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The Insider: Julieanna Richardson, Founder of The HistoryMakers

Digital archive documents Black America’s legacy

In June 2014, the Library of Congress announced that it had acquired a video archive of thousands of hours of interviews that captures African-American life, history and culture as well as the struggles and achievements of the black experience. The interview collection is from The HistoryMakers, a nonprofit research and educational institution founded in 1999 that is committed to preserving, developing and providing easy access to an internationally recognized, archival collection of thousands of African-American video oral histories. The Librarian of Congress, James H. Billington said, “The HistoryMakers archive provides invaluable first-person accounts of both well-known and unsung African-Americans, detailing their hopes, dreams and accomplishments—often in the face of adversity. This culturally important collection is a rich and diverse resource for scholars, teachers, students and documentarians seeking a more complete record of our nation’s history and its people.”

The collection comprises 9,000 hours of content and over 2,600 videotaped
interviews with African-Americans from various disciplines including art, business, media, law, education, entertainment, sports and more. Among the notables are President Barack Obama when he was an Illinois state senator, General Colin Powell, child advocate Marion Wright Edelman, baseball legend Ernie Banks, entertainer/activist Harry Belafonte, poet/writer Maya Angelou, Massachusetts Senator Edward Brooke, poet Nikki Giovanni and actors Ossie Davis and Ruby Dee. Some of the lesser-known participants who have shared their life stories are Arthur Burton, Sr., one of the last surviving Pullman Porters; Judge William Sylvester White, one of the first commissioned black officers in the Navy; and Alonzo Pettie, the oldest living black cowboy.

For Women’s History Month we talked with Julieanna Richardson, founder and CEO of The HistoryMakers to learn more about the organization, her inspiration for creating it and how readers can get involved.

**Tell us about yourself and what inspired you to create The HistoryMakers.**

I’m an American studies and theater arts major. Storytelling is an important part of who I am.

I graduated from Brandeis University and Harvard Law School. I started my career as a corporate lawyer and later became involved in the cable television industry. Then I decided to launch a home shopping network. I was one of two regional home shopping networks in the mid-80s. I was later asked by the cable company to manage several local cable channels. After the city took over those channels I was at a major crossroads in my life. Out of that came this wonderful idea for a project. I had done an oral history project as a young college student and I just found all of the interviews over the Christmas break. They’re over 40 years old! Finding that material had a huge impact on me. I didn’t want our children not to know our history. That motivates me to do what I’m doing now.

**Share more about your event announcing the Library of Congress partnership.**

We had a major celebration on November 8, 2014 at the Library of Congress with over 250 of our history makers in attendance. We toured the Library and the Packard Campus where the archive is housed. Featured during the celebration was a reader’s theater telling the history of the organization in theatrical form, an education symposium and a main event where we honored Gwen Ifill. That program is airing nationally on PBS.
There was also a major announcement during the evening that PricewaterhouseCoopers charitable foundation committed 1.6 million to us in the area of youth education. They’re giving us money to add all of our interviews to our digital archives. We’re using that as part of our education effort to bring the digital archive into schools around the country. It’s a miracle blessing. It will take three years to complete. It’s huge. So the focus will be on our digital archives going forward.

How can readers get involved with The HistoryMakers?

Our goal is to launch a new 25 million capital campaign. It’s been a real challenge for us to find money to do the interviews themselves. It’s important because our history makers are passing away. Ernie Banks (Major League baseball legend) just died and I remember a writer from the Chicago Sun Times learned important things she didn’t know about him from our interview. We know our interviews are valuable in that way. And we want to do more technologically to connect people to the stories. When people see what we have I think they’re going to be blown away. We need your support.

Anything else you’d like to share?

I want to emphasize that this affiliation with the Library of Congress really completes the circle because also housed at the Library is the slave narrative (the Works Progress Administration’s initiative to document the experiences of former slaves in the 1930s) and that had been the only recording of the Black experience before we came along. So we are joined by the story of the enslaved, and now with us, there’s the story of their descendants.

Visit the website at thehistorymakers.com.
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