The HistoryMakers partners with Brandeis to modernize video archive of African-American experience

A $725,000 grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation will help modernize the HistoryMakers' digital archive

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Sixteen years ago, oral historian Julieanna Richardson ’76 began recording first-person interviews with African Americans from all walks of life to create a one-of-a-kind archive of the African-American experience called The HistoryMakers. Since then, more than 2,700 oral histories totaling 9,000 hours have been recorded on video, making The HistoryMakers the single largest archival project of its kind in the world.

Gen. Colin Powell, children’s advocate Marian Wright Edelman, entertainer and civic activist Harry Belafonte, and President Barack Obama are represented in the archive, as are countless other less well known African Americans who have told their personal stories.

Now, with the support of a generous $725,000 grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, Brandeis University, Ms. Richardson’s alma mater, will work with The HistoryMakers to modernize the technological foundations of the digital archive. The one-year grant, which also funds the creation of a new client for the digital archive to be produced by Carnegie Mellon University, is a crucial first step toward enhancing online access to the collection for students and scholars across the country and around the world.

In addition, Brandeis is one of 11 elite universities to gain access to The HistoryMakers’ archive through a first-ever digital subscription partnership. The digital subscription partnership will give scholars and students unprecedented access to the most significant archive of African-American life.

“It means the world to me that my alma mater is leading the modernization of the archive and has joined as a digital subscriber. It’s all come full circle for me,” said Julieanna Richardson ’76, founder and executive director of the The HistoryMakers. “This important modernization of the digital archive will ensure the oral history of thousands of African Americans lives on for generations.”

Ms. Richardson first began to understand the power of oral history as a Brandeis sophomore when she interviewed African-American actors Thelma Butterfly McQueen and Leigh Whipper for a research project on the Harlem Renaissance. These personal narratives inspired her, and gave her the idea to establish The HistoryMakers many years later.

“We are honored that The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation has selected Brandeis to modernize and secure the future of The HistoryMakers’ prized archive, with the goal of eventually making this singular collection available to scholars, students and the general public,” said Brandeis’ Interim President Lisa M. Lynch. “It is fitting that we will partner with Ms. Richardson, who has made a remarkable contribution to the rich chronicle of the African-American experience.”

Brandeis’ Library and Technology Services project team, in tandem with Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, will implement improvements to the video collection’s web platform; establish a higher-education advisory board to develop a strategy for promoting use of the video archive by institutions of higher learning across the country; and identify a video-host provider that can deliver responsive video on a variety of platforms, including smartphones, tablets, laptops and desktops.

“The nation is indebted to Julieanna Richardson for her tireless effort in establishing and building this extraordinary collection of the oral histories of contemporary African Americans,” said Donald J. Waters, senior program officer at the Mellon Foundation. “HistoryMakers needs to be more widely known and studied, and this collaboration among HistoryMakers, Brandeis and Carnegie Mellon promises to increase both the visibility and usability of the collection.”
John Unsworth, Brandeis University’s librarian, vice provost and chief information officer, is the project’s principal investigator.

“We are looking forward to working with The HistoryMakers to put this collection of oral histories on a sustainable technological platform,” Unsworth said. “This work will make it possible to improve The HistoryMakers’ website, and pave the way to make the archive available for generations to come to learn from and enjoy.”

Interviews with more than 200 of the nation’s leading African-American scientists are already publicly available at the Library of Congress, The HistoryMakers’ official repository.

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