

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with The Honorable Hazel O'Leary

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## Overview of the Collection

<b>Repository:</b>	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
<b>Creator:</b>	O'Leary, Hazel Rollins, 1937-
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Hazel O'Leary,
<b>Dates:</b>	March 15, 2007
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2007
<b>Physical Description:</b>	4 Betacame SP videocassettes (1:59:29).
<b>Abstract:</b>	University president and cabinet appointee The Honorable Hazel O'Leary (1937 - ) was the first African American United States Secretary of Energy and the president of Fisk University. O'Leary was also the CEO of Blaylock and Partners. O'Leary was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on March 15, 2007, in Nashville, Tennessee. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2007_090
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Cabinet appointee and president of Fisk University, Hazel Rollins O'Leary was born Hazel Reid on May 17, 1937, in Newport News, Virginia to Dr. Russell Edward Reid and Hazel Palleman. Raised by her stepmother Mattie Ross Reid, O'Leary attended the Urban League's camp in Atwater, Massachusetts every summer where she met Alma Brown and the Delany sisters. O'Leary attended Aberdeen Gardens School in Hampton, Virginia, Booker T. Washington School, John Marshall School and Huntington High School in Newport News, Virginia. O'Leary graduated from the High School of Fine and Performing Arts in Newark, New Jersey in 1955. She then graduated Phi Beta Kappa from Fisk University in 1959, at the cusp of the Civil Rights Movement. Among her teachers were Vivian Henderson, Robert Hayden, and T.S. Courier. O'Leary went on to obtain her J.D. degree from Rutgers University Law School in 1966.

From 1967 to 1969, O'Leary handled organized crime cases while serving as assistant county prosecutor in Essex County, New Jersey. Later, she joined the accounting firm of Coopers & Lybrand. During the administration of President Jimmy Carter, O'Leary acted as assistant administrator of the Federal Energy Commission, general counsel of the Community Services Administration, and an administrator for the Economic Regulatory Commission of the newly-created Department of Energy. In 1981, O'Leary and her husband formed O'Leary and Associates, 1989 to 1993, where she served as executive vice president of Northern States Power in Minnesota.

Nominated by President Bill Clinton in 1993, O'Leary became the seventh United States Secretary of Energy and the first African American woman to serve in that office. As Secretary, O'Leary changed the department's Office of Classification to the Office of Declassification, initiated an aggressive clean-up of surplus plutonium, created an Openness Advisory Panel, and encouraged the Clinton administration to end nuclear testing in the United States. O'Leary established the Samuel P. Massie Chair of Excellence Professorship in Environmental Disciplines which benefited nine historically black colleges and universities. In 1996, O'Leary resigned and joined Blaylock and Partners, becoming CEO in 2002. In 2004, O'Leary was named President of Fisk University in Nashville,

Tennessee.

O'Leary served on the boards of Africare, UAL Inc. (parent company of United Airlines), Morehouse College; Alchemix Corporation; AES Corporation; The Center for Democracy; ICF Kaiser; Scottish Re, Ltd.; Nashville Chamber Orchestra; the World Wildlife Fund; Nashville Alliance for Public Education; ITC Holdings, Inc.; and Nashville Business Community for the Arts. O'Leary also received numerous honors for her work. O'Leary was widowed in 1987 and she also has one son, attorney Carl G. Rollins III.

Hazel O'Leary was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on March 15, 2007.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with The Honorable Hazel O'Leary was conducted by Larry Crowe on March 15, 2007, in Nashville, Tennessee, and was recorded on 4 Betacame SP videocassettes. University president and cabinet appointee The Honorable Hazel O'Leary (1937 - ) was the first African American United States Secretary of Energy and the president of Fisk University. O'Leary was also the CEO of Blaylock and Partners.

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## 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®.

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## 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.

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## Controlled Access Terms

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

### Persons:

O'Leary, Hazel Rollins, 1937-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

### Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews  
O'Leary, Hazel Rollins, 1937---Interviews

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African American college presidents--Interviews

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African American civic leaders--Interviews

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African American government executives--Interviews

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## **Organizations:**

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

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The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

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United States. Dept. of Energy

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Fisk University

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## **Occupations:**

Cabinet Appointee

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University President

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## **HistoryMakers® Category:**

EducationMakers|PoliticalMakers

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## **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 The Honorable Hazel O'Leary, March 15, 2007. 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).

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## 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.

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## Detailed Description of the Collection

### Series I: Original Interview Footage

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Hazel O'Leary, Section A2007\_090\_001\_001, TRT: 0:29:15 ?

The Honorable Hazel O'Leary was born on May 17, 1937 in Newport News, Virginia to Hazel Pallemmon Reagan and Russell Reid. Her mother was born in San Antonio, Texas, where her maternal grandfather was a preacher, and her grandmother was a nurse. During World War II, O'Leary's mother joined the Women's Army Corps. O'Leary's father was born in Portsmouth, Virginia to parents educated at the Leonard School of Medicine and Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute. He was raised alongside seven brothers who all pursued professional fields like medicine, law and accounting. O'Leary's parents met at Meharry Medical College in Nashville, Tennessee. They married and moved to Virginia, but divorced when O'Leary was four years old. O'Leary's father later married Mattie Ross Reid, a teacher who studied at Virginia State College for Negroes. Her stepmother's mother, Lula Clark, ran a charity that distributed donated clothing to the needy; and was married to the head of Newport News' numbers operation.

O'Leary, Hazel Rollins, 1937-.

African American families--Virginia--Newport News.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Hazel O'Leary, Section A2007\_090\_001\_002, TRT: 0:28:28 ?

The Honorable Hazel O'Leary's step-grandmother, Lula Clark, was an entrepreneur who operated restaurants, concessions and gambling games around Tidewater, Virginia. O'Leary grew up in Portsmouth, Virginia, where she lived for a time in the household of her paternal grandfather, a doctor. She listened to radio shows like 'Stella Dallas' and 'Amos 'n' Andy,' and loved reading due to the influence of her paternal grandmother. She also attended Carver Memorial Presbyterian Church, the church of her stepmother, Mattie Ross Reid. During World War II, O'Leary experienced air raid drills, and saw German prisoners of war housed at Joint Base Langley-Eustis in Virginia. She began elementary school in Aberdeen Gardens, a closed community for African Americans in Hampton, Virginia. As an adolescent, O'Leary attended summer camp at Camp Atwater in North Brookfield, Massachusetts, where she met Alma Arrington Brown, Sarah Louise Delany and Annie Elizabeth Delany, who all became lauded educators.

African American families--Virginia--Newport News.

African American children--Virginia--Newport News.

World War, 1939-1945--Prisoners and prisons, German.  
Education, Primary--Virginia--Newport News.  
O'Leary, Hazel Rollins, 1937-.  
Camp Atwater (North Brookfield, Mass.).  
Hampton (Va.).

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Hazel O'Leary, Section A2007\_090\_001\_003,  
TRT: 0:30:50 ?

The Honorable Hazel O'Leary began her education in the Aberdeen Gardens community of Hampton, Virginia. In third grade, she transferred to the all-black John Marshall Elementary School in Newport News, Virginia, where she was bullied due to her light skin. She began high school at Collis P. Huntington High School, and then transferred to the Arts High School in Newark, New Jersey as a sophomore. There, she played the French horn in the school band, which included future pop star Connie Francis. She also interacted with physically disabled peers for the first time. O'Leary witnessed her older sister's struggles at the integrated Cedar Crest College in Pennsylvania, and decided to enroll at the historically black Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee in 1955. There, O'Leary majored in history, and studied with professors like Leslie M. "Doc" Collins and Theodore S. Currier. The university had many regulations on female students' decorum, and O'Leary was once placed on social probation for driving a car.

African American children--Virginia--Newport News.  
Education, Primary--Virginia--Newport News.  
Education, Secondary--New Jersey--Newark.  
African Americans--Color--Social aspects.  
Fisk University.  
Education, Higher--Tennessee--Nashville.  
O'Leary, Hazel Rollins, 1937-.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Hazel O'Leary, Section A2007\_090\_001\_004,  
TRT: 0:30:56 ?

The Honorable Hazel O'Leary entered Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee in 1955. During her freshman year, the university was led by its first African American president, Charles S. Johnson. In 1956, Johnson passed away, and was succeeded by Stephen J. Wright. Among O'Leary's professors were poet Robert Hayden, artist Aaron Douglas and Matthew Kennedy, the leader of the Fisk Jubilee Singers. O'Leary majored in history and economics, for which she was advised by Theodore S. Currier and Vivian Wilson Henderson. Her classmates included John Lewis, who was then a civil rights leader in Nashville; Marion Barry, who studied chemistry under Professor Samuel Massie; and Diane Nash. She recalls Nash's later life, including organizing the Freedom Rides; her marriage to Reverend James Bevel; and her honorary doctorate from Fisk University in 2007. In 2004, O'Leary returned to Fisk University as its president, and led a faculty that included historian Reavis L. Mitchell, Jr. and poet Nikki Giovanni.

Fisk University.  
Education, Higher--Tennessee--Nashville.  
African American college students--Political activity--Tennessee--Nashville.  
Civil rights movements--Tennessee--Nashville.