for libel defamation and secured a multimillion dollar settlement, but the decision was later overturned by the Texas Supreme Court. Following the Republican Revolution in the midterm elections of 1994, the State of Texas elected two consecutive Republican governors; and, for the first time in 150 years, a Republican majority presided over the Texas House of Representatives. During this time, Turner remained a member of the state legislature; and, in 2003, was appointed speaker pro tempore. That same year, he campaigned again for the mayoralty of Houston, and lost to Bill White. In 2007, Turner organized bipartisan support for the passage of Texas House Bill 109, which implemented the Children's Health Insurance Program.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Sylvester Turner, Section A2012_156_001_007, TRT: 7:24:00 ?

The Honorable Sylvester Turner was a member of the Texas House of Representatives, and was serving as the vice chairman of the Committee on Appropriations at the time of the interview. In addition to his state legislative work, Turner talks about his efforts for community redevelopment of the Acres Homes neighborhood of Houston, Texas, where he cofounded the Houston Astros Major League Baseball Urban Youth Academy. He also remembers the election of President Barack Obama, and describes his hopes and concerns for the African American community. Turner talks about his family, and concludes the interview by reflecting upon his life, legacy and how he would like to be remembered.