

## Houston voices join national archive of African-American experience



**By Cindy George, Houston Chronicle**

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Sylvester Turner talked about growing up in Acres Homes. Rufus Cormier shared details of his role in the Watergate investigation. John W. Peavy Jr. described working as a judge.

The stories of these three Houston civic leaders are part of a growing national archive of oral histories from African-Americans that is unmatched in preserving black voices since the Works Progress Administration recorded former slaves in the 1930s.

Called The HistoryMakers, the project has now amassed more than 2,700 first-person accounts from people in 180 cities since 2000. Both databases are stored at the Library of Congress.

"What we set out to do is create the nation's largest African-American video oral archives," said project founder Julieanna Richardson of Chicago. "The significance of our effort is that there had been virtually no attempt to record the black experience with the first-person voice since the slave narratives."

The archives include such well-known people as writer Maya Angelou and Katherine G. Johnson, the NASA computer scientist whose story was captured in this year's "Hidden Figures" movie. But the database also includes entrepreneurs, lawyers, bankers, corporate executives, actors, athletes and others in 15 different categories.

Turner was interviewed in 2012 as a state legislator, before he was elected Houston's mayor. Cormier and Peavy are among seven Houstonians whose interviews are being added now to the archives.

"I was extremely pleased to be included; I think it's a very valuable project," Cormier said. "That record being stored in the Library of Congress will be of great value historically and the range of people - from the most celebrated to those whose lives are much more routine - will result, I think, in a valuable record in documenting the lives and progress of African-Americans in the country."

The project was founded in 1999 by Richardson, but the focus now is to broaden the geographic representation in the archives. About one-third of those interviewed are from Chicago and Washington, D.C. There are three people from Mississippi and 10 from Utah. Fewer than 100 are Texans.

"That's not reflective," said Richardson. "How can we have 500 people in Chicago and 400 people in D.C. and 40 from Houston?"

Richardson knows that time is running out for many important voices.

"Every death represents the burning of a library," she said. "There is a huge urgency."

### ***'Rich and diverse'***

The project began during a lull in Richardson's career. The former corporate lawyer, Chicago cable administrator and television executive wanted her next act to meld her love of theater and concern about the undocumented black experience in America's pockmarked history.

She modeled the project on the WPA's effort, which collected 2,300 first-person accounts of formerly enslaved people, and the Shoah Foundation's Institute for Visual History and Education that began in 1994 to videotape and preserve interviews with survivors and other witnesses of the Jewish Holocaust. The Shoah database now has more than 54,000 audio-visual testimonies.

The first HistoryMakers interview was conducted in 2000, and the project has continued for more than 16 years at a cost of about \$30 million.

Interviews are usually chronological, last for several hours and explore a person's childhood, education, career progression and philosophies. Most average about six hours, but one lasted for 15.

The oldest HistoryMaker at the time of recording was Louisiana Hines, a Florida beautician, artist, author and entrepreneur who was 109 during her 2007 interview. Richardson's goal is to record at least 5,000 testimonies - twice the number of slave narratives.

"We are living in very fractured times and there is so little still known about the black experience," she said. "Our collection is as rich and diverse and contextual as one would like to see."

The strategy now is to broaden the geographic representation of the database, particularly in Texas, she said.

"As I started to do interviews, I found that there was something about Texas and the black experience," she said. "There were families who held a lot of land and there were also families who went back a lot of generations. We are hoping to learn more about what Texan African-American history will add to the national narrative."

The HistoryMakers came to Houston in late November to film a Public Broadcasting System program featuring a conversation with Turner led by fellow HistoryMaker Tony Chase, an entrepreneur who founded Cricket Wireless. The special aired this month on Houston Public Media's TV 8 as part of Black History Month programming.

Chase's father, pioneering Texas architect John Chase, who died in 2012, also has an interview in the HistoryMakers archives.

The searchable database is provided to public schools; college and universities including Harvard, Howard, Yale and Princeton pay licensing fees for access. Users of the archive are tracked from Africa, Europe and the Caribbean, she said, proving "how broadly embraced the black experience is around the world."

### ***New Houston voices***

Cormier was six months out of Yale Law School when he was asked to join the Watergate investigation.

In January 1974, he became a special assistant to John Doar, who was special counsel to the U.S. House Judiciary Committee for the impeachment inquiry that led to the resignation of President Richard Nixon. Cormier worked on the articles of impeachment.

"It was certainly a very, very interesting undertaking, and it was certainly a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity," he said.

Born and raised in Beaumont, Cormier started his college education at Southern Methodist University on a football scholarship.

Now 68, he's a retired Baker Botts partner who spent 38 years with the firm as a transactional lawyer. He and his wife, Dr. Yvonne Cormier, are well-known philanthropists.

Peavy, a lawyer now in his early 70s, grew up in Houston's Fifth Ward. As a Howard University undergraduate and law school student, he worked part-time as a clerk and administrative assistant for the agency that became NASA.

After returning to Houston, he handled probate cases and community outreach in Harris County through the county judge's office until redistricting in the mid-1970s opened better electoral possibilities for black and Hispanic candidates. He became the first black justice of the peace in Texas and the state's first black family law judge, a position he held in Harris County from 1977 to 1994. He also served on the Houston City Council in the mid-1990s until resigning under the cloud of a federal investigation.

"People who are 50 don't know that I was justice of the peace or that I worked at the White House," said Peavy, who has been a businessman for the last two decades. "I think it's just important that people know people who are trailblazers and the things that they went through because it was not easy. We can do it - we just have to have the opportunity."

Stephen L. Williams - another Houstonian who is being added to the archives - considers himself an "ordinary person," though he is the first non-physician to lead the Houston Health Department.

Since becoming director in 2004, Williams, 60, has worked to strengthen public health outreach in the community.

"We have really intervened at times that were critical," he said. "There were times that our folks knocked on someone's door and found out there was an immediate need that folks had and sent a nurse or social worker out to take care of it."

Other Houstonians who are new to the archives are hospitality entrepreneur Charles Bush, state Rep. Garnet Coleman, dentist Matthew Plummer and Merline Pitre, an author and historian. Texans joining the archives include Gregory Vincent, the University of Texas at Austin vice president for diversity and community engagement, and Beaumont lawyer James E. Payne.

Richardson, who attended Harvard Law School with Turner and Tony Chase, said the database will continue to grow.

"We have an opportunity to do something that no one in the history of the United States has done - to really create this every-increasing body of work about the black experience," she said. "I feel like I've been guided by our enslaved ancestors. ... They have been joined under one roof - the stories of the formerly enslaved and now the descendants of the formerly enslaved."

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