

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Grayson Mitchell

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Mitchell, Grayson, 1950-2018
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Grayson Mitchell,
Dates:	December 12, 2003
Bulk Dates:	2003
Physical Description:	9 Betacame SP videocassettes (4:22:17).
Abstract:	Business consulting chief executive and newspaper reporter Grayson Mitchell (1950 - 2018) was the founder, chairman and CEO of Summit Consulting, Inc., Corporate Communications and Public Affairs Consultancy. He served as a political reporter for the 'Chicago Sun-Times,' Washington editor for Jet and Ebony magazines, Washington columnist for Black Enterprise magazine and director of corporate communications for Johnson Products. Mitchell was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on December 12, 2003, in Chicago, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2003_295
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

William Grayson Mitchell was born March 8, 1950 in Mobile, Alabama. The son of educators, he attended Baldwin County Training School in Daphne, Alabama through the 9th grade. A precocious student, Mitchell qualified for and was granted early admission to Morehouse College, but graduated from the University of Illinois at Chicago with a B.S. in economics in 1971.

At Morehouse, Mitchell found himself drawn to journalism as his writing in the school paper earned for him a valuable summer internship. He was a political reporter for the *Chicago Sun-Times* in 1970, at the age of 20. Mitchell was Metro Reporter for the Washington Post from 1972 to 1973, where he knew Watergate reporters, Woodward and Bernstein. Invited by his friend, the late, *Jet* magazine editor Robert DeLeon, Mitchell signed with Johnson Publishing Company becoming Washington editor for *Jet* and *Ebony* magazines from 1973 to 1974. He was Washington columnist for *Black Enterprise* magazine from 1975 to 1979. He switched careers in 1980 when he became Director of Corporate Communications for Johnson Products in Chicago. In 1983, the 33 year old, Mitchell became Press Secretary for Chicago's first African American Mayor, the Honorable Harold Washington. His new job placed Mitchell in the thick of "Council Wars" as city council factions struggled for political control. Leaving the Mayor's service in 1985, Mitchell went on to found Summit Consulting, Inc., Corporate Communications and Public Affairs Consultancy of which he was Chairman and CEO.

Mitchell also served as director of Lakefront Supportive Housing, the Illinois Humanities Council and the Federation of State Humanities Councils. He was a member of the Economics Club of Chicago. Mitchell had two grown children. They all resides in the city of Chicago.

Mitchell passed away on February 23, 2018 at age 67.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Grayson Mitchell was conducted by Larry Crowe on December 12, 2003, in Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on 9 Betacame SP videocassettes. Business consulting chief executive and newspaper reporter Grayson Mitchell (1950 - 2018) was the founder, chairman and CEO of Summit Consulting, Inc., Corporate Communications and Public Affairs Consultancy. He served as a political reporter for the 'Chicago Sun-Times,' Washington editor for Jet and Ebony magazines, Washington columnist for Black Enterprise magazine and director of corporate communications for Johnson Products.

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:

Mitchell, Grayson, 1950-2018

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Mitchell, Grayson, 1950-2018 --Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Newspaper Reporter

Business Consulting Chief Executive

HistoryMakers® Category:

MediaMakers

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 Grayson Mitchell, December 12, 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 Grayson Mitchell, Section A2003_295_001_001, TRT: 0:28:39
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Grayson Mitchell was born on March 8, 1950 in Mobile, Alabama. Mitchell's mother, Helen Bailey Mitchell, was born in Mobile in 1925. Mitchell's maternal family ancestry dates back three generations on the Gulf Coast and Eastern Shore of Alabama. His maternal great-grandfather earned a living by reading to people at the dock on Mobile Bay. His father, William Gray Mitchell, was born in 1923 in Rockford, Illinois. He attended Alabama State University in Montgomery, Alabama where he met Helen Bailey. Mitchell describes his paternal family's history in Chicago, Illinois. Mitchell's mother's family is more educated than his father's family. Mitchell was raised a quarter mile from the Mobile Bay surrounded by his extended maternal family; he remembers swimming and eating fresh foods during his childhood. Mitchell talks about the Greek and Italian community in Mobile, the influence of its French settlers on the region, and open interracial marriages such as that of his great-aunt Hattie.

Video Oral History Interview with Grayson Mitchell, Section A2003_295_001_002, TRT: 0:29:20
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Grayson Mitchell attended Baldwin County Training School in Daphne, Alabama for the second through ninth grades. Mitchell loved to read as a child and developed a strong interest in education because of his parents who were both professors. Mitchell even taught a summer course in reading and English at Florida A&M University in Tallahassee, Florida when he was thirteen. He describes his family's relationships with Ralph Abernathy and Autherine Lucy, the first black student to attend the University of Alabama. Mitchell wrote a book inspired by these figures and submitted it to a publisher when he was eleven years old. Mitchell talks about socializing at the Elks Club in Mobile, an influential guidance counselor, and black periodicals in Mobile. He describes family members and his church in Mobile. Mitchell enrolled at Morehouse College in Atlanta, Georgia as an early admissions candidate at the age of fifteen where he majored in economics, but also had difficulties adjusting to college.

Video Oral History Interview with Grayson Mitchell, Section A2003_295_001_003, TRT: 0:30:40
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Grayson Mitchell was admitted to Morehouse College in Atlanta, Georgia as an early admissions candidate at fifteen years old. He talks about the influence of Dr. Benjamin Mays, president of Morehouse from 1940 to 1967, and Willie Ricks' and Stokely Carmichael's radical organizing in Atlanta in the 1960s. During college, Mitchell worked on HistoryMaker Julian Bond's campaign for Georgia State Representative and helped organize the 1969 student takeover at Morehouse College. Students prohibited board members from exiting a meeting, and demanded the board of trustees appoint black members, more black professors, and form a black studies department. The board was released after twenty-one hours, and Mitchell was expelled. He was admitted to the University of Illinois at Chicago and graduated with his B.S. degree in economics in 1971. He describes his tenure as a reporter at the Southern Courier civil rights newspaper, Newsweek magazine and the Chicago Sun-Times.

Video Oral History Interview with Grayson Mitchell, Section A2003_295_001_004, TRT: 0:28:50
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Grayson Mitchell describes his tenure as a reporter at the Chicago Sun-Times in Chicago, Illinois. Mitchell left the Sun-Times in 1972 for a position as a reporter at the Washington Post in Washington, D.C. where he met Robert Woodward and Carl Bernstein, the investigative journalists who broke the Watergate Scandal. Mitchell describes the Washington Post's involvement in the Watergate investigations, and outstanding journalists he met at the Post like Ben Bradlee, Dorothy Gilliam and Roger Wilkins. In 1974, Mitchell left the Post after

receiving an employment offer from Ebony magazine associate editor Robert DeLeon. Mitchell was awarded the National Endowment for the Humanities fellowship in journalism from Stanford University in 1975, and left Ebony magazine to study at Stanford. Mitchell talks about DeLeon's marriage to HistoryMaker Diahann Carroll and his death in 1977.

Video Oral History Interview with Grayson Mitchell, Section A2003_295_001_005, TRT: 0:31:18
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Grayson Mitchell returned to Washington D.C. in 1976 when he was hired by the Washington D.C. bureau of the Los Angeles Times. Mitchell describes his tenure as a reporter for the L.A. Times and his relationship with American journalist John Howard "Jack" Nelson. Mitchell covered President James Earl "Jimmy" Carter's 1976 presidential election campaign. He remembers meeting George H.W. Bush in Plains, Georgia on the campaign trail, and talks about American journalist Ed Bradley's legacy in Plains, Georgia. Mitchell also describes conducting an interview with former U.S. Senator Russell Long. He talks about the relationships he developed with Long and other southern U.S. Congressman. Mitchell talks about HistoryMaker Andrew Young's appointment as United States Ambassador to the United Nations and his diplomacy in Africa. He also talks about HistoryMaker Leon Dash's work with Angolan rebel UNITA forces in the 1970s, black agents in the CIA, and the recovery of a black United States spy in Russia.

Video Oral History Interview with Grayson Mitchell, Section A2003_295_001_006, TRT: 0:29:20
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Grayson Mitchell describes U.S. reporting on the Angolan independence wars in the 1970s and HistoryMaker Andrew Young's resignation as the U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations. He also talks about Jimmy Carter's presidency, racist remarks made by former secretary of agriculture Earl Butz, Richard Nixon's domestic policy record and the emergence of Minority Business Enterprise certification. In 1980, Mitchell returned to Chicago, Illinois to work for HistoryMaker George Johnson, the founder of Johnson Products Company. Johnson wanted Mitchell's help developing a strategy to address the assault on the Johnson Products by the Federal Trade Commission. Mitchell reflects upon the legacy of Johnson and other black hair care entrepreneurs. He also describes how Jane Byrne's controversial tenure as Mayor of Chicago helped ally the interests of the black community and the business community, thus setting the stage for Harold Washington's election in 1983.

Video Oral History Interview with Grayson Mitchell, Section A2003_295_001_007, TRT: 0:29:50
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Grayson Mitchell explains how Harold Washington emerged as the favored candidate to be Chicago, Illinois's first black mayor after a poll by the Chicago Defender. Chicago United, which represented the city's business interests, initially supported Warren Bacon. Washington's campaign was financed primarily by African Americans, like HistoryMakers George Johnson and Jacoby Dickens. Hugh Hefner was also a major supporter of Washington; he had a history of supporting independent black politicians in Chicago including HistoryMakers William Cousins and Anna Langford. Mitchell talks about Washington's campaign strategy, Washington's friendship with advice columnist Eppie Lederer, Jewish supporters of Washington's campaign and Washington's victory in the 1983 Democratic mayoral primary. Following Washington's election, Mitchell was appointed press secretary for the administration in 1983. Chicago developers and the many city council members took an oppositional stance towards Washington's administration.

Video Oral History Interview with Grayson Mitchell, Section A2003_295_001_008, TRT: 0:28:00
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Grayson Mitchell was named press secretary for the Harold Washington mayoral administration in 1983. He describes his strategy as press secretary, as well as Washington's personality and skill as an orator. Most of Washington's first term was dominated by Council Wars, a racially-polarizing political conflict in Chicago's City Council from 1983 to 1986. Washington's primary opponents on the City Council were Alderman Edward Burke, and President of the City Council Edward Vrdolyak. Despite the gridlock, the city government managed to accomplish some things, such as avoiding a shutdown of O'Hare International Airport. Mitchell resigned as press secretary in 1985 due to exhaustion. Mitchell talks about Washington's relationship with his chief of staff William "Bill" Ware, Washington's legacy as mayor, and the City Council's support for Washington's second term.

Video Oral History Interview with Grayson Mitchell, Section A2003_295_001_009, TRT: 0:26:20
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Grayson Mitchell describes the media agenda surrounding the Harold Washington administration and lists Chicago media personalities he liked and disliked, and black Chicago media personalities in the 1980s and 1990s including HistoryMakers Vernon Jarrett and Avis LaVelle. Mitchell talks about the state of contemporary investigative journalism, racial inclusivity in journalism and Mayor Richard M. Daley's supervision of the press. After leaving Washington's administration, Mitchell formed his own consulting firm, North Star Communications, which became Summit Consulting Inc. Mitchell describes his hopes and concerns for the African American community. He reflects upon his legacy, what he would have done differently, and how he would like to be remembered.