

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with The Honorable William "Mo" Cowan

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Cowan, William Maurice, 1969-
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable William "Mo" Cowan,
Dates:	October 20, 2016
Bulk Dates:	2016
Physical Description:	6 uncompressed MOV digital video files (2:47:33).
Abstract:	Lawyer and political leader William “Mo” Cowan (1969-) worked as a litigator before becoming the chief of staff in Massachusetts Governor Deval L. Patrick’s office. He also served as an interim U.S. Senator for the State of Massachusetts in 2013. Cowan was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on October 20, 2016, in Boston, Massachusetts. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2016_074
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Lawyer and political leader William “Mo” Cowan was born on April 4, 1969 in Yadkinville, North Carolina to machinist William Hall and seamstress Cynthia Cowan. In 1987, Cowan graduated from Forbush High School in East Bend, North Carolina. He earned his A.B. degree in sociology from Duke University in Durham, North Carolina; and received his J.D. degree from Northeastern University School of Law in Boston, Massachusetts in 1994.

From 1997 to 2009, Cowan served on the litigation team at the law firm of Mintz

Levin in Boston, Massachusetts, eventually becoming a partner. He served as an advisor to both Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney and Middlesex District Attorney Gerard T. Leone Jr. In 2009, he became chief legal counsel to Massachusetts Governor Deval L. Patrick, where he oversaw all legal operations for the Governor's office. Cowan then served as Governor Patrick's chief of staff in 2011, where he helped develop the governor's budget and pass legislation like the Expanded Gaming Act. Governor Patrick then appointed Cowan as interim United States Senator until July 15, 2013. Cowan was the second African American senator to represent Massachusetts, as well as the first African American U.S. Senator to serve concurrently with another African American senator. Cowan chaired the Subcommittee on Nutrition, Specialty Crops, Food and Agricultural Research, and sponsored several bills during his service. After his time in the U.S. Senate, Cowan joined the Boston law firm of Mintz Levin as counsel, and served as president and chief executive officer of ML Strategies, LLC.

Cowan was a fellow at the Harvard University Institute of Politics in 2013. He also served as president of the Massachusetts Black Lawyers Association, president of Northeastern University's School of Law Alumni/ae Association Board of Directors, and as an active member of the United States Association of Former Members of Congress. Cowan sat on the Board of Trustees at Northeastern University, Massachusetts General Hospital, and The Chesnut School.

Cowan was named one of *Boston's Business Journal's* "40 Under 40," and one of "Massachusetts Super Lawyers." In addition to being awarded the Good Guy Award from the Massachusetts Women's Political Caucus, he received the Building A Better Boston Award from the UMass-Boston Center for Collaborative Leadership, and the Paul Robeson National Leadership Award from the Concerned Black Men of Massachusetts.

Cowan and his wife, Stacy Cowan, have two sons, Miles and Grant.

William "Mo" Cowan was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on October 20, 2016.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with The Honorable William "Mo" Cowan was conducted by Larry Crowe on October 20, 2016, in Boston, Massachusetts, and was recorded on 6 uncompressed MOV digital video files. Lawyer and political

leader William “Mo” Cowan (1969-) worked as a litigator before becoming the chief of staff in Massachusetts Governor Deval L. Patrick’s office. He also served as an interim U.S. Senator for the State of Massachusetts in 2013.

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:

Cowan, William Maurice, 1969-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Cowan, William Maurice, 1969---Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Lawyer

HistoryMakers® Category:

LawMakers

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 William "Mo" Cowan, October 20, 2016. The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

Processing Information

This interview collection was processed and encoded on 2/5/2020 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 William "Mo" Cowan, Section A2016_074_001_001, TRT: 1:28:22 2016/10/20

The Honorable William “Mo” Cowan was born on April 4, 1969 in Yadkinville, North Carolina to Cynthia Long Cowan and William Cowan. Cowan’s maternal great-grandparents, Minnie Martin Young and Brady Young, were farmers that owned farmland in North Carolina, where they grew and sold produce. Cowan’s maternal grandmother, Rosa Young Hawkins, worked as a nurse’s aide, and raised Cowan’s mother in the predominately African American neighborhood of Huntsville, North Carolina. After graduating from high school, Cowan’s mother found work as a seamstress. She was also musically talented, and often sang at Tabernacle United Church of Christ with her siblings. Cowan’s paternal grandmother, Thelma Hendricks Cowan, grew up in Surrey County, North Carolina and later moved to Yadkin County, North Carolina, where she and husband raised their several children, including Cowan’s father. Despite the presence of the Ku Klux Klan in Yadkinville, Cowan rarely saw or experienced racial terrorism during his childhood.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable William "Mo" Cowan, Section A2016_074_001_002, TRT: 2:29:55 2016/10/20

The Honorable William “Mo” Cowan was raised in Yadkinville, North Carolina with his two sisters. He often visited his maternal grandmother, Rosa Young Hawkins, and maternal great-grandparents, Minnie Young and Brady Young, who owned farmland nearby. During the summer, Cowan helped them tend to their crops and livestock. He attended Courtney Elementary School in Yadkinville, where he was tracked and placed in advanced classes. As the only African American student in these classes, he developed friendships with the white children, and later learned that one of his friends was the son of a Ku Klux Klan member. Outside of school, Cowan spent time with the African American children in his neighborhood. He had a strained relationship with his father, William Cowan, who struggled with alcoholism after serving in the Vietnam War. At times, he was physically abusive toward Cowan’s mother, Cynthia Long Cowan. He died in a drunk driving accident when Cowan was sixteen years old.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable William "Mo" Cowan, Section A2016_074_001_003, TRT: 3:25:31 2016/10/20

The Honorable William “Mo” Cowan attended Courtney Elementary School in Yadkinville, North Carolina, where he was elected as the school’s first student body president. Nonetheless, Cowan struggled socially inside and outside of school. As a result of the school's tracking system, he was placed in classes with majority white students, which distanced him from the other African American children in his neighborhood. Cowan’s social life improved drastically once he graduated to Forbush High School in East Bend, North Carolina, where he was no longer the only African American tracked in the upper level classes. He joined several clubs, including the marching band, wrestling team, football team, and choir, which helped him to meet and connect to other students. When the African American students criticized the administration, the principal asked for Cowan’s assistance in calming his peers, although he politely refused. He also recalls the popular culture of the 1980s, including the popularity of

Michael Jackson.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable William "Mo" Cowan, Section A2016_074_001_004, TRT: 4:28:02 2016/10/20

The Honorable William “Mo” Cowan’s father struggled with alcoholism, and frequently committed domestic abuse against Cowan’s mother, Cynthia Long Cowan. When Cowan was sixteen years old, his father died in a drunk driving accident, and Cowan began working during the summers and after school to help support his family. At this time, he considered becoming an educator, but was encouraged by a teacher and mentor to pursue other interests. Cowan enrolled in the health-focused vocational classes at Forbush High School in East Bend, North Carolina, and aspired to become an anesthesiologist. Although most of his peers and relatives did not attend four year universities, Cowan was determined to earn his B.S. degree in engineering before continuing to medical school. He opted to attend Duke University because of its biomedical engineering program, and hoped that the exposure to a predominantly white college would better prepare him for the professional world. He graduated from Forbush High School in 1987.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable William "Mo" Cowan, Section A2016_074_001_005, TRT: 5:27:43 2016/10/20

The Honorable William “Mo” Cowan started his freshman year at Duke University in Durham, North Carolina in 1987, where he met students from across the nation as well as foreign countries. On campus, he learned about African American history from his peers, and joined the Black Student Alliance and marching band. After struggling in his science classes, Cowan decided not to pursue a career in medicine. Instead, he immersed himself in social science courses, and changed his major to sociology. After several lawyers spoke to his criminal justice class, Cowan decided to pursue a law degree. The beating of Rodney King in 1991 and the following civil unrest prompted by the acquittal of the three officers further spurred Cowan’s interest in the legal system. While Cowan enjoyed his political science classes, he was uninterested in entering politics at this time. He recalls President Ronald Wilson Reagan’s visit at Duke

University in 1988, and Harvey Gantt's campaign against Senator Jesse Helms in 1990.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable William "Mo" Cowan, Section A2016_074_001_006, TRT: 6:28:00 2016/10/20

The Honorable William "Mo" Cowan lived next to basketball player Christian Laettner in his senior year at Duke University in Durham, North Carolina. While many disliked Laettner and criticized his character, he and Cowan got along well. Cowan decided to leave North Carolina after his graduation in 1991. He applied to Northeastern University School of Law in Boston, Massachusetts, which offered a coop program that combined coursework with an apprenticeship. Initially, Cowan had difficulty adjusting to life in Needham, Massachusetts where he knew few people. He also struggled with his rigorous course load and deciding upon a legal focus. Although he preferred to work on his own and avoided study groups, Cowan made several good friends, and was influenced by professors like Deborah Ramirez, Hope Lewis and David Hall. Ultimately, he opted to focus on business law upon graduation, and joined the law firm Peabody and Arnold LLP in Boston.