

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Charles M. Blow

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Blow, Charles M., 1970-
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Charles M. Blow,
Dates:	September 11, 2014
Bulk Dates:	2014
Physical Description:	7 uncompressed MOV digital video files (3:30:25).
Abstract:	Journalist Charles M. Blow (1970 -) served as The New York Times' graphics department head, as well as the paper's first visual op-ed columnist. His memoir, <i>Fire Shut Up in My Bones</i> , was published in 2014. Blow was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on September 11, 2014, in New York, New York. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2014_208
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Journalist Charles M. Blow was born on August 11, 1970 in Gibsland, Louisiana. As a young boy, Blow was inspired by his mother, a teacher and school administrator. He went on to graduate magna cum laude from Grambling State University in Louisiana, where he received his B.A. degree in mass communications. As a student, Blow interned at *The New York Times* and was the editor-in-chief of the student newspaper, *The Gramblinite*. He also founded a now-defunct student magazine called *Razz*.

Upon graduation from Grambling State University in 1991, Blow was hired as a graphic artist for *The Detroit News*. He then joined *The New York Times* in 1994 as a graphics editor and subsequently became the paper's graphics director, a position he held for nine years. Blow was later appointed as *The New York Times*' design director for news before leaving in 2006 to become the Art Director for *National Geographic* magazine. In 2008, Blow returned to *The New York Times*, where he was named the paper's first visual op-ed columnist. His column appeared twice-a-week, and he wrote a blog entitled "By The Numbers" for the newspaper's website. Blow also served as a CNN commentator, and appeared on MSNBC, CNN, Fox News, the BBC, Al Jazeera, and HBO.

While at *The New York Times*, Blow led the paper to a best of show award from the Society of News Design for its information graphics coverage of 9/11, the first time the award had been given for graphics coverage. He also led the newspaper to its first two best in show awards from the Malofiej International Infographics Summit for work that included coverage of the Iraq war. Since 2011, Blow has been ranked on The Roots' Top 100 most influential people list. In addition to these honors, he was one of the leading voices on the Trayvon Martin case in the first half of 2012.

His memoir, *Fire Shut Up in My Bones*, was published in 2014. Blow lives in Brooklyn with his three children.

Charles M. Blow was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on September 11, 2014.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Charles M. Blow was conducted by Julieanna L. Richardson on September 11, 2014, in New York, New York, and was recorded on 7 uncompressed MOV digital video files. Journalist Charles M. Blow (1970 -) served as The New York Times' graphics department head, as well as the paper's first visual op-ed columnist. His memoir, *Fire Shut Up in My Bones*, was published in 2014.

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:

Blow, Charles M., 1970-

Richardson, Julieanna L. (Interviewer)

Feldman, Isaac (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Blow, Charles M., 1970---Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Journalist

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 Charles M. Blow, September 11, 2014. The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

Processing Information

This interview collection was processed and encoded on 6/7/2022 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 Charles M. Blow, Section A2014_208_001_001, TRT: 1:30:16
2014/09/11

Charles M. Blow was born on August 11, 1970 in Shreveport, Louisiana to Freddie Blow and Toi Blow. Blow's mother was born in the rural town of Gibsland, Louisiana. There, she was raised by her grandmother, Catherine Sneed Richardson, after her parents moved to Houston, Texas. She married Blow's father at a young age, and left school to care for her five sons. Eventually,

Blow's mother went to work in a processing plant, and returned to school to study education. Blow's father worked as a musician until his bandmates died in an accident. He then quit playing music, and found work in the construction industry. When Blow was young, his parents divorced. Afterwards, he and his four brothers were raised in Gibsland by their mother and extended maternal family. The town's schools were not integrated until the late 1960s. Blow attended Gibsland Elementary School and Gibsland-Coleman High School, which was formerly the all-black Coleman College.

Video Oral History Interview with Charles M. Blow, Section A2014_208_001_002, TRT: 2:30:12
2014/09/11

Charles M. Blow was raised by his extended maternal family in Gibsland, Louisiana. There, he belonged to the Shiloh Baptist Church, where his mother was a lifetime member. He briefly attended Ringgold Elementary School, where his mother worked, and then transferred to Gibsland Elementary School. There, Blow excelled academically, and developed an interest in reading and drawing. In the seventh grade, Blow entered the integrated Gibsland-Coleman High School. At this point in the interview, Blow remembers being sexually abused by his teenage cousin at the age of seven years old. He was bullied into keeping the abuse a secret, and as a result, he often felt alienated and lonely as a child. He spent most of his free time in the abandoned home of a family whose children had drowned, where he practiced drawing portraits. In the early 2010s, Blow began writing his memoirs, 'Fire Shut Up in My Bones,' and decided to tell his mother about what happened to him as a child.

Video Oral History Interview with Charles M. Blow, Section A2014_208_001_003, TRT: 3:30:15
2014/09/11

Charles M. Blow attended Gibsland-Coleman High School in Gibsland, Louisiana. There, he excelled academically and served in leadership roles in numerous clubs and organizations. During the eleventh grade, Blow met Louisiana's governor, Edwin Edwards, through the Hugh O'Brian Youth Leadership program, which fostered his interest in politics. Around this time, Blow's girlfriend became pregnant. Shortly after the baby was born, Blow learned he was not the father, and the woman and child disappeared. Blow went on to graduate as the class valedictorian, and then followed his older brothers to Grambling State University in Grambling, Louisiana, where he planned to study English. As a freshman, Blow joined a fraternity, and was elected president of his pledge class. At this point, he talks about the pledging process, and reflects upon his experiences of hazing. Later that year, Blow changed his major to mass communications at the suggestion of one of his professors.

Video Oral History Interview with Charles M. Blow, Section A2014_208_001_004, TRT: 4:39:46
2014/09/11

Charles M. Blow studied mass communications at Grambling State University in Grambling, Louisiana. While there, he wrote for The Gramblinite student newspaper, and founded a magazine called The Razz. During the summer after his junior year, Blow interned as a visual journalist at the Shreveport Times, where he accepted a part time staff position at the end of the program. During his senior year, Blow interviewed for an internship at The New York Times at a journalism conference. Although he was initially told that the newspaper did not offer a visual journalism internship, the staff was so impressed with Blow that they created a position for him. After graduating, Blow moved with his wife to Detroit, Michigan, where he worked in information graphics for The Detroit News. He remained in that position for eighteen months, and then moved to New York City to join The New York Times' graphics department under

executive editor Joseph Lelyveld. One year later, Blow was promoted to head of the department.

Video Oral History Interview with Charles M. Blow, Section A2014_208_001_005, TRT: 5:27:35
2014/09/11

Charles M. Blow became the youngest department head of The New York Times in the mid-1990s, when he was promoted to director of the newspaper's graphics department. In this role, Blow oversaw a diverse staff of thirty-five journalists, who used maps and graphics to create visual explanations that accompanied the written articles. At this point, Blow talks about the theories of perception and color that influence the work of visual journalists. In 2006, Blow left The New York Times to become the art director of National Geographic. He commuted daily to Washington, D.C. from Brooklyn, New York, where he was his children's sole guardian. After two years, Blow left National Geographic and returned to The New York Times as an op-ed columnist. Due to his background in visual journalism, his column and By the Numbers blog incorporated both op charts and written text. Around the time of his return, Blow was asked to appear on MSNBC, where he became a frequent guest.

Video Oral History Interview with Charles M. Blow, Section A2014_208_001_006, TRT: 6:28:30
2014/09/11

Charles M. Blow became an op-ed columnist at The New York Times in 2008. At this point, Blow talks about his writing process, and the purpose of a newspaper column. He also talks about Hurricane Katrina, which ravaged his home state of Louisiana in 2005. He remembers his disgust towards the journalists who expressed surprise about the New Orleans residents who were unable to evacuate the city. In 2012, Blow was one of a group of black writers, including Trymaine Lee and Ta-Nehisi Coates, whose articles on the shooting of Trayvon Martin brought the issue of discriminatory policing to national attention. For his column, Blow interviewed Martin's mother, Sybrina Fulton, about how the case was handled by the police. After Martin's body was taken into custody, the police made little effort to identify him or locate his family members. At this point, Blow reflects upon the state of the African American community, and describes his hopes and concerns for the next generation.

Video Oral History Interview with Charles M. Blow, Section A2014_208_001_007, TRT: 7:23:51
2014/09/11

Charles M. Blow raised three children as a single father in Brooklyn, New York. During this time, he also worked as a columnist at The New York Times, appeared as a guest speaker on MSNBC and wrote his memoir, 'Fire Shut Up in My Bones.' Published in 2014, Blow began work on the book in 2009, following the suicides of two eleven year old boys who were bullied for their sexual orientation. In the book, Blow wrote about his own experiences as a bisexual man in the hopes that he would become an example for struggling LGBTQ youth. At this point, Blow remembers telling his former wife about his bisexuality, and how his friends and family reacted to the news. He also talks about the issue of bisexual erasure at large and within the LGBTQ community. Blow concludes the interview by reflecting upon his legacy.