An In Depth look into The HistoryMakers Digital Archive

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Each month, the DePaul University Library brings deep into our collections to feature resources recommended by our Library Associates. This month, Heather Hummungs, Liaison to the African and Black Diaspora Studies Program recommends The HistoryMakers Digital Archive. HistoryMakers is a collection of oral history recordings following the lives of influential African American figures (including some DePaul alumni and faculty) and African-American-led groups and movements. Her piece highlighted the source in October 2020 on "Researching African American History with NearLibrary Resources" and due to such a positive response we are providing a more in-depth look for those who expressed interest in learning more.

Established in 1996, HistoryMakers is a non-profit organization that, over the past two decades, has compiled a digital archive of interviews that catalogs African American histories, stories, and experiences dating back to the 1900s. With almost 150,000 stories from over 2,500 historically significant figures, The HistoryMakers Digital Archive is truly one of the most unique and important resources in support of African American and Black Diaspora Studies programs. With notable appearances of past luminaries, politicians and activists, John Lewis, (Hon) Coretta Scott King, civil rights leader, Martin Luther King, Jr., and many more, this archive provides access to personalized stories and narratives of figures who shaped the review of history.

There have been attempts to record and preserve the histories of the African-American experience before, but not on this scale or scope. By accessing the HistoryMakers website, there was an attempt by the Federal Writers Project in the 1930s to compile the stories of former slaves (known as the WPA Slave Narrative Project). But many have been criticized for being incomplete and flawed. HistoryMakers strives to provide accessible, authentic, and rich content for its users, giving young people the ability to learn and connect to history, and develop a better understanding of African American history.

Searching "DePaul" will bring up dozens of interviews from former DePaul professor David Goss and Barbara Randlo as well as stories from former students about the opportunities they found while at DePaul. And for each drop, there is a little note from the speaker’s page, such as the following from one interview: "I was very impressed by the library in general and was very glad to be able to see it during my visit."


Here is a five-year-old example of our community members found within the HistoryMakers database:

Barbara Grossman, former Dean of the School of Education, was an educator and academic administrator. Simms was one of the first African-American women to become a principal of a Chicago Public School and the first African-American woman to lead a major city public school system as the superintendent of the CPS’s public school system. In one of these interviews from her reminiscences in the database, Simms describes her time at DePaul as “one of the most rewarding experiences in her life.”

Simms goes on to explain that through DePaul she was able to link directly with the community and was supported by the institution’s outreach to the community established in the Chicago Public Schools.

College of Law Alum, the Hon. Benjamin Hooks, served as the first black judicial subject in Tennessee as well as the first African-American appointee to the Federal Trade Commission. Hooks is well-known for his tenure as the executive director of the NAACP from 1977 to 2002 and former service as a civil rights leader in the Black Community. In his interview with HistoryMakers, Hooks discusses the reputation of DePaul as the legal community for “having more judges on the bench in Chicago” than its other law school competitors and takes his alma mater as a “remarkably good school.”

College of Law Alum, the Hon. Earl S. Storey served as an associate justice with the Illinois Supreme Court. As a judge, Storey presided over the first municipal court in Cook County’s newly organized district in 1913. His interview with HistoryMakers, Storey explains the demographics of his incoming class consisting of “seven African-American students, two blacks and an Indian country lawyer who was, named with families’” and reminisces about his time at DePaul as “the most exhilarating experience.” He adds that his fellow veterans classmates had never gone through. Additionally, when asked about any professors that stood out during his time at DePaul, University College of Law, Storey names four specific faculty members: Professor Arthur Anderson for his Criminal Law course, Professor R. W. Young for his Criminal Law course, Professor Charles B. Rapier (Rapier) for his Property Law course, and Professor Dan Tuff for his Constitutional Law course.

School of Music Alum, Regina Harris-Bowles is a music composer, producer and author. Graduating with honors in 1970, Harris-Bowles’ works have been performed by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Detroit Symphony Orchestra, the Army Band, and other orchestras internationally. Performances include concerts in Peru, Spain, and Italy. She served as the first female musician in the Royal Scottish National Orchestra of Scotland and has received numerous Grammy awards, the American Composer’s League’s Gold Medal, and was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 2010 for her work "Pulse." She has received numerous awards and honors, including the National Medal of Arts and the Library of Congress’ Gershwin Prize for Popular Song.

In Harris-Bowles’ interview with HistoryMakers, she describes the creation of “Oldest Known: No One’s Ever Heard It” as her
primary research for pursuing her second master's degree at DePaul. As Marie Stoeckle elaborates, she believed writing her
chapter in the context of an academic environment would provide her the structure and "inspiration" she needed to complete the piece.

We hope you will explore the HistoryMakers database, consider incorporating its contents into your curriculum or use its
extensive collection of oral history interviews when seeking primary resources in the future. If you have questions about this
resource please contact Maries Hummers, Library Liaison to African and Black Diaspora Studies Program at
Hummers@depau.edu.

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