

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Opalanga D. Pugh

Overview of the Collection

| | |
|------------------------------|---|
| Repository: | The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com |
| Creator: | Pugh, Opalanga D. |
| Title: | The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Opalanga D. Pugh, |
| Dates: | November 3, 2008 |
| Bulk Dates: | 2008 |
| Physical Description: | 8 Betacame SP videocassettes (3:32:57). |
| Abstract: | Professional storyteller Opalanga D. Pugh (1952 - 2010) was a scholar of African oral traditions who facilitated ceremonies and workshops across the United States, Canada, West Africa and the Caribbean. Pugh was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on November 3, 2008, in Denver, Colorado. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview. |
| Identification: | A2008_120 |
| Language: | The interview and records are in English. |

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Professional storyteller Opalanga D. Pugh was born on October 31, 1952, in Denver, Colorado, to Mary Edmonson and John Harris. She also grew up in Denver. In 1975, Pugh received her B.S. degree in communication studies from the University of Wisconsin. Her senior year, as an undergraduate student, she studied at the Imo University of Lagos in Nigeria. Her more extensive informal education includes studying under the instruction of traditional griots in the Gambia, and workshops with African dance choreographer Baba Chuck Davis; African shamans Malidoma and Sobonfu Some; futurist Jean Houston; and motivational speaker Les Brown. Pugh has immersed herself and her work in the realm of communication—including (but not limited to) public relations, group facilitation, mental health, and outdoor education.

Pugh spent an extensive amount of time working, traveling and studying in nine West African countries including the Gambia and Nigeria. While she was there, her studies served as primary sources of learning African oral tradition. Since 1986, she has been a professional storyteller. In addition to that, she has done various keynote addresses as well as facilitated workshops and programs. To date, Pugh has made presentations at thousands of schools in thirty-seven states across the country and over 500 corporations and nonprofit organizations. Her work has taken her across the world. She has shared and collected stories, and hosted events and ceremonies in the United States, Canada, Europe, West Africa, and the Caribbean.

In 1995, Denver's *Westword Magazine* named Pugh "Best Storyteller." She also received the Mayor's Award for Excellence in the Arts that year. The following year, she was featured as an "African American Living Legend" by NBC-TV. She has been featured in the following publications and media outlets: *Women Who Run with the Wolves*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Christian Science Monitor*, and on Black Entertainment Television (BET). Pugh was awarded the *Urban Spectrum Newspaper* "One Who Makes A Difference" Award. She also received the Ambassador of Peace Award from The Conflict Center in Denver.

Other accomplishments include her work with the international relief organization, CARE, to coordinate and present components of their global conference for over 60 country directors surrounding the theme of gender equity and diversity. Pugh was also instrumental in assisting the grieving Columbine High School staff and students through ‘story intervention’ after the tragic shooting in 1999.

Opalanga D. Pugh was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on November 3, 2008.

Ms. Pugh passed away on June 5, 2010.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Opalanga D. Pugh was conducted by Denise Gines on November 3, 2008, in Denver, Colorado, and was recorded on 8 Betacame SP videocassettes. Professional storyteller Opalanga D. Pugh (1952 - 2010) was a scholar of African oral traditions who facilitated ceremonies and workshops across the United States, Canada, West Africa and the Caribbean.

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:

Pugh, Opalanga D.

Gines, Denise (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews
Pugh, Opalanga D.--Interviews

African American women storytellers--Interviews

Griots--United States--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Professional Storyteller

HistoryMakers® Category:

ArtMakers

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 Opalanga D. Pugh, November 3, 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 Opalanga D. Pugh, Section A2008_120_001_001, TRT: 0:29:39
?

Opalanga D. Pugh was born on October 31, 1952 in Denver, Colorado to Mary Howard Edmonson and John Harris. Her maternal great-grandmother, Mary Mitchell, had Native American ancestry, and was able to pass for white. She worked in domestic service in Dallas, Texas, where both Pugh's maternal grandmother, Jessie Howard, and mother were born. Together, they left the South and moved to Denver, where Pugh's grandmother married an older man who owned a hardware store in the Five Points neighborhood. When he died, Pugh's grandmother developed his home into a rooming house, and served as a foster parent. Pugh's mother graduated from Denver's Manual High School, and went on to study home economics at the Tuskegee Institute. After returning to Denver, she found work at the Fizzsimons Army Hospital in Aurora, Colorado. Pugh's father was born in 1929 in Caldwell, Kansas; and, upon graduating from the University of Colorado School of Pharmacy, opened a drug store in Denver. African American women storytellers--Interviews.
Griots--United States--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with Opalanga D. Pugh, Section A2008_120_001_002, TRT: 0:29:01
?

Opalanga D. Pugh's stepfather, Thomas Edmonson, was born in 1925 in Gloster, Louisiana. He was the oldest of ten children born to his father, a circuit preacher who grew up in the segregated South; and his mother, who was raised on a sugarcane farm in Gloster. His mother taught classes on canning, cooking and quilting for the agricultural extension service; and eventually relocated the family to Joplin, Missouri. After completing his service in the U.S. military, Pugh's stepfather moved to Denver, where he worked for the Pepper Packing Company, and later as a cook with Sky Chefs Inc. He also met Pugh's mother, Mary Howard Edmonson; and together they raised Pugh and her brothers, Dempsey Pugh, Jr. and Lloyd Pugh, with help from Pugh's maternal grandmother, Jessie Howard. Pugh began her education at the integrated Ebert Elementary School in Denver, where she was the tallest and youngest student in her class. She also attended Denver's Zion Baptist Church with her maternal grandmother.

Video Oral History Interview with Opalanga D. Pugh, Section A2008_120_001_003, TRT: 0:28:24
?

Opalanga D. Pugh grew up in a close-knit community on Ogden Street in Denver, Colorado, where she lived with her mother, stepfather and brothers in a house owned by her maternal grandmother. Pugh was baptized at Denver's Zion Baptist Church, where she belonged to the choir and the junior usher board. At this point in the interview, Pugh remembers the start of her adolescence, including the experiences that led her to buy her first bra. In 1968, while Pugh was a student at Denver's East High School, Rachel Noel of the Denver Board of Education successfully motioned for the integration of Denver Public Schools. Around this time, Pugh became interested in the Black Power movement, and aspired to join Black Panther Party (BPP) leaders like Eldridge Cleaver and Kathleen Cleaver in Oakland, California. Following Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s assassination, she participated in a march from East

High School to the predominantly black Five Points neighborhood, led by local BPP activists like Lauren Watson.

Video Oral History Interview with Opalanga D. Pugh, Section A2008_120_001_004, TRT: 0:29:23
?

Opalanga D. Pugh attended Morey Junior High School and Cole Junior High School in Denver, Colorado. During this time, she ran for student council secretary, and considered pursuing careers in nursing and education. Later, while studying at Denver's East High School, Pugh learned about the Black Power movement, and aspired to work for The Black Panther Community News Service. During her final semester of high school, she participated in Denver's Colorado Outward Bound School program. In 1970, Pugh matriculated in the communications program at the University of Colorado Boulder. After one year, she left school in search of adventure, and lived with friends in California, and then in Dayton, Ohio. She ultimately enrolled at the University of Wisconsin in Milwaukee, through which she studied abroad at the University of Lagos in Nigeria. She describes the competitive nature of Nigeria's education system, and recalls Nigerians' misconceptions about African American women.

Video Oral History Interview with Opalanga D. Pugh, Section A2008_120_001_005, TRT: 0:29:29
?

Opalanga D. Pugh studied at the University of Lagos in Nigeria during the mid-1970s, through an exchange program with the University of Wisconsin in Milwaukee. After graduation, Pugh remained in Lagos, where she worked as a journalist for the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC). At this point in the interview, she talks about the Yoruba language, and the ceremony through which she received the name Opalanga. When her maternal grandmother's health began to fail, Pugh returned for a time to Denver, Colorado. She then joined a friend in Fairbanks, Alaska, where she was hired as an air-ground communications operator for the Trans Alaska Pipeline System. In this role, Pugh worked at centers along the coast, and was eventually assigned to a camp in Five Mile, Alaska. In 1980, Pugh joined the staff of the Salvation Army Booth Memorial Home for teenage girls in Anchorage, Alaska. Around this time, she met Black Panther Party leader Eldridge Cleaver.

Video Oral History Interview with Opalanga D. Pugh, Section A2008_120_001_006, TRT: 0:29:03
?

Opalanga D. Pugh served as counselor for teenage girls at the Salvation Army Booth Memorial Home in Anchorage, Alaska from 1980. During this time, she helped found an artist collective, and pledged to the Delta Sigma Theta Sorority. She was also influenced by the storytelling traditions of the Inupiat community. Then, Pugh returned to her hometown of Denver, Colorado, where she began working in the public libraries. In 1983, Pugh performed Sojourner Truth's Ain't I a Woman speech at the National Storytelling Conference in Denver, which launched her career as a professional storyteller. She helped to found the National Association of Black Storytellers, and mentored teachers at Colorado's Columbine High School following the mass shooting in 1999. At this point in the interview, Pugh describes her storytelling exercises, including fable singing and playing the mbira, a ceremonial instrument from Africa. She also talks about broom jumping and end of life ceremonies, and shares a parable about gratitude.

Video Oral History Interview with Opalanga D. Pugh, Section A2008_120_001_007, TRT: 0:28:29
?

Opalanga D. Pugh began her work as a professional storyteller during the mid-1980s in Denver, Colorado. She also performed rituals, including roots and wings ceremonies, which honored the transition from adolescence to adulthood.

At the time of the interview, Pugh was in recovery from chemotherapy treatment for bone marrow cancer. She also recently performed at the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. She reflects upon her career and legacy, her reasons for sharing her story with The HistoryMakers and her advice to future generations. Pugh concludes this part of the interview by playing the mbira, an African instrument used in traditional ceremonies.

Video Oral History Interview with Opalanga D. Pugh, Section A2008_120_001_008, TRT: 0:09:29
?

Opalanga D. Pugh narrates her photographs.