

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Miriam DeCosta-Willis

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers® 1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	DeCosta-Willis, Miriam
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Miriam DeCosta-Willis,
Dates:	July 31, 2003
Bulk Dates:	2003
Physical Description:	6 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:40:47).
Abstract:	Educator Miriam DeCosta-Willis (1934 - 2021) is the first African American faculty member at Memphis State University. Later, she was named professor of Spanish and chair of the Department of Romance Languages at Howard University. She is also the cofounder of the Memphis Black Writers' Workshop, and has published eight books and numerous articles. DeCosta-Willis was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on July 31, 2003, in Washington, District of Columbia. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2003_173
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Educator Miriam DeCosta-Willis was born November 1, 1934 in Florence, Alabama to educators Beautine and Frank DeCosta. She grew up in the South but graduated from Westover School in Connecticut and received a B.A. degree, Phi Beta Kappa, from Wellesley College, as well as M.A. and Ph.D. degrees from the Johns Hopkins University.

In her forty-year career in education, she has taught at LeMoyne and Owen Colleges (later, at the merged institution for a decade), became the first Black faculty member at Memphis State University in 1966, chaired the Department of Romance Languages at Howard University, was named Commonwealth Professor of Spanish at George Mason University in 1989, and was Director of Graduate Studies in the Department of African American Studies at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, from which she retired in 1999.

An activist throughout her life, she organized a student protest at Wilkinson High School, joined her mother in the Montgomery Bus Boycott, was jailed in Memphis for participating in civil rights demonstrations, campaigned for Black political candidates, led a boycott of Memphis public schools, and joined protest marches in Washington when she lived there in the 1990s.

Co-founder of the Memphis Black Writers' Workshop, DeCosta-Willis has published eight books, including *Blacks in Hispanic Literature*, *Erotique Noire*, *The Memphis Diary of Ida B. Wells*, *Daughters of the Diaspora* and, recently, *Notable Black Memphians*. A columnist, lecturer, consultant, and visiting scholar, she was chair of the Tennessee Humanities Council, associate editor of *Sage: A Scholarly Journal of Black Women*, and editorial board member of the *Afro-Hispanic Review*.

In 1955, she married Russell Sugarmon, Jr., a civil rights attorney, and they had four children. Later, she married

A. W. Willis, Jr., an attorney, businessman, and first Black elected to the Tennessee Legislature since Reconstruction.

Miriam DeCosta-Willis was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on July 31, 2003.

DeCosta-Willis passed away on January 7, 2021.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Miriam DeCosta-Willis was conducted by Kelly Navies on July 31, 2003, in Washington, District of Columbia, and was recorded on 6 Betacame SP videocassettes. Educator Miriam DeCosta-Willis (1934 - 2021) is the first African American faculty member at Memphis State University. Later, she was named professor of Spanish and chair of the Department of Romance Languages at Howard University. She is also the cofounder of the Memphis Black Writers' Workshop, and has published eight books and numerous articles.

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:

DeCosta-Willis, Miriam

Navies, Kelly (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

DeCosta-Willis, Miriam--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Educator

HistoryMakers® Category:

EducationMakers

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 Miriam DeCosta-Willis, July 31, 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 Miriam DeCosta-Willis, Section A2003_173_001_001, TRT: 0:29:50 ?

Miriam DeCosta-Willis was born on November 1, 1934 in Florence, Alabama. Her maternal family is from Hancock County, Georgia. Her great-grandfather was born into slavery, acquired a lot of land and sent all of his children to college. Her mother, Beautine Hubert DeCosta, was a social worker educated at Savannah State University and Atlanta University in Georgia. DeCosta-Willis' father, Frank DeCosta, is the youngest of eleven children. He graduated from Avery Normal Institute in Charleston, South Carolina and began his Ph.D. studies at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia. DeCosta-Willis was a curious child. Her family moved frequently. She attended Thaddeus Stevens Observatory School in Philadelphia, and laboratory schools affiliated with Alabama State Teachers College and South Carolina State College where her parents taught. She also attended Wilkinson High School in Orangeburg, South Carolina. In high school, she began studying French, continuing her study at preparatory school in Connecticut.

Video Oral History Interview with Miriam DeCosta-Willis, Section A2003_173_001_002, TRT: 0:29:05 ?

Miriam DeCosta-Willis' family moved frequently due to her father's successive academic appointments. During her teenage years, her family lived on the campus of South Carolina State University in Orangeburg, South Carolina. At the time, railroad tracks divided city into two racially segregated communities. DeCosta-Willis has memories of swimming and playing tennis during the summer. Initially enrolled at Wilkinson High School in Orangeburg, she completed her last two years of high school at Westover School in Middlebury, Connecticut due to the influence of her benefactor Elizabeth Waring. She did well, but encountered racial prejudice as one two black students at the school. In 1956, DeCosta-Willis was visiting her parents in Montgomery, Alabama when Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s house was bombed. Her mother participated in the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Later the same year, DeCosta-Willis graduated from Wellesley College in Wellesley, Massachusetts. Race was rarely addressed in her college classes.

Video Oral History Interview with Miriam DeCosta-Willis, Section A2003_173_001_003, TRT: 0:30:50 ?

Miriam DeCosta-Willis studied Spanish under Professor Justine Ruiz de Conde and noted poet Jorge Guillen as a student at Wellesley College in Wellesley, Massachusetts. In college, she did not study any Afro-Hispanic writers. After graduating in 1956, she moved to Memphis, Tennessee with her husband HistoryMaker Russell Sugarmon, Jr., a graduate of Harvard Law School. In Memphis, DeCosta-Willis struggled to find a teaching job. However, she and her husband, along with other northern educated African Americans such as A.W. Willis and HistoryMakers Maxine Smith and Benjamin Hooks, were active in the NAACP and Civil Rights Movement in Memphis throughout the late-1950s and 1960s. In 1960, DeCosta-Willis earned her M.A. degree in Romance Languages from Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, Maryland, where her parents were living at the time. She later returned to Hopkins in 1965 and completed her Ph.D. degree in 1967. In 1966, she became the first African American faculty member at the University of Memphis.

Video Oral History Interview with Miriam DeCosta-Willis, Section A2003_173_001_004, TRT: 0:29:45 ?

Miriam DeCosta-Willis advocated on behalf of black students and faculty while on faculty at the University of Memphis in Tennessee from 1966 to 1970. In

1969, when she was chair of the education committee for the Memphis branch of the NAACP, she, HistoryMaker Maxine Smith, HistoryMaker Samuel Billy Kyles and others organized Black Mondays to protest the school district's resistance to integration. She remembers Memphis' black power group, the Invaders. In 1970, she joined the faculty of Howard University in Washington, D.C. where she was first exposed to Afro-Hispanic literature. She describes the development of the Afro-Hispanic literary field since the 1970s. She returned to Memphis in 1976 to live with her husband A.W. Willis. In 1977, her book 'Blacks in Hispanic Literature,' was published. She began teaching at LeMoyne-Owen College in 1979 and at George Mason University in 1989. In 1991, she became director of the graduate program in Afro-American studies at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County.

Video Oral History Interview with Miriam DeCosta-Willis, Section A2003_173_001_005, TRT: 0:31:05 ?

Miriam DeCosta-Willis talks about the publication of 'Erotique Noire/Black Erotica' in 1992, a collection of essays she edited with Roseanne P. Bell and Reginald Martin. The anthology included essays by Audre Lorde and HistoryMaker Charles Blockson, and the cover art was done by Romare Bearden. DeCosta-Willis describes how she developed the idea for the book and the process of getting it published by Knopf Doubleday. At the time of interview in 2003, DeCosta-Willis' published works included: 'The Memphis Diary of Ida B. Wells,' 'Singular Like a Bird: The Art of Nancy Morejon,' and 'Daughters of the Diaspora: Afro-Hispanic Writers.' She also talks about the books she plans to publish in the future. DeCosta-Willis describes how she would like to be remembered and reflects upon her life and the current state of the African American community. DeCosta-Willis narrates her photographs.

Video Oral History Interview with Miriam DeCosta-Willis, Section A2003_173_001_006, TRT: 0:10:12 ?

Miriam DeCosta-Willis narrates her photographs.