

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Reverend Samuel Billy Kyles

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Kyles, Samuel Billy
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Reverend Samuel Billy Kyles,
Dates:	February 13, 2003
Bulk Dates:	2003
Physical Description:	8 Betacame SP videocassettes (3:47:50).
Abstract:	Civil rights activist and pastor Reverend Samuel Billy Kyles (1934 - 2016) was witness to the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Kyles was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on February 13, 2003, in Chicago, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2003_029
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

The Reverend Samuel "Billy" Kyles was born in Shelby, Mississippi, on September 26, 1934. A longtime participant in the civil rights movement, Kyles was the founding pastor of the Monumental Baptist Church in Memphis, Tennessee in 1959.

After Memphis sanitation workers went on strike in February 1968 due to low pay and poor working conditions, Kyles led the effort to gain community support for the striking workers. He organized nightly rallies and raised money before scheduling a major rally for April 3, 1968. Kyles persuaded the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. to come to Memphis and speak at the event. Kyles accompanied King and his entourage that day and was on hand when King was assassinated in the early evening. Kyles is widely believed to be the only living person to have been with King during his dying hour.

Kyles has maintained his involvement with civil rights work since the 1960s. He belonged to several civic and professional organizations. Kyles was a founding member of the National Board of People United to Save Humanity (PUSH), the executive director of Rainbow/PUSH-Memphis and the executive producer of Rainbow/PUSH WLOK Radio. Kyles also worked on Jesse Jackson's 1984 and 1988 presidential campaigns and was a delegate to the First African National Congress. He was appointed by President Bill Clinton to serve on the Advisory Committee on Religious Freedom Abroad.

Kyles has appeared in several television documentaries about the life and assassination of King and has toured the country extensively, speaking on King and his message. Kyles received several honors and awards, including the Tennessee Living Legend Award in 1992.

Rev. Kyles passed away on April 26, 2016.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Reverend Samuel Billy Kyles was conducted by Larry Crowe on February 13, 2003, in Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on 8 Betacame SP videocassettes. Civil rights activist and pastor Reverend Samuel Billy Kyles (1934 - 2016) was witness to the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

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:

Kyles, Samuel Billy

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Kyles, Samuel Billy --Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Civil Rights Activist

Pastor

HistoryMakers® Category:

CivicMakers|ReligionMakers

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 Reverend Samuel Billy Kyles, February 13, 2003. 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 Reverend Samuel Billy Kyles, Section A2003_029_001_001, TRT: 0:29:05 ?

Reverend Samuel “Billy” Kyles describes his parents. His mother, Ludie Kyles, was born in Alabama. She married Kyles father, Reverend Joseph Henry Kyles, at the age of eighteen in order to leave Alabama. Joseph Henry Kyles was raised in Shaw, Mississippi. The Kyles’ gave birth to seven sons, including Samuel Kyles on September 26, 1934 in Shelby, Mississippi. In Shelby, Reverend Kyles

pastored St. Andrews Baptist Church, while his wife was a homemaker. As a child in Shelby, Kyles buried dead birds, baptized chickens, and preached, earning him the nickname “Billy Sunday” after the white evangelist William “Billy” Sunday. The Kyles’ moved to Chicago, Illinois between 1938 and 1939, where Reverend Kyles pastored Mt. Pleasant Missionary Baptist Church. The Kyles’ lived in the church parsonage on Chicago’s South Side. As a youth in Chicago, Kyles worked as a soda jerk at a candy store. Kyles also enjoyed eating pork rinds from a street cart, singing under the streetlamps with Sam Cooke, and riding his motor bike.

Video Oral History Interview with Reverend Samuel Billy Kyles, Section A2003_029_001_002, TRT: 0:29:05 ?

As a youth in Chicago, Illinois, Reverend Samuel “Billy” Kyles lived near the Staples Singers and Sam Cooke. Known for his high tenor voice, Kyles was a member of Roberta Martin’s youth singing group, and sang with The Caravans and James Cleveland. Kyles was also family friends with Mahalia Jackson and Reverend C.L. Franklin, Aretha Franklin’s father. Kyles attended Douglas Elementary School where he served as a patrol boy. In 1948, Kyles enrolled at Wendell Phillips High School where he was a member of the track team. In 1951, Kyles’ father died of cancer. A pastor from Mississippi swindled his way into taking over Mt. Pleasant Missionary Baptist Church, forced the Kyle family to move out of the church parsonage, and cut off the salary promised to Kyles’ mother. The family moved into the projects, and Kyles dropped out of school to work and get married. In 1953, Kyles preached his introductory sermon at Mt. Pleasant Missionary Baptist Church. He was then elected as assistant pastor under Reverend H.R. Jelks

Video Oral History Interview with Reverend Samuel Billy Kyles, Section A2003_029_001_003, TRT: 0:29:10 ?

Reverend Samuel “Billy” Kyles was nurtured by the congregation that had watched him grow up as a young preacher at Mt. Pleasant Missionary Baptist Church in Chicago, Illinois. In 1959, Kyles was encouraged by his mentor, Reverend H.R. Jelks, to preach as a visiting pastor at Monumental Baptist Church in Memphis, Tennessee. Within two weeks, Kyles was chosen to pastor the church. Kyles traveled to Memphis to preach every other week, and eventually obtained a \$20,000 loan to purchase a building for his church. Kyles then moved with his family to Memphis to pastor Monumental Baptist Church full time. In 1961, Kyles helped Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. form the Progressive National Baptist Convention after Reverend J.H. Jackson, President of the National Baptist Convention, refused to support the Civil Rights Movement. Despite a lack of support from his congregation and community, Kyles became active in the Civil Rights Movement in Memphis, helping to integrate busses, schools, and banks.

Video Oral History Interview with Reverend Samuel Billy Kyles, Section A2003_029_001_004, TRT: 0:29:10 ?

In 1961, Reverend Samuel “Billy” Kyles and his daughter were harassed by their police escort while integrating her elementary school. In junior high school, she was harassed by her black peers for having white friends, and by white students for being black. In high school, a play she was supposed to star in was cancelled because her character played opposite a white male. During the 1960s, Kyles chaired the Labor & Industry Committee of the Memphis Chapter of the NAACP. The Memphis NAACP integrated Memphis’ municipal spaces and retail stores, negotiating with whites to achieve their goals. In 1968, the black sanitation workers went on strike due to poor working conditions and low pay.

Kyles worked with sanitation workers to organize daily and weekly marches. Because the workers' grievances aligned with Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s poor people's campaign, he addressed the workers in 1968. Dr. King later returned to Memphis to lead a sanitation workers march. The march, however, erupted in violence.

Video Oral History Interview with Reverend Samuel Billy Kyles, Section A2003_029_001_005, TRT: 0:29:25 ?

In 1968, Reverend Samuel "Billy" Kyles helped to organize a failed march of Memphis sanitation workers in response to the Memphis Sanitation Workers Strike. Dr. King returned to Memphis to prove that he could lead a successful, nonviolent march. On the evening of April 3, 1968, hundreds packed Memphis's Mason Temple to hear Dr. King speak. It was here that Dr. King gave his final speech, "I've Been to the Mountaintop." Kyles felt that this speech allowed King to preach himself through any fear he had at the time, as the next day, he was in high spirits. On April 4, 1968, Kyle prepared dinner for Dr. King and SCLC leaders at his home. He went to the Lorraine Motel to chat with Dr. King and Dr. Ralph Abernathy before the group headed to dinner. As the trio exited Dr. King's hotel room to depart for Kyles' home, Dr. King was shot and killed. Kyles blamed himself for the assassination for many years, but later used his experience to share an important moment in history with others, and promote the legacy of Dr. King.

Video Oral History Interview with Reverend Samuel Billy Kyles, Section A2003_029_001_006, TRT: 0:28:30 ?

After the assassination of Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Reverend Samuel "Billy" Kyles worked with SCLC leaders to prepare an official statement that announced Dr. King's death and Dr. Ralph Abernathy's succession as SCLC President. Kyles also selected the funeral home where Dr. King was embalmed. Kyles refuses to write a book about his experiences, as he does not want to capitalize on the tragedy of Dr. King's death. The Memphis Sanitation Workers Strike saw success following Dr. King's death, yet the poor people's campaign failed. Kyles compared his Civil Rights involvement to being a war veteran in a rag-tag army, where no one person had power, but all were committed to a single mission. Kyles noted that Dr. King and Malcom X were each committed to fighting forces that oppressed blacks. Kyles talked about slavery's role in shaping the American experience, and described it as a story of survival and resilience. These survival instincts allowed African Americans to persevere through Jim Crow.

Video Oral History Interview with Reverend Samuel Billy Kyles, Section A2003_029_001_007, TRT: 0:28:45 ?

Reverend Samuel "Billy" Kyles commented on Reverend Ralph Abernathy's autobiography, "And the Walls Came Tumbling Down," which was released in 1989. Kyles sought to address inconsistencies in the book about Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s alleged infidelity the night before his death. Kyles described Dr. King's leadership of the SCLC, as well. Dr. King founded the organization in 1957 to promote Christian civil rights advocacy. Though the SCLC was not strong in Memphis, a city where the NAACP had a stronghold, it was effective through most of the South. After Dr. King was assassinated in 1968, infighting between members of the organization's leadership caused the SCLC to suffer. Under the leadership of Martin Luther King III, the SCLC still suffered from leadership and administrative issues. Kyles talked about Martin Luther King Jr.'s children, and described his religious philosophy. Kyles also commented on the burden of leadership, and shared his hopes and concerns for

the African American community.

Video Oral History Interview with Reverend Samuel Billy Kyles, Section A2003_029_001_008,
TRT: 0:24:40 ?

Reverend Samuel “Billy” Kyles talked about Harold Ford, Sr., Tennessee’s first African American U.S. Congressman. Ford won a U.S. Congress seat in 1975 after a voting recount revealed that he, rather than his opponent, Dan Kuykendall, won the election. In 1987, Ford was charged with bank fraud and Kyles led a campaign to raise money for his defense. Ford was acquitted of all charges in 1993. Kyles mentored Ford’s son, Harold Ford, Jr., and encouraged him to run for his father’s seat in the U.S. Congress in 1997. Harold Ford, Jr. won his father’s seat, and served as a U.S. Congressman until 2006. Kyles’ legacy is that of his church, Monumental Baptist Church, his role in mentoring young preachers, and his involvement in the lives of people. Kyles committed himself to inspiring young people, as well. Kyles closed the interview by talking about how he would like to be remembered, and narrating his photographs.