

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Edward J. Williams

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Williams, Edward J., 1942-
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Edward J. Williams,
Dates:	February 16, 2004
Bulk Dates:	2004
Physical Description:	8 Betacame SP videocassettes (3:43:00).
Abstract:	Bank executive Edward J. Williams (1942 -) was the first African American male to work at Harris Bank and served as its Executive Vice President of Community Affairs. He was on the boards of the Adler Planetarium, the Neighborhood Housing Services of Chicago and the Art Institute of Chicago. Williams was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on February 16, 2004, in Chicago, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2004_008
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Born on Chicago's South Side on May 5, 1942, Ed Williams has risen to the top in the world of banking. He attended Tilden Tech, and transferred to Englewood High School after two years. Following his high school graduation, he attended Clark College in Atlanta on a scholarship, though he returned to his native Chicago before graduating. Williams later returned to school, earning a B.S. degree in business administration from Roosevelt University in Chicago in 1973.

Upon his return to Chicago from Atlanta in 1961, Williams, with help from an alumnus of Clark College, bought a newspaper distributorship for the *Chicago Tribune* on the city's West Side. The neighborhood at the time was turbulent, and the franchise was sold to him for \$6,000, ten percent of the average value of similar operations. Soon, Williams had twenty-five employees. He left the business in 1962, however, after seeing his employees get hurt in robberies. Under the advice of Supreme Life Insurance chairman Earl Dickerson, Williams attempted to get a job with one of their partners, but was turned down for being too light skinned. Undeterred, he continued to apply at banks, and after working briefly with Continental Bank, he was hired as the first African American male employee of Harris Bank in 1964, and he would remain there until his retirement.

Williams rapidly advanced at the bank, first supervising tellers and later managing the department that worked with African American entrepreneurs. In 1980, Williams was named senior vice president of commercial banking, and in 1991 he was named executive vice president of community affairs. He retired from the bank in February of 2004.

Throughout his career, Williams served as a mentor to those who have sought him out, offering his time and advice to others. He has also been active in the community, serving with the Neighborhood Housing Services (NHS) of Chicago since 1978, spending more than twenty years as a trustee of the Adler Planetarium and currently serving

as a trustee of the Art Institute of Chicago. In 2003, Williams was presented with the Gale Cincotta Neighborhood Partnership Award by the NHS. He and his wife, Ana, reside in Chicago.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Edward J. Williams was conducted by Julieanna L. Richardson on February 16, 2004, in Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on 8 Betacame SP videocassettes. Bank executive Edward J. Williams (1942 -) was the first African American male to work at Harris Bank and served as its Executive Vice President of Community Affairs. He was on the boards of the Adler Planetarium, the Neighborhood Housing Services of Chicago and the Art Institute of Chicago.

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:

Williams, Edward J., 1942-

Richardson, Julieanna L. (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Williams, Edward J., 1942- --Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Harris Trust and Savings Bank.

Occupations:

Bank Executive

HistoryMakers® Category:

BusinessMakers

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 Edward J. Williams, February 16, 2004. 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 Edward J. Williams, Section A2004_008_001_001, TRT: 0:31:10 ?

Edward J. Williams was born on May 5, 1942 on South Prairie Avenue above Lang's Barbeque in Chicago, Illinois. His mother, Lillian Watkins Williams, was born in Port Gibson, Mississippi and grew up on a cotton plantation, before moving to Chicago in 1936. There, she met Williams' father, Joseph Williams, a welder and World War I veteran, who was highly literate and had collaborated with writer James Baldwin. When he was five or six years old, Williams' family moved to the building his father bought in Chicago's Washington Park neighborhood, which on a good day smelled like fresh baked bread. Williams attended Coppin AME Church and William W. Carter Elementary School. His third-grade teacher and the Hall Branch librarian encouraged him to read; and he was a Boy Scout. He was inducted into the Order of the Arrow, and attained the Life Scout rank. One of his Boy Scout leaders was his first professional African American role model. When Williams was fourteen years old, his father died from cancer.

Video Oral History Interview with Edward J. Williams, Section A2004_008_001_002, TRT: 0:29:40 ?

Edward J. Williams remembers holiday dinners and listening to the radio with his family as a child. He aspired to be a foreign news correspondent and loved horses. He worked on a horse-drawn milk wagon during elementary school; rode horses with his brother in Washington Park and Dan Ryan Woods in Chicago, Illinois; and visited his brother George, who lived with an aunt in the more rural Chicago neighborhood of Morgan Park. Williams attended Coppin Memorial AME Church and William W. Carter Elementary School where he excelled academically. He became aware of socioeconomic differences when he accompanied his father grocery shopping in downtown Chicago and visited a friend's spacious apartment. Following his father's death, Williams was responsible for paying utility bills and putting ads in the Chicago Defender for vacancies in his family's apartment building. At sixteen, he developed an ulcer from stress; though he is very fair skinned, Williams was not aware of anyone questioning his race during his childhood.

Video Oral History Interview with Edward J. Williams, Section A2004_008_001_003, TRT: 0:30:30 ?

Edward J. Williams' maternal grandfather was a Chinese immigrant who died when Williams' mother was three years old. Williams recalls visiting his mother's home state of Mississippi as a child. When he was two years old, his father was diagnosed with cancer in his leg, but refused to amputate it, and died years later in 1956. When Williams was sixteen years old, his mother sold their apartment building and purchased a smaller building on 92nd Street in Chicago, Illinois. Williams attended predominantly white Tilden Technical High School for two years, then transferred to predominantly black Englewood High School, where he did well academically and enjoyed math and English. He obtained a scholarship to Clark College in Atlanta, Georgia through his employer, newspaper distributor Charles Chisholm. At Clark, he studied business, pledged Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity and became aware of the social hierarchies in the African American community. Williams left Clark in 1961, after two years, to get married.

Video Oral History Interview with Edward J. Williams, Section A2004_008_001_004, TRT: 0:29:40 ?

Edward J. Williams returned to Chicago, Illinois in 1961, after two years at Clark College in Atlanta, Georgia. He worked at a supermarket until his former employer, newspaper distributor Charles Chisholm, helped him buy a Chicago Tribune franchise in East Garfield on Chicago's West Side. Williams' young

newspaper boys were vulnerable to robberies on the violent West Side; and despite his efforts to protect them, a paper boy was hospitalized. In 1963, Williams sold the franchise. The president of Supreme Life Insurance, Earl B. Dickerson, recommended Williams apply to a lending firm in downtown Chicago looking to hire its first African American employee. Williams excelled during aptitude testing but was rejected because he did not look African American. In 1963, he accepted a trust securities position at Continental Bank. A few months later, he was offered a higher paying position at Harris Bank and became its first African American teller, gaining his first exposure to corporate America.

Video Oral History Interview with Edward J. Williams, Section A2004_008_001_005, TRT: 0:30:30 ?

Edward J. Williams remembers supportive coworkers, like his manager, a former U.S. Army drill sergeant, at his Harris Bank teller job. Around 1967 he was promoted to personal banker and was recruited to volunteer for Talent Assistance Program (TAP), a government program that provided resources to African American entrepreneurs. He helped Rotary Connections' Sid Barnes obtain a loan for a music production company by appealing directly to a senior vice president at Harris. In the late 1960s, Williams began volunteering with Chicago Economic Development Corporation (CEDCO), another program that provided financial resources to African American businesses, where he met Garland Guice and HistoryMaker The Honorable Jesse Madison. Williams became an assistant manager and later a manager of a personal banking area; he eventually became the division administrator for retail banking at Harris. Williams shares his strategies for moving up a corporate hierarchy and working well with managers.

Video Oral History Interview with Edward J. Williams, Section A2004_008_001_006, TRT: 0:30:10 ?

Edward J. Williams earned his B.S. degree in business in 1973, taking night classes at Roosevelt University in Chicago, Illinois. Throughout his career he was active in civic organizations and has worked to increase African American access to cultural institutions and representation on their boards. He has served on multiple United Way of Chicago committees; in 1974, he was appointed to a desegregation task force by Chicago Public Schools Superintendent Joseph Hannon; and, he was on the board of Provident Hospital for seven years and was chair during its bankruptcy in 1987. In 1991, Williams became head of community affairs at Harris Bank and retired from banking in 2004. He recalls occasions when co-workers and clients assumed he was not African American and made racist comments, and expresses appreciation that Harris had strong anti-discrimination policies. At the time of the interview, he remained on the board of the Neighborhood Housing Service, the Art Institute of Chicago, and Chicago Botanic Garden.

Video Oral History Interview with Edward J. Williams, Section A2004_008_001_007, TRT: 0:29:20 ?

Edward J. Williams became head of Harris Bank's philanthropic foundation in 1991 and focused on revitalizing Chicago, Illinois' North Lawndale community. In 1994, he convinced Harris to open a branch in the West Garfield Park neighborhood. He has become more involved in the Asian American community; after creating African American, Latino, and Asian American affinity groups at Harris, he was invited to fundraise for the Asian American Institute in Chicago in the mid-1990s. He has also helped African American small businesses network with the financial community in Chicago's

Chinatown. At the time of the interview, Williams had recently retired and planned to continue his civic engagement. He talks about redlining and the 1977 Community Reinvestment Act, and gives advice to young people interested in a career in financial services. Williams concludes by reflecting upon how banking has changed since the 1980s, the industry's future, his hopes and concerns for the African American community and his legacy.

Video Oral History Interview with Edward J. Williams, Section A2004_008_001_008, TRT: 0:12:00 ?

Edward J. Williams narrates his photographs.