

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Rita Aliese Fry

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Fry, Rita Aliese, 1946-
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Rita Aliese Fry,
Dates:	October 2, 2003
Bulk Dates:	2003
Physical Description:	7 Betacame SP videocassettes (3:22:12).
Abstract:	Public defender Rita Aliese Fry (1946 -) has held positions in the Office of the Cook County Public Defender, the city of Chicago as the supervisor of the law department and as chief executive of the Public Defender's Office. Fry was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on October 2, 2003, in Chicago, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2003_246
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Rita Aliese Fry was born in Memphis, Tennessee, on May 28, 1946. Moving with her family to Chicago, Fry attended Catholic schools and graduated from high school in 1964. First attending Prairie State College in Chicago Heights for an A.A. in 1968, Fry then attended Loyola University of Chicago for a bachelor's degree in 1971. She later went on to attend Northwestern University School of Law, earning her J.D. in 1979.

Fry joined the Cook County Office of Public Defense in 1980, serving as an assistant public defender. She remained there until 1986, when she took a position with the city of Chicago Law Department as a supervisory attorney. Two years later, she returned to the Cook County Public Defender's Office, this time serving as the chief executive, where she remains in her second term today. The Office of the Cook County Public Defender is the largest public defender office in the country, with Fry supervising more than 500 attorneys.

Also active in public policy, Fry has worked as a consultant both in private practice and through government appointment. Governor George Ryan named her to the Illinois Commission on Capital Punishment, a panel that sought to reevaluate Illinois' administration of the death penalty. In 1994, she was selected by the president of the Supreme Court of Ethiopia to assist in establishing a public defender system in that country. Fry has received numerous awards, including the Phenomenal Women Award and the Sixth Amendment Award, and she remains active with a number of organizations, including serving as vice president of the Leadership Council of Greater Chicago and serving on the board of directors of the Lawyer Assistance Program. Fry and her husband, Adelbert, have one son, who is also an attorney.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Rita Aliese Fry was conducted by Larry Crowe on October 2, 2003, in

Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on 7 Betacame SP videocassettes. Public defender Rita Aliese Fry (1946 -) has held positions in the Office of the Cook County Public Defender, the city of Chicago as the supervisor of the law department and as chief executive of the Public Defender's Office.

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:

Fry, Rita Aliese, 1946-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Fry, Rita Aliese, 1946- --Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Cook County (Ill.)

Occupations:

Public Defender

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 Rita Aliese Fry, October 2, 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 Rita Aliese Fry, Section A2003_246_001_001, TRT: 0:30:00 ?
Rita Aliese Fry was born on May 28, 1946 in Memphis, Tennessee. Her father, McKinley High, was born in 1923 in Albany, Mississippi. He migrated to Memphis, Tennessee as a young adult and worked as a delivery person for a candy company. He passed away in 1991, just before Fry's appointment to the Public Defender's Office. Fry's mother, Lucille Hoskins High was born in 1928 outside of Memphis, Tennessee. She attended Booker T. Washington High School in Memphis and married High shortly after her high school graduation. The couple relocated to Chicago, Illinois. Lucille Hoskins High earned a B.A. degree in social work from Governor's State University in University Park,

Illinois at fifty years old and subsequently earned her M.A. degree. She worked as a counselor and an elementary school teacher. Fry grew up on the West Side of Chicago where two of her maternal uncles owned a pool halls. She attended St. Mary High School, an all-girls Catholic school which HistoryMaker Sharon Gist Gilliam also attended.

Video Oral History Interview with Rita Aliese Fry, Section A2003_246_001_002, TRT: 0:29:46 ?

Rita Aliese Fry remembers Maxwell Street, a market located on the Near West Side of Chicago, Illinois. She describes bartering in Maxwell Street shops and ordering Chicago's staple Maxwell Street Polish sausages. Fry describes her childhood social activities, including visiting Riverview Amusement Park, the Museum of Natural History, and the Regal Theater in Chicago's Bronzeville neighborhood. There, Fry saw movies and acts in the Motown review, including Stevie Wonder, the Temptations and others. Live weekend blues performances were also a feature of Maxwell Street; Fry remembers Saturday performances by John Lee Hooker and other blues musicians. Fry liked cowboys Lash LaRue and Hopalong Cassidy as a child, and as she got older loved high heeled shoes. Other children in her neighborhood called her "sadiddy." She attended St. Charles Borromeo Catholic School in Chicago where she was encouraged to be a lawyer.

Video Oral History Interview with Rita Aliese Fry, Section A2003_246_001_003, TRT: 0:30:08 ?

Rita Aliese Fry attended St. Mary High School, an all-girls Catholic high school in Chicago, Illinois. She describes her experience as a high school student, including having difficulty dating in predominantly white Catholic schools. Fry was forbidden from attending the March on Washington in 1963. In 1964, on her senior class trip to Washington, D.C. she experienced racial discrimination at a restaurant in Richmond, Virginia. The staff maintained that black students be seated and served separately, however, the nuns chaperoning the trip refused to allow their black students to be mistreated. Fry attended Cortez Peters Business College of Chicago and Prairie State College in Chicago Heights, Illinois. She earned her B.A. at Loyola University in 1971 and was admitted to Northwestern University School of Law. She describes her professors at Northwestern, including HistoryMaker Thomas N. Todd, and talks about the assassinations of Fred Hampton and Mark Clark on December 4, 1969, the same day her son was born.

Video Oral History Interview with Rita Aliese Fry, Section A2003_246_001_004, TRT: 0:30:13 ?

Rita Aliese Fry attended Northwestern University School of Law in Chicago, Illinois. She describes her professors at Northwestern, including Victor Rosenblum, who suggested she pursue a legal career in public service. Fry earned her J.D. in 1979. She was hired as a law clerk for Diane Kinnard and HistoryMaker James D. Montgomery, where she discovered an interest in trial work. Fry applied to both the Public Defender's Office and State's Attorney's Office, and ultimately decided she was more attuned to defense than prosecution and joined the Chicago Public Defender's Office in 1980. She was assigned to women's court and tried over forty cases her first day. Her next assignment was to the felony division and in 1983 she was appointed to the Murder Taskforce—the second black, second woman and first black woman assigned to that division. Shortly after her appointment to the taskforce, however, she, along with six other people, filed a discrimination lawsuit against the Public Defender's Office.

Video Oral History Interview with Rita Aliese Fry, Section A2003_246_001_005, TRT: 0:30:18 ?

Rita Aliese Fry joined Chicago Mayor Harold Washington's administration in 1986 as Senior Attorney and Supervisor for Municipal Prosecution. One of Fry's responsibilities was to collaborate with the police department to enforce proper

conduct at political demonstrations, in case of counter-demonstrations or violence. Fry stayed in the mayor's office an additional year after Mayor Washington's death in 1987; then returned to the Public Defender's Office in 1988 as First Assistant to the Public Defender, HistoryMaker Randolph Noel Stone. Stone left the office in 1991 and Fry was appointed Public Defender by Cook County board president, Richard "Dick" Phelan, in 1992, making her the first woman and first black woman named Public Defender of Cook County. As Public Defender she improved the technology of the department and raised its stature. She also had the opportunity to travel to China and Ethiopia during her tenure. Fry critiques the Illinois juvenile justice system.

Video Oral History Interview with Rita Aliese Fry, Section A2003_246_001_006, TRT: 0:29:23 ?

Rita Aliese Fry talks about defending a young client charged with manslaughter as well as economic and social inequalities that influence the rates of conviction and incarceration. She critiques the demand for increased policing in urban areas, arguing that the criminal justice system cannot resolve the problems in poor urban communities, and critiques repressive legislation. Fry lists recent improvements in public defense and describes how she would like to be remembered. She concludes by narrating her photographs.

Video Oral History Interview with Rita Aliese Fry, Section A2003_246_001_007, TRT: 0:22:24 ?

Rita Aliese Fry narrates her photographs.