

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Mattelia B. Grays

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Grays, Mattelia B., 1931-
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Mattelia B. Grays,
Dates:	March 11, 2008
Bulk Dates:	2008
Physical Description:	5 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:14:00).
Abstract:	Association chief executive and school superintendent Mattelia B. Grays (1931 -) was the eighteenth international president of AKA Sorority, Inc., serving from 1970 to 1974. She was also the youngest person ever elected National President of the Sorority in 1968. Grays also served as Deputy Superintendent of the Houston Independent School District. Grays was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on March 11, 2008, in Houston, Texas. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2008_044
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

The 18th International President of Alpha Kappa Alpha (AKA) Sorority Incorporated (1970-1974), Mattelia Bennett Grays was born in Houston, Texas to the Reverend and Mrs. A.B. Bennett. Bennett graduated as salutatorian from Booker T. Washington High School in 1948 and went on to attend Dillard University in New Orleans, Louisiana, where she was initiated into the AKA Sorority in the Beta Upsilon Chapter. She received her B.A. degree from Dillard University in 1952 and was married to Horace Grays the same year. The couple has one daughter, Karen, and a grandson, Kristopher John Howard.

Grays went on to receive her M.A. degree with honors in special education from the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, Michigan, and later received her Doctorate in educational administration from Pacific University in Sacramento, California in 1985. Grays returned to Houston to teach in the Houston Public Schools, where she also worked as a consultant for the Continuous Progress Learning Corporation and principal of Rogers Educational Enrichment Center. Grays served as principal of Rogers Educational Enrichment Center from 1970 to 1987. Under her leadership, the center served as a teacher training center and was named “One of Six Super Schools” by *Texas Monthly* magazine. After several years in Houston Public Schools, she began working summers with the University of Houston as a supervisor of laboratory experiences for teachers of culturally deprived children. She became District Three Superintendent of the Houston Independent School District in 1987. Grays transferred her AKA Sorority membership to the Alpha Kappa Omega Chapter in Houston and served as Chapter President and Regional Director of the Sorority’s South Central Region. She was the youngest person ever elected National President of the Sorority in 1968 and was installed at the Sorority’s biennial national convention in 1970.

As National President, Grays emphasized member involvement and was adamant about every member embracing her financial responsibility to the Sorority. She headed the Sorority’s effort to purchase the birthplace of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and presented a check for \$20,000 to Coretta Scott King. Her focus as Sorority President included

Negro heritage brochures, chapter programs designed for the specific community that the chapter served, educational grants, Job Corps and leadership training.

Grays retired from the Houston Independent School District and continues to reside in Houston, Texas. She has been honored by several organizations including the AKA Sorority. AKA Sorority's South Central Region has a scholarship fund named in her honor, and she is an Outstanding Alumna of the Booker T. Washington High School in Houston.

Grays was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on March 11, 2008 as part of the Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority's Centennial Boule 2008 celebration. Segments of these interviews were used in a DVD entitled *A.K.A. Sorority: Legacy of Leadership*.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Mattelia B. Grays was conducted by Denise Gines on March 11, 2008, in Houston, Texas, and was recorded on 5 Betacame SP videocassettes. Association chief executive and school superintendent Mattelia B. Grays (1931 -) was the eighteenth international president of AKA Sorority, Inc., serving from 1970 to 1974. She was also the youngest person ever elected National President of the Sorority in 1968. Grays also served as Deputy Superintendent of the Houston Independent School District.

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:

Grays, Mattelia B., 1931-

Gines, Denise (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews
Grays, Mattelia B., 1931- --Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority.

Occupations:

Association Branch 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 Mattelia B. Grays, March 11, 2008. 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 Mattelia B. Grays, Section A2008_044_001_001, TRT: 0:28:40
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Mattelia B. Grays was born on July 26 in Houston, Texas to Dilcia McNeal Bennett and Abel Bennett. She attended Houston's Booker T. Washington High School, where a teacher encouraged her to join the Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority (AKA). Grays pledged to AKA at Dillard University in New Orleans, Louisiana, where she was impressed by Soror Edna Over Gray Campbell's Founders Day speech. Grays remained active in the sorority at the University of Michigan, where she earned a graduate degree in education. After completing the program, Grays taught in the Houston Independent School District, and was active in Houston's graduate chapter of AKA. In the early 1960s, she became the basileus of the chapter; and, soon after, was recruited as a candidate for the south central regional directorship. Grays was elected in 1968 to become the supreme basileus of AKA, and served from 1970 to 1974. During her tenure, Grays emphasized personal connections and local service.

Video Oral History Interview with Mattelia B. Grays, Section A2008_044_001_002, TRT: 0:28:20
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Mattelia B. Grays was mentored by Larzette Hale-Wilson, who was the supreme basileus of the Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority (AKA) when Grays was first elected to the position. After succeeding Hale-Wilson, Grays opened the AKA boule banquet to men, despite pushback from sorors; and restructured the organization's board of directors. In addition, Grays led the sorority in purchasing Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s childhood home, and presented the check to Coretta Scott King in 1972. Throughout her tenure, Grays had a close friendship with Soror Esther Payne, who served as her supreme parliamentarian, and assisted Grays in navigating the politics of the organization. Grays also mentored several younger sorors, including Norma White, who went on to become AKA's twenty-fifth supreme basileus. Grays was succeeded by Bernice Irene Sumlin in 1974. She reflects upon her tenure and the legacy of AKA, as well as her hopes for the future of the sorority.

Video Oral History Interview with Mattelia B. Grays, Section A2008_044_001_003, TRT: 0:29:00
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Mattelia B. Grays served from 1970 to 1974 as the eighteenth supreme basileus of the Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority (AKA). She received her supreme basileus pin from Edna Over Gray Campbell and her pearls from Larzette Hale-Wilson, both of whom had previously served in the position. Grays' success as the sorority's leader was facilitated by the business acumen of Soror Carey B. Maddox Preston, who built a strong financial foundation for the organization. As supreme basileus, Grays pledged to raise \$2 million on behalf of the United Negro College Fund, and the initiative was completed during the tenure of her successor, Bernice Irene Sumlin. Grays reflects upon her legacy, and how she would like to be remembered by her sorors. She talks about the sustainability of AKA, and shares her advice for ensuring its survival. Grays also talks about the importance of sisterhood within AKA, and the problem of hazing in fraternal organizations.

Video Oral History Interview with Mattelia B. Grays, Section A2008_044_001_004, TRT: 0:28:30
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Mattelia B. Grays was raised by her parents, Dilcia McNeal Bennett and Abel Bennett, in Houston, Texas. Her mother was born in Glen Flora, Texas to Frances McNeal and Reuben McNeal, Sr., who worked in domestic service. They had ten children, whom Gray's mother helped raise after Grays' maternal grandmother died. Grays' mother was forced to leave high school to support her siblings, and found work as a seamstress. Grays' father was born in Edna, Texas to Lucy Bennett and William Bennett. They owned a large farm in El Campo, Texas, where many of their relatives lived and worked. Grays' father learned Spanish from his childhood friends, and left school before earning a high school diploma. He met Grays' mother while living in a boarding house in Houston; and, after marrying, worked as a night watchman and chauffeur. He eventually quit to preach full time at a church outside of Houston in Chappell Hill, Texas. Grays grew up in the Houston Heights neighborhood, where her family attended a local church.

Video Oral History Interview with Mattelia B. Grays, Section A2008_044_001_005, TRT: 0:19:30
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Mattelia B. Grays narrates her photographs.