Julieanna Richardson '76 building something special with 'The HistoryMakers'

The alumna has collected 9,000 hours of interviews for the oral history project, which has teamed with Brandeis for a grant

By Jarret Bencks
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Growing up as an African-American in a small, mostly white community in Ohio, Julieanna Richardson '76 had an empty feeling when it came to her cultural heritage.

"There were only two things in my history book about black people, one was about slavery, and the other was George Washington Carver," she said. "It was hard for my 9 year old brain to reconcile that George Washington Carver would have done all those things with peanuts when all we had been were slaves."

Richardson is the founder of The HistoryMakers, a non-profit educational institution that has created the nation's largest African American video oral history archive of stories of thousands of both well-known and unsung African-Americans. Last year, it was announced that the Library of Congress will serve as the permanent repository for The HistoryMakers Collection. Recently, Brandeis received a $50,000 planning grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation to expand The HistoryMakers' reach as a resource at the university level.

The seeds of The HistoryMakers were planted during Richardson's undergraduate years at Brandeis. As a double major in Theatre Arts and American Studies double major, Richardson did her independent research project on the Harlem Renaissance and traveled to New York her sophomore year to interview Butterfly McQueen of Gone With the Wind, Honey Coles, lyricist for 1928 Broadway production of the musical Shuffle Along and other icons from that period. And she took her tape recorder with her.

"I was in my element. I had found myself," she said.

Lawrence Fuchs, professor and founder of Brandeis' American Studies program, was a force in supporting Richardson's research into her cultural identity, she said.

"He was such a mentor and believed in me and my dream," Richardson said.

Since it was founded in 2000, The HistoryMakers has received funding, including large grants from the National Science Foundation and PricewaterhouseCoopers. The proposal for the most recent grant from the Mellon Foundation was developed and written by Brandeis University Librarian John Unsworth, who has been an advocate for The HistoryMakers dating back to his days as a dean at the University of Illinois.

"It's a unique project, there really isn't anything like this in respect to black history," Unsworth said. "It's highly searchable for research and teaching – it's very easy to get to the portions of these conversations that are pertinent to multiple disciplines."
So far, the project has over 9,000 hours of interviews with 3,000 subjects from hundreds of U.S. cities and towns as well as in the Caribbean, Mexico and Norway, but Richardson considers it only about 60 percent complete. The goal is to collect interviews from 5,000 subjects.

"To create something people find valuable is quite a big payback for all the work," Richardson said. "It is essentially my life's passion."

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