

Finding Black History's Lost Stories

Project Aims to Fill In Gaps by Moving Beyond Familiar Faces

By JOHN W. FOUNTAIN

CHICAGO, Dec. 28 — Inside the 7,000-square-foot office of a renovated warehouse on south Michigan Avenue, it is almost as if the walls can talk. Boxes of labeled videotapes neatly line shelves where the tales of a century and a people are stored.

Some of the stories are familiar, some not so familiar. And some of those telling their stories are famous — Harry Belafonte, Ossie Davis, Ruby Dee, Terry McMillan and Julian Bond — though many are not so famous.

But all are deemed to be history makers, their voices and faces captured on film as lessons for generations to come.

At least, that is the aim of a Chicago nonprofit group, HistoryMakers. The group's founder, Julieanna Richardson, said the hope was to preserve an oral history on videotape of African-Americans and their accomplishments — to seek and find them, then to record "America's missing stories."

"We are preserving living history," Ms. Richardson said. "In today's world you hear Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, Fannie Lou Hamer, you keep hearing the same names over and over again."

"Had it not been a lot for the lawyers behind the scene, and funders like Harry Belafonte, there would not have been a Martin Luther King," Ms. Richardson said.

She said she hoped HistoryMakers would help to fill in the gaps that she

believes exist in African-American history largely because of the tendency to focus on icons and on more frequently explored subjects like slavery, the abolitionist movement and civil rights. Often missed are the stories of many lesser-known blacks that are a big part of that historical tapestry.

So Ms. Richardson, a Harvard Law graduate and entrepreneur turned historian — through HistoryMakers — has begun to collect the stories of

An archive of interviews with people who made a difference.

5,000 African-Americans, a task she hopes to complete by 2005, and apparently the single largest African-American archival project since the recording of more than 2,000 former slaves by the Works Progress Administration in the Depression.

"Out of this really will develop this quilt work where you'll see patterns between stories and you will see new stories emerging," Ms. Richardson said.

Since she started the project in 1999, HistoryMakers has interviewed 400 people. The interviews are con-

ducted by historians, celebrities — including Danny Glover and Angela Davis — and the staff of HistoryMakers as well as by journalists. Among those interviewed are artists, entertainers, civic leaders, athletes and noncelebrities, like Alonzo Pettie, 93, whom HistoryMakers says is the oldest living black cowboy.

"The thing is that you can't get excited about 400 interviews when you want to do 5,000," Ms. Richardson said. "We are just at the precipice of trying to move out nationally and create a system that will have integrity and an infrastructure that will make this work."

The cost of the HistoryMakers project is estimated at \$30 million, and Ms. Richardson said she had raised \$2.4 million, through private donations and grants, including more than \$500,000 from foundations.

Earl G. Graves, founder and publisher of Black Enterprise magazine, said Ms. Richardson's work was important because "history, only since the civil rights movement, started to recognize the importance of the contributions of African-Americans."

"And if you can have a program, such as what is in place now, that can be put away, then people a couple hundred years from now can look back," said Mr. Graves, who is also among those to be interviewed. Ms. Richardson points to Steven Spielberg's Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation as the best example of what she envisions for HistoryMakers, although her project is



Photographs by Scott Olson for The New York Times

"We are preserving living history," says Julieanna Richardson, the founder of HistoryMakers. The group aims to build a video archive that includes lesser-known stories that are an important part of black history.

a fraction of the size. Since its establishment in 1994, the Shoah Foundation has collected and preserved videotaped testimony of more than 50,000 Holocaust survivors.

Camille Cosby, wife of Bill Cosby, and Renee Poussaint, a former cor-

respondent for ABC News, have undertaken a project similar to HistoryMakers. A videotaped oral history archive called the National Visionary Leadership Project, it seeks to record the experiences of blacks in their 70's and older. But that project, which hopes to begin by completing 60 interviews a year over five years, is substantially smaller.

HistoryMakers has already created an educational kit called "Pioneers in the Struggle," which chronicles the history of African-Americans in Illinois state government. The program, which is being used by

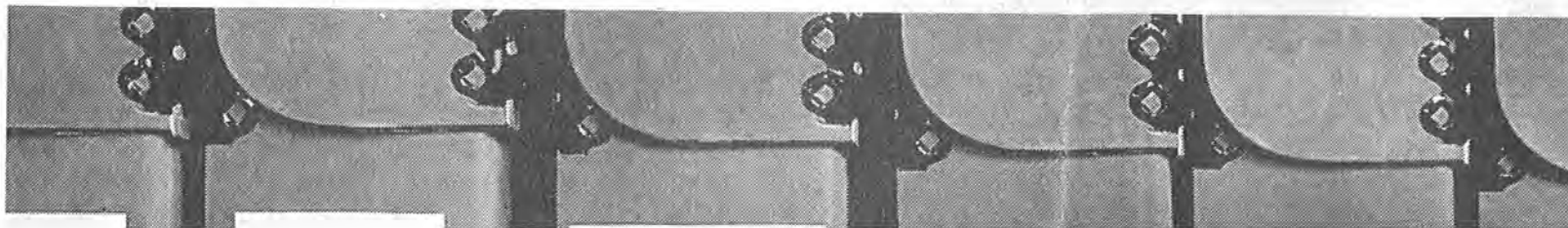
chive was potentially priceless.

"History is made not just by the Martin Luther Kings and the Malcolm X's but by every individual who has the consciousness to take responsibility for their lives and seek to shape and form their world," Mr. Dodson said. "Frequently, those individuals' stories are not seen as part of the historical record and are not appreciated in that regard."

Vernon Jarrett, a longtime Chicago journalist, also praised Ms. Richardson's undertaking.

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Eventually, Ms. Richardson plans to create a digital archive of the interviews that will be made available to some historically black colleges as well as libraries and national research centers, including the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in Harlem.

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"This is one of the most significant advances in the propagation of African-American history," said Mr. Jarrett, a columnist for The Chicago Defender, the city's major black newspaper. "This means that in contrast to today when we would like to hear the voice of W. E. B. DuBois, of a young A. Philip Randolph, she is giving several generations henceforth an opportunity to know what they were like, how they appeared, their mannerisms. It's just tremendous."