

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Ruby Nell Sales

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Sales, Ruby
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Ruby Nell Sales,
Dates:	September 15, 2003
Bulk Dates:	2003
Physical Description:	6 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:48:27).
Abstract:	Nonprofit chief executive and social activist Ruby Nell Sales (1948 -) is a scholar who focuses on African American women's issues. Sales experiences in the civil rights movement shaped her career which eventually led her to launch SpiritHouse, a nonprofit organization focused on community organizing and spiritually based community building. Sales was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on September 15, 2003, in Washington, District of Columbia. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2003_226
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Ruby Sales, born in Jemison, Alabama, on July 8, 1948, suffered many hardships during the civil rights movement but was not disparaged. She has spent her adult life working in philanthropic endeavors.

While studying at the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, Sales became involved with the state's Freedom Summer voter registration drive. One afternoon, as she and Jonathan Daniels, a white seminarian, stood in line at a corner store, a man shot and killed Daniels for standing behind Sales in line. Unnerved and unable to speak significantly for seven months, Sales determined to attend the trial of Daniels' murderer, Tom Coleman, and to testify on behalf of her slain colleague. Her perseverance moved her to a career of social activism.

After earning her B.A. in American history in 1971 from Manhattanville College, where she was a National Council of Churches Merit Scholar, Sales enrolled in graduate school at Princeton University. Between 1971 and 1976, she was a Danforth Scholar, and she advanced to Ph.D. candidacy in American history before leaving the university. Sales taught adult education in Boston for a year, and then worked as director of the Citizens' Complaint Center in Washington, D.C. From 1986 to 1988, she taught courses on the civil rights movement and African American women's history at the University of Maryland before becoming affiliated with the National Women's Studies Association. She served as director from 1989 to 1991 of Black Women's Voices and Images, an initiative to wed research to action on issues affecting black women. For the following three years she worked as director of Women of All Colors, coordinating a broad coalition of progressive organizations to work on issues affecting all women.

In 1994, Sales entered the Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge, Massachusetts. She studied feminist, African American and liberation theologies with an emphasis on race, class and gender issues, and in 1998 received her

master's of divinity. Her training as a seminarian prepared her to launch SpiritHouse in 2000, a nonprofit organization focused on community organizing and spiritually based community building. Sales has written several articles and has appeared as a commentator on several television programs. She lives in Washington, D.C.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Ruby Nell Sales was conducted by Larry Crowe on September 15, 2003, in Washington, District of Columbia, and was recorded on 6 Betacame SP videocassettes. Nonprofit chief executive and social activist Ruby Nell Sales (1948 -) is a scholar who focuses on African American women's issues. Sales experiences in the civil rights movement shaped her career which eventually led her to launch SpiritHouse, a nonprofit organization focused on community organizing and spiritually based community building.

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:

Sales, Ruby

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Sales, Ruby--Interviews

African American civil rights workers--Interviews

Community activists--Interviews

Nonprofit organizations--Employees--United States--Interviews

African American college teachers--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Social Activist

Nonprofit Chief Executive

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 Ruby Nell Sales, September 15, 2003. 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 Ruby Nell Sales, Section A2003_226_001_001, TRT: 0:29:55 ?

Ruby Nell Sales was born on July 8, 1948 in Jemison, Alabama, delivered by the same midwife as her father, Joe Sales, who was born in the early 1900s. Sales traces her paternal lineage to Buckingham, Virginia. After emancipation, the family migrated throughout the South before Sales' grandfather, an itinerant preacher, settled in Jemison. There, he met her grandmother, a schoolteacher who had been born into slavery. Sales' mother, Willie Mae Baker Sales Griffin, was born in 1928 in Jackson County, Florida. Sales' maternal family included many singers and migrant farmers. Her mother was raised by an abusive sister who later became an Evangelical. Sales describes her father's time in the U.S. Army and how her parents met. Sales and her siblings grew up in Columbus, Georgia in a tight-knit community. She attended Mary Mother Mission, across the state line, in Phenix City, Alabama, for grade school, and Carver High School in Columbus, where she was surrounded by encouraging teachers and staff.

African American civil rights workers--Interviews.

Community activists--Interviews.

Nonprofit organizations--Employees--United States--Interviews.

African American college teachers--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with Ruby Nell Sales, Section A2003_226_001_002, TRT: 0:29:04 ?

Ruby Nell Sales grew up in segregated Columbus, Georgia, but because her father was in the military frequently visited the Fort Benning U.S. Army base, which was not segregated. As a student at Carver High School, she developed a love for reading and graduated with honors. She earned a scholarship to Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. Sales describes the constraints of gender roles at Tuskegee and her involvement with the burgeoning civil rights movement. Student body president, HistoryMaker Gwendolyn Patton, organized Sales and other students into the Tuskegee Institute Advancement League (TIAL). The group's first direct action protest was a sit-in in Montgomery, Alabama with Alabama State students following Bloody Sunday in Selma. Sales remembers that Tuskegee's faculty and administration were supportive of her and other students' civil rights activities. She talks about her work in Lowndes County with Stokely Carmichael and other SNCC members and reflects upon how the movement coalesced.

Video Oral History Interview with Ruby Nell Sales, Section A2003_226_001_003, TRT: 0:30:48 ?

Ruby Nell Sales was a SNCC organizer in Lowndes County, Alabama, where she worked with Stokely Carmichael, Bob Mants, HistoryMaker Julian Bond, and others. In Lowndes County, SNCC worked to elect local African American politicians following the passage of the 1964 Voting Rights Act. Sales describes Carmichael's relationship to the people in Lowndes and what made him an effective organizer. She explains how SNCC built relationships with Lowndes County residents, explains the strategic differences between SNCC's work in

Mississippi and Alabama, and explains how interracial and intraracial gender relationships evolved within SNCC. SNCC activists debated the question of allowing white activists to engage in Civil Rights work in Lowndes County. In 1965, two white men, a priest, Father Richard Morrisroe and priest-in-training, Jonathan Daniels, were allowed to go to Lowndes. Sales was standing next to Daniels when he was murdered in Haynesville, Lowndes County, Alabama in 1965.

Video Oral History Interview with Ruby Nell Sales, Section A2003_226_001_004, TRT: 0:28:54 ?

Ruby Nell Sales witnessed the murder of Jonathan Daniels, a young, white civil rights worker in Lowndes County, Alabama, by Tom Coleman. During Coleman's trial Sales and other African American witnesses were forced to wait outside of the courthouse in the rain. Despite attempts at witness intimidation, Sales testified at the trial; however, Coleman was ruled not guilty. Following the trial, Sales continued to work with SNCC in Lowndes County and observed the formation of the Lowndes County Freedom Party. After leaving Lowndes in 1965, she worked with Charles Sherrod in Georgia, joined the Anti-Vietnam War Movement and attended Manhattanville College in Purchase, New York. After earning her B.A., Sales entered Princeton University's graduate program in history where she studied under historians Arthur Link and James McPherson, but found that Black people's humanity was constantly critiqued and activism was discouraged. During this time, Sales also became involved in the Women's Movement.

Video Oral History Interview with Ruby Nell Sales, Section A2003_226_001_005, TRT: 0:30:13 ?

Ruby Nell Sales worked towards her Ph.D. in history at Princeton University in New Jersey from 1971 to 1976. Sales recalls received no support from her professors; her biggest influences were her friends: black women poets such as Audre Lorde, June Jordan, and HistoryMakers Nikki Giovanni and Sonia Sanchez. After Princeton, Sales taught history at Spelman College in Atlanta, Georgia. Sales left teaching to devote her time to developing Women of All Colors. She went to divinity school at Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge, Massachusetts, which her murdered friend Jonathan Daniels had attended. Sales talks about the disconnect between feminist ideologies and the experience of non-elite African American women, her interest in connecting religious discourse to justice through black folk theology, and explains the centrality of black spirituality to the success of the Civil Rights Movement. She also describes the SpiritHouse Project and the importance of relationship-building in organizing communities.

Video Oral History Interview with Ruby Nell Sales, Section A2003_226_001_006, TRT: 0:19:33 ?

Ruby Nell Sales reflects on the state of the black church and the role of African Americans in the broader country and international affairs. She speaks about the symbolism of the Exodus story and her understanding of its connection to African Americans. Sales comments on young people she works with through the SpiritHouse Project and laments how debt shapes their lives and ability to commit to organizing. She describes her hopes for the African American community and how she would like to be remembered. She reflects upon her life and legacy. Sales concludes by narrating her photos.