

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Melvin E. Banks

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Banks, Melvin
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Melvin E. Banks,
Dates:	September 2, 2004
Bulk Dates:	2004
Physical Description:	6 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:57:35).
Abstract:	Publisher Melvin E. Banks (1934 - 2021) is the founder of Urban Ministries, Inc., which produces Bible study materials with an emphasis on the African American community, and is also the founder of the Urban Outreach Foundation, which conducts training seminars around the country. Banks was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on September 2, 2004, in Chicago, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2004_156
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Publisher Melvin E. Banks was born in Birmingham, Alabama on October 15, 1934. Banks graduated from Parker High School in Birmingham in 1952, and from there he attended the Moody Bible College in Chicago, where graduated in 1955. Continuing his education, Banks attended Wheaton College, earning a B.A. degree in theology in 1958 and his master's degree in biblical studies in 1960.

Following his graduation, Banks was employed by Scripture Press Publications, where Banks helped bring their products into Black churches nationwide. In 1970, Banks founded Urban Ministries, Inc., which produces Bible study materials for people in urban communities with an emphasis on the African American community. Over the ensuing decades, his company has grown to serve over 100,000 Sunday school and vacation bible school teachers across the country, as well as materials for adult education. Four of the videos produced by Urban Ministries have been honored with either Chicago Emmy awards or Angel Awards.

Banks is also the founder of the Urban Outreach Foundation, which conducts training seminars around the country. He also sponsors yearly conferences, and a number of notables, including Dr. Michael Battle, Rev. Floyd Flake and Jesse Jackson. Banks serves as a trustee at his alma mater of Wheaton College, as well as the Circle Y Ranch, which is a children's camp. He and his wife, Olive, have been married since 1955. They reside in Chicago.

Banks passed away on February 13, 2021.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Melvin E. Banks was conducted by Larry Crowe on September 2, 2004, in

Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on 6 Betacame SP videocassettes. Publisher Melvin E. Banks (1934 - 2021) is the founder of Urban Ministries, Inc., which produces Bible study materials with an emphasis on the African American community, and is also the founder of the Urban Outreach Foundation, which conducts training seminars around the country.

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:

- Banks, Melvin
- Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)
- Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

- African Americans--Interviews
 - Banks, Melvin--Interviews
-

Organizations:

- HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)
 - The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection
 - Urban Ministries, Inc. (Chicago, Ill.)
-

Occupations:

Publisher

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 Melvin E. Banks, September 2, 2004. 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 Melvin E. Banks, Section A2004_156_001_001, TRT: 0:30:00 ?

Melvin E. Banks was born on October 15th, 1934 in Birmingham, Alabama. His mother, Survilla Ellis Banks, was born in 1903 in Eutaw, Alabama, the second of thirteen children. Banks lived with his maternal grandparents, Lemuel and Clement Ellis, in Birmingham until the age of eight while his mother taught at a school in rural Alabama. His father, Jerry Banks, was born in Central Alabama, in 1902; his parents divorced shortly after his birth and Banks only met his father once in early childhood. Banks grew up in the black neighborhoods of Birmingham where he played with his cousin and was chased out of the house

by his grandfather. He grew up near a steel mill with its smell of sulfur and smoke. He recalls seeing the red mountain next to the Titusville, Birmingham; hearing Negro spirituals, quartet and gospel music; unique dietary trends such as eating red clay and pig brains; and the love for Alaga syrup. After his grandmother died, Banks and his older sister, Margaret, went to live with their mother.

Video Oral History Interview with Melvin E. Banks, Section A2004_156_001_002, TRT: 0:29:40 ?

Melvin E. Banks first attended Booker T. Washington School in Birmingham, Alabama, before moving to the Collegeville neighborhood to live with his mother. During their first year in Collegeville, Banks spent weekdays with his older sister Margaret and a cousin while his mother worked at a live-in domestic job. When Banks was twelve years old, he was strongly influenced by the teachings of a Christian missionary named William Rudolph and was baptized a second time. He credits Rudolph and two other men, Harold Peck and Harvey Birkey, as his religious mentors. At a missionary trip with Rudolph, Banks spoke publicly about his acceptance of Jesus Christ as his savior; this experience sparked his desire to spread the word of God. Banks attended A.H. Parker High School where he excelled academically, worked on the school newspaper, and earned the nickname "Preacher." He recalls the sound of the whistles signaling the end of World War II and boxer Joe Louis losing a match in the 1940s.

Video Oral History Interview with Melvin E. Banks, Section A2004_156_001_003, TRT: 0:30:20 ?

Melvin E. Banks, influenced by his mentors Harold Peck and Harvey Birkey, began his undergraduate studies at Moody Bible Institute in Chicago, Illinois. He received a deep theological exposure to the Bible and was an avid table tennis player. At Moody in the early 1950s, Banks was among a small number of black students; he was encouraged by his religious mentor, William Rudolph, to attend Brethren Assembly Church on the South Side of Chicago. In 1954, Banks met his future wife, Olive, through the church and married her in November 1955. In January 1956, he entered Wheaton College in Wheaton, Illinois to complete his bachelor's degree. He majored in Biblical archeology. Banks compares his studies of black history in school in Birmingham, Alabama with the lack of exposure to any African or African American history during his biblical studies in Illinois. He also describes race relations in Birmingham in the 1940s and 1950s, and his trepidations about traveling by public transportation in the South.

Video Oral History Interview with Melvin E. Banks, Section A2004_156_001_004, TRT: 0:30:55 ?

Melvin E. Banks studied biblical archaeology and earned a master's degree in biblical studies from Wheaton College in Wheaton, Illinois in 1960. Elijah Muhammad's preachings and Bishop Alfred Gilbert Dunston, Jr.'s book 'Black Man in the Old Testament and Its World' influenced him to reconceive of biblical figures as non-white. After graduating from Wheaton, Banks worked as a welfare caseworker and at realty firm before accepting an offer from Scripture Press in Wheaton. There, he discovered the challenges of promoting gospel material that only addressed white congregational needs to black churches. In 1970, Banks founded Urban Ministries, Inc. (UMI) to generate and distribute Christian publications to African American churches. In its early years, UMI operated at a loss, but faith sustained Banks's commitment. In 1994, Banks hired C. Jeffrey Wright, who then became UMI's CEO. He discusses the evolution of UMI's publications since 1971 and its wide reach amongst the African American churches in the country.

Video Oral History Interview with Melvin E. Banks, Section A2004_156_001_005, TRT: 0:29:20 ?

Melvin E. Banks founded Urban Ministries, Inc. (UMI) in 1970 as a Christian

publishing house specifically working to distribute Bible study material to the African American community and churches. Although Banks encountered initial resistance, even from some in the black community, to portraying people of color in biblical materials, UMI has managed to set a precedent in creating biblical material reflective of an African heritage. UMI publishes material for all age ranges, and its Bible study materials and curricular content address social issues and highlight role models that are relevant in the African American community. Banks describes the roles of his editorial staff, UMI's publications and direct-sales approach, the rise and fall of black publishing houses, and prominent black authors and artists. He also describes his hopes and concerns for the African American community. In reflecting on his life, he wishes that he had received a more diverse and multicultural undergraduate and graduate education.

Video Oral History Interview with Melvin E. Banks, Section A2004_156_001_006, TRT: 0:27:20 ?

Melvin E. Banks's Urban Ministries, Inc. (UMI) in Chicago, Illinois offers a positive and supportive work environment for its employees. UMI also sponsors an annual conference for Christian leaders and educators. Past featured speakers have included HistoryMakers Reverend Jesse L. Jackson, Bishop Arthur Brazier and Michael A. Battle. Banks foresees UMI taking its content and curricula to digital media to reach a larger, potentially international, audience. He credits his wife, Olive Banks, for supporting him and UMI since its inception. They have also been involved in co-founding a church on the West side of Chicago and organizing the Circle Y Ranch, a Christian summer camp in Michigan, since the late 1950s. Banks and his wife have three children, Melvin Banks, Jr., Patrice Banks Lee, and Reginald Banks, and one grandson, Regis. Banks reflects upon his legacy and how he would like to be remembered. He concludes by narrating his photographs.