

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Michele Coleman Mayes

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Mayes, Michele Coleman
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Michele Coleman Mayes,
Dates:	December 19, 2008 and November 6, 2008
Bulk Dates:	2008
Physical Description:	11 Betacame SP videocassettes (5:18:00).
Abstract:	Corporate lawyer Michele Coleman Mayes (1949 -) was appointed as vice president and general counsel of The Allstate Corporation, and senior vice president and general counsel for the Allstate Insurance Company. Mayes was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on December 19, 2008 and November 6, 2008, in Chicago, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2008_126
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Michele Coleman Mayes was born on July 9, 1949 in Los Angeles, California to Geraldine and Wilbert Coleman. Mayes graduated from MacKinzie High School in Detroit, Michigan in 1967. She received her B.A. degree from the University of Michigan in 1971 and her J.D. degree from the University of Michigan Law School in 1974.

Mayes taught as an Assistant Professor in the Department of Political Science at Illinois State University in Normal, Illinois for two years and then as an Adjunct Professor of Civil Trial Advocacy at Wayne State University in Detroit, Michigan from 1981 to 1987. Mayes served in the United States Department of Justice from 1976 to 1982 as Assistant United States Attorney in Detroit and Brooklyn. Mayes eventually assumed the role of Chief of the Civil Division in Detroit. In 1982, Mayes entered the corporate sector as managing attorney of the Burroughs Corporation. Her career continued to evolve as the Burroughs Corporation and the Sperry Corporation merged, creating Unisys Corporation, for which she was appointed staff vice president and associate general counsel for Worldwide Litigation. In 1992, Mayes joined the Colgate-Palmolive Company as vice president and associate general counsel. One year later, she was promoted to vice president of Human Resources and their Legal Division for North America. In May 2001, Mayes was promoted to vice president, legal and assistant secretary, and elected a corporate officer. Two years later, she accepted the position of senior vice president and general counsel at Pitney Bowes. In 2007, Mayes was named vice president and general counsel of The Allstate Corporation and senior vice president and general counsel for Allstate Insurance Company.

Mayes is the recipient of numerous awards, including The Margaret Brent Award and The Trailblazer Award. She was also named one of America's top black lawyers by *Black Enterprise* Magazine in 2003.

Mayes was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on November 6, 2008.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Michele Coleman Mayes was conducted by Julieanna L. Richardson on December 19, 2008 and November 6, 2008, in Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on 11 Betacame SP videocassettes. Corporate lawyer Michele Coleman Mayes (1949 -) was appointed as vice president and general counsel of The Allstate Corporation, and senior vice president and general counsel for the Allstate Insurance Company.

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:

Mayes, Michele Coleman

Richardson, Julieanna L. (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Mayes, Michele Coleman--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Corporate Lawyer

HistoryMakers® Category:

LawMakers

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 Michele Coleman Mayes, December 19, 2008 and November 6, 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 Michele Coleman Mayes, Section A2008_126_001_001, TRT: 0:28:50 ?

Michele Coleman Mayes was born on July 9, 1949 in Los Angeles, California to Geraldine Coleman and Wilbert Coleman. Her maternal family were distant relatives of President Jimmy Carter. Mayes' paternal grandmother, Sadie Coleman, was Louisiana Creole, with French and Jamaican ancestry, and her paternal grandfather, William Coleman, was a porter on the railroad. They raised

Mayes' father in Memphis, Tennessee, and agreed to pay for his college education under the condition that he become a dentist. After two years of dental training, Mayes' father decided against the dental profession, and moved to Los Angeles to work as a mechanic. Mayes' mother, who was also raised in Memphis, followed him shortly after. When Mayes was two years old, her family moved to a working class neighborhood in Detroit, Michigan so that her father could work in the auto industry. Mayes and her sister were cared for by their maternal grandmother, Emma Jordan, while their mother worked as a lab technician at a nearby medical practice.

Video Oral History Interview with Michele Coleman Mayes, Section A2008_126_001_002, TRT: 0:30:30 ?

Michele Coleman Mayes grew up on 12th Street in Detroit, Michigan, where her mother, Geraldine Coleman, worked nearby at a medical practice owned by surgeon Waldo Cain and pediatrician Natalia Tanner Cain. Mayes was a quiet but blunt child, which contrasted with the gregarious personality of her younger sister, Greta Coleman Moore. Although Mayes joined St. Mark Presbyterian Church as a young girl, her parents were not religious, and only her maternal grandmother, Emma Jordan, attended regularly. Mayes' parents emphasized the importance of education, and she was eager to impress them with her good grades at Thirkell Elementary School. She was particularly encouraged in her studies by her paternal aunt, who was a schoolteacher. When Mayes was nine years old, her family moved to a single-family home on Kendall Street in a predominately white neighborhood in Detroit. There, Mayes attended MacCulloch Elementary School, Tappan Junior High School and David Mackenzie High School.

Video Oral History Interview with Michele Coleman Mayes, Section A2008_126_001_003, TRT: 0:31:00 ?

Michele Coleman Mayes attended David Mackenzie High School, where she aspired to become a stewardess and a lawyer; and interned at law firms with her paternal aunt's assistance. Although Mayes had hoped to attend the University of California, Berkeley, her mother, Geraldine Coleman, encouraged her to attend the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, Michigan instead. During the Detroit riots in 1967, Mayes' father, Wilbert Coleman, was employed as a city guard, and shielded her from the violence. Afterwards, he took Mayes to her old neighborhood, which had been largely destroyed, and she gave a speech on the events when she returned to campus. Mayes participated in speech contests and took dance classes with Vera B. Embree, while working part-time at the University of Michigan's dental school. In her junior year, she began working as an administrative aide for the Black Law Students Alliance. Upon graduating, Mayes was accepted to the University of Michigan Law School.

Video Oral History Interview with Michele Coleman Mayes, Section A2008_126_001_004, TRT: 0:28:30 ?

Michele Coleman Mayes met her husband, Jean Mayes, in 1969 at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, Michigan. They continued their relationship long distance, when Jean Mayes moved to Birmingham, Alabama. During a summer visit there, she experienced housing discrimination. The couple married on the day of Mayes' graduation from the University of Michigan Law School, and moved to Champaign, Illinois. During this time, Mayes taught at Illinois State University, while her husband earned his master's degree from the University of Illinois. She then returned to Detroit, Michigan in 1976; and with the help of Judge Henry Heading, secured a position as an assistant U.S. attorney in the civil and criminal divisions. In 1980, Mayes was

promoted to chief of the civil division. In this role, she represented the federal government after President Ronald Reagan fired air traffic controllers who were on strike. Mayes recalls living in New York City briefly, and working for the U.S. Attorney's office there.

Video Oral History Interview with Michele Coleman Mayes, Section A2008_126_001_005, TRT: 0:30:40 ?

Michele Coleman Mayes worked at the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Eastern District of Michigan, where she met attorneys N.C. Deday LaRene and Dennis Archer, who was the first African American president of the American Bar Association. After five years, Mayes left the U.S. Attorney's office; and under the advisement of an older coworker, sought a position in private practice. Because of her limited experience representing private clients, Mayes struggled to find employment at a law firm. Her husband, Jean Mayes, suggested that she work as an in house corporate lawyer, and Mayes was hired by the Burroughs Corporation in 1982. There, she worked with attorneys J. Marne Gleason and Wade H. McCree. Although she initially disliked the slower pace of corporate law, Mayes familiarized herself with the computer business, and all aspects of the company. She was the only African American woman in the legal department, but did not allow her coworkers' negative preconceptions of her race or gender to influence her work.

Video Oral History Interview with Michele Coleman Mayes, Section A2008_126_001_006, TRT: 0:30:30 ?

Michele Coleman Mayes was an associate general counsel at Burroughs Corporation when it merged with Sperry Corporation to form Unisys Corporation in 1986. In the following years, the company's stock plummeted, and it was engulfed in several lawsuits. During this time, Mayes aspired to become a general counsel at the company, but was told by the acting general counsel Andrew D. Hendry, that she lacked the necessary experience. After Hendry left Unisys Corporation, he encouraged Mayes to join him at Colgate Palmolive Company, and promised to prepare her to become general counsel. After joining Colgate Palmolive Company in 1992, Mayes worked with the Food and Drug Administration for the first time, and learned how to operate in a decentralized legal department under businessman Edward T. Fogarty. The following year, Mayes became vice president of human resources for the North American operations, and acquired essential management skills to become general counsel.

Video Oral History Interview with Michele Coleman Mayes, Section A2008_126_001_007, TRT: 0:31:10 ?

Michele Coleman Mayes headed Colgate Palmolive Company's North American human resources department for three years. She then moved to the law department, where she traveled around the world to oversee the company's international legal operations. Mayes studied foreign judicial systems and learned to rely on the expertise of local lawyers. When Colgate Palmolive Company was sued in Ecuador, Mayes connected with lawyers and lobbyists in Washington, D.C. in order to help settle the lawsuit. She traveled to Nigeria to quell angry shareholders of the plant there, and hired a respected Nigerian law firm to help mediate. In 2001, Mayes became a deputy general counsel; and in this role, handled patent and trademark law for the first time. In 2003, Sara Moss announced her resignation as the general counsel for Pitney Bowes Inc., and recommended Mayes as her replacement. Mayes was hired in February of 2003 after a lengthy interview process with the company's CEO, Michael J. Critelli.

Video Oral History Interview with Michele Coleman Mayes, Section A2008_126_001_008, TRT:

0:31:00 ?

Michele Coleman Mayes was hired as the general counsel for Pitney Bowes Inc., which had a smaller legal department and less of an international focus than her previous employer, Colgate Palmolive Company. Mayes focused on motivating her staff, and mentored a young man who aspired to become general counsel. Knowing that in house lawyers would provide better work in a niche market, she expanded Pitney Bowes Inc.'s team of patent lawyers during her tenure. At the time, Mayes was one of only six women of color serving as general counsel of a Fortune 500 company. While working at Pitney Bowes Inc., she joined the public board of Assurant, Inc. in 2004, and formed a special committee after the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission launched an investigation into the insurance company in 2007. Mayes was encouraged to interview for a position as general counsel at Allstate Corporation, and was so impressed by the values of CEO Thomas J. Wilson that she accepted the job offer.

Video Oral History Interview with Michele Coleman Mayes, Section A2008_126_002_009, TRT: 0:29:10 ?

Michele Coleman Mayes was persuaded by headhunter June Eichbaum to apply for a position as general counsel at Allstate Corporation. She traveled to Chicago, Illinois for her interview, despite inclement weather, and spoke to a number of executives, including CEO Thomas J. Wilson. Mayes was impressed by Wilson's thoughtful critique of the pictures in his office, and further admired his down to earth personality when he agreed to ride the subway following a second interview in New York City. Although Mayes had received another job offer elsewhere, she was attracted to the new challenges she would encounter at Allstate Corporation. She joined Allstate Corporation in 2007, succeeding Michael McCabe after his retirement. Compared to her previous employers, Allstate Corporation was more of a U.S. focused business. Insurance was also a highly regulated industry, and Mayes was tasked with learning various regulations from each of the fifty states in the United States.

Video Oral History Interview with Michele Coleman Mayes, Section A2008_126_002_010, TRT: 0:29:40 ?

Michele Coleman Mayes led a legal department at the Allstate Corporation, which was comprised of both seasoned lawyers and recent law school graduates. She encouraged her staff to be engaged, proactive and accurate in their work, and to challenge themselves as well. Mayes also brought a consumer-driven approach to the company, which she had cultivated in her earlier years working with consumer products. She advised the Allstate Corporation to learn about their customers and their criticism of the company in order to remain relevant in the future. Although the company once operated internationally, it returned to a national focus before the start of Mayes' tenure. She describes her hopes for the company to grow internationally, and talks about the potential costs and benefits of moving from a state-by-state regulatory system to a unified federal system. She also talks about her previous board involvement, and her hopes to join a public board after retirement.

Video Oral History Interview with Michele Coleman Mayes, Section A2008_126_002_011, TRT: 0:17:00 ?

Michele Coleman Mayes describes her plans for the future, and shares her advice for aspiring lawyers. She also describes her hopes and concerns for the African American community, and reflects upon the role of race in the United States. Mayes concludes the interview by reflecting upon her legacy.