

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Jorja Palmer

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Palmer, Jorja, 1930-2005
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Jorja Palmer,
Dates:	June 24, 2002
Bulk Dates:	2002
Physical Description:	7 Betacame SP videocassettes (3:33:51).
Abstract:	Community activist Jorja Palmer (1930 - 2005) is the founder of the first group home for African American children in Illinois as well as a delegate to the National Black Political Assembly and a founding member of the Black Crime Commission. Palmer was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on June 24, 2002, in Chicago, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2002_086
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Consummate community activist and people's strategist Jorja English Palmer was born Jorja Williams on June 16, 1930 in New Madrid, Missouri. Her parents, Elizabeth and Frank Williams, moved Palmer and her seven siblings to Chicago in 1933. Palmer attended Forestville Elementary, graduated from DuSable High School in 1948 and attended Woodrow Wilson Junior College (Kennedy-King College).

Keenly interested in history as a youth, Palmer was a voracious reader who loved to discuss local and international issues. As a young mother, she was drawn to neighborhood meetings and by 1960 she was head of the West Chatham Improvement Organization Education Committee and sent by that body to the newly formed Chicago Community Council Organization (CCCO). The CCCO's issue was the elimination of the "Willis Wagons," portable trailers authorized by school superintendent Benjamin Willis that supplanted new school construction in Chicago's overcrowded segregated black neighborhoods. Palmer was an important leader in the CCCO's historic school boycott, in which 80 percent of black families kept their children out of school. In the 70s, she engaged in the fight for an African American School Board President for the Chicago Public Schools. Palmer made history as a delegate to the National Black Political Assembly in Gary, Indiana. She also joined with Thomas Todd, Lu Palmer and Congressman Ralph Metcalfe in the formation of the Black Crime Commission to combat police brutality.

In 1976, she married journalist and political pundit Lu Palmer. Together, they were determined to fight the status quo. In the 80s, Lu and Jorja made a move for real community power when they convened "Toward A Black Mayor" at Malcolm X College in 1981. It was Jorja Palmer who came up with the process for selecting a black mayoral candidate. The Palmers launched the largest voter registration drive in U. S. history, solidifying a core constituency of black voters that persuaded Harold Washington to run for Mayor of the City of Chicago. On October 22, 1992, Palmer established the Stanford English Home for Boys, the first group home for African American children in Illinois, named for her later autistic son. Palmer lived with her husband on Chicago's south

side until her death on December 29, 2005.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Jorja Palmer was conducted by Larry Crowe on June 24, 2002, in Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on 7 Betacame SP videocassettes. Community activist Jorja Palmer (1930 - 2005) is the founder of the first group home for African American children in Illinois as well as a delegate to the National Black Political Assembly and a founding member of the Black Crime Commission.

Restrictions

Restrictions on Access

Restrictions may be applied on a case-by-case basis at the discretion of The HistoryMakers®.

Restrictions on Use

All use of materials and use credits must be pre-approved by The HistoryMakers®. Appropriate credit must be given. Copyright is held by The HistoryMakers®.

Related Material

Information about the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview, as well as correspondence with the interview subject is stored electronically both on The HistoryMakers® server and in two databases maintained by The HistoryMakers®, though this information is not included in this finding aid.

Controlled Access Terms

This interview collection is indexed under the following controlled access subject terms.

Persons:

Palmer, Jorja, 1930-2005

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Palmer, Jorja, 1930-2005--Interviews

African American civil rights workers--Illinois--Chicago--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Community Activist

HistoryMakers® Category:

CivicMakers

Administrative Information

Custodial History

Interview footage was recorded by The HistoryMakers®. All rights to the interview have been transferred to The HistoryMakers® by the interview subject through a signed interview release form. Signed interview release forms have been deposited with Jenner & Block, LLP, Chicago.

Preferred Citation

The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Jorja Palmer, June 24, 2002. The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

Processing Information

This interview collection was processed and encoded on 5/30/2023 by The HistoryMakers® staff. The finding aid was created adhering to the following standards: DACS, AACR2, and the Oral History Cataloging Manual (Matters 1995).

Other Finding Aid

A Microsoft Access contact database and a FileMaker Pro tracking database, both maintained by The HistoryMakers®, keep track of the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview.

Detailed Description of the Collection

Series I: Original Interview Footage

Video Oral History Interview with Jorja Palmer, Section A2002_086_001_001, TRT: 0:30:14 ?

Jorja Palmer describes her family background. Her mother, Elizabeth Bethel Williams, was born to Anne Bethel and her husband presumably in Sardis, Mississippi. Palmer's father, Frank Williams, was a teacher who was born in the

South, as well. Palmer was born to Frank and Elizabeth Williams on June 16, 1930 in New Madrid, Missouri. When Palmer was a small child, Frank Williams relocated to Chicago, Illinois to work as a teacher in the hopes of saving money to send for his family. It was here that he was robbed and murdered. Not long after, Elizabeth Bethel died in childbirth. Palmer and her eight siblings were taken to Chicago, Illinois where they were raised by her maternal aunt and maternal grandparents. In Chicago, Palmer was raised in a poor household that relied on welfare. However, she found joy in learning from her grandmother, Anne Bethel, and enjoying large family dinners her aunt and her sister prepared. African American civic leaders--New York (State)--New York--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with Jorja Palmer, Section A2002_086_001_002, TRT: 0:30:46 ?

In the 1930s, Jorja Palmer moved to Chicago, Illinois to live with her maternal aunt and maternal grandparents after her parents died. She attended Willard Elementary School and Forestville Elementary School, where she excelled as a student. Palmer also loved to read as a girl, as reading helped her escape the harsh realities of her life. Palmer and her siblings were not always treated well by their aunt. In addition, the atmosphere of South Side Chicago during the 1940s was stifling. Palmer watched firsthand as her brother engaged in gang activities that helped fuel race wars between African Americans, Jews, and whites in her community. In addition, police brutality and restrictive covenants made it impossible for African Americans in Palmer's childhood community to be mobile. However, Palmer witnessed some early neighborhood organizing efforts in her community as a young person. In 1943, Palmer enrolled at DuSable High School, where she excelled.

Video Oral History Interview with Jorja Palmer, Section A2002_086_001_003, TRT: 0:31:10 ?

Jorja Palmer began attending DuSable High School in 1944. She helped legendary musician Walter H. Dyett write portions of the school's "Hi-Jinks" show, and started a newspaper called "The DuSable Dial." Palmer had a keen interest in chemistry and French, and dreamt of becoming a research physicist, journalist, or linguist. After graduating in 1948, Palmer enrolled at the University of Illinois-Navy Pier. She left the university in 1950 to marry Jaime English, and the couple started a family soon thereafter. After learning of the Chicago's school overcrowding issues, Palmer joined the Parent-Teacher Association in Chicago's West Chatham Neighborhood, and the West Chatham Improvement Association. She worked with these organizations and encouraged HistoryMaker Dick Gregory to march on the Chicago School Board. In 1963, Palmer began working with Reverend Lynward Stevenson, Al Raby, Harry Griffin and HistoryMaker Reverend Dr. Leon Finney to organize a city-wide boycott of the schools.

Video Oral History Interview with Jorja Palmer, Section A2002_086_001_004, TRT: 0:30:07 ?

In the 1960s, Jorja Palmer began working with the Chicago Community Council Organization to organize a boycott of Chicago Public Schools. Individuals like HistoryMaker Reverend Dr. Leon Finney helped train grassroots organizers like Palmer in their organizing strategy. The boycott took place in 1963, and was a success: nearly eighty percent of black families kept their children out of public schools, and Superintendent Benjamin Willis resigned from the School Board. Under pressure, Dr. James Redmond, who replaced Benjamin Willis, worked toward eliminating the neighborhood schools policy. After meeting with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and HistoryMaker Reverend James Bevel, the CCCO shifted their attention from organizing around education to fair and equal housing. Palmer helped lead these organizing efforts. In 1967, Palmer chaired the education committee for the first National Black Power Conference. In 1968,

she helped found the Black Community with Anderson Thompson and HistoryMaker Harold Pates.

Video Oral History Interview with Jorja Palmer, Section A2002_086_001_005, TRT: 0:30:42 ?

In 1966, Jorja Palmer, through the Chicago Community Council Organization, began working with Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and HistoryMaker Reverend James Bevel to organize for fair and equal housing. During a 1966 march, Palmer and other activists were met by a mob of violence in Marquette Park. Marchers were hit with bows and grazed with bullets; sugar was dumped in their gasoline tanks; and their cars were burned or pushed into the water. Palmer was hit with a slab of concrete by a young white boy. Many of the CCCO's white supporters fled the scene out of fear. Reverend James Bevel managed to lead marchers back to First Presbyterian Church, away from the violence. On April 4, 1968, Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated. Palmer recalls what she was doing on this day, as well as the early stages of the riots that followed, including clearing out CCCO headquarters. Palmer also talks about the Community Action Training Program.

Video Oral History Interview with Jorja Palmer, Section A2002_086_001_006, TRT: 0:29:43 ?

In 1968, Jorja Palmer helped start Black Community following the assassination of Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. In 1972, Palmer served as a delegate for the National Black Political Assembly in Gary, Indiana. At the assembly, Palmer hoped to work with black leaders to develop strategies for uplifting the black community; however, power and ego got in the way of progress. Through her activism, Palmer met HistoryMaker Lutrelle "Lu" F. Palmer. The pair became close and started courting after the 1969 murders of Black Panther Party members Fred Hampton and Mark Clark. Lu and Jorja Palmer worked together to write a formal call for a "white curfew" to keep whites out of predominately African American hours after 6:00 p.m. HistoryMaker C.T. Vivian was selected to announce the curfew formally. Palmer describes an incident where she and her girlfriends were followed by police. She also talks about people of different cultures are infiltrating business districts in black communities.

Video Oral History Interview with Jorja Palmer, Section A2002_086_001_007, TRT: 0:31:09 ?

In 1982, Women's Auxiliary of the Lu Palmer Foundation, led by Jorja Palmer, organized a plebiscite to elect a black Mayor of Chicago. The original plebiscite listed ninety candidates, but it was eventually reduced to ten. Congressman Harold Washington received the greatest number of votes, while HistoryMaker Manford Byrd came in second. HistoryMaker Lu Palmer originally came in second, but he withdrew his name. Jorja and Lu Palmer organized the nation's largest voter registration drive at the time to elect Congressman Harold Washington Mayor. In addition, Jorja Palmer began organizing political education classes at Malcom X College in 1982. Her students were assigned to organize in predominantly black wards. The Palmers also used a strategic public relations campaign to encourage community support of Mayor Harold Washington's campaign. He was elected as the first African American Mayor of Chicago in 1983, and served until his death in 1987.