

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Allene Singho Roberts

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## Overview of the Collection

<b>Repository:</b>	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
<b>Creator:</b>	Roberts, Allene Singho, 1943-
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Allene Singho Roberts,
<b>Dates:</b>	July 28, 2005 and March 10, 2005
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2005
<b>Physical Description:</b>	7 Betacame SP videocassettes (3:29:46).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Corporate executive and association chief executive Allene Singho Roberts (1943 - 2014 ) was hired as the first black showroom model for Sloat and Company, and modeled in the Johnson Publishing Company's Ebony Fashion Fair. She later became the chair and chief executive officer of the American Women's Forum for Economic Development Strategies and co-founder of the Bronx River Research Group and Clean Energy Systems for New York. Roberts was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on July 28, 2005 and March 10, 2005, in New York, New York. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2005_062
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Allene Singho Roberts was born Allene Singho on April 14, 1943 in Bronx, New York. Her father, longshoreman Albert Singho, was from Sri Lanka and her mother, Harriet Allie Franklin Singho, was raised in Manhattan's Hell's Kitchen. Growing up in the Bronx and in Harlem, Roberts attended P.S. 10 and Paul Laurence Dunbar Junior High School. After graduating from Evander Childs High School in 1960, Roberts worked for three years as a claims administrator for the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company and studied modeling with Ophelia Devore.

The first black showroom model with Sloat and Company, she traveled internationally and worked with designers Rudi Gernreich, Oleg Cassini and Bill Blass. Roberts joined the Johnson Publishing Company's Ebony Fashion Fair in 1965 and toured with Audrey Smaltz, Richard Roundtree, Pat Cleveland, Beverly Simms and Janet Langhart. In 1967, Phillip Morris Companies hired Roberts and she worked in sales management, sales training and community relations. During this period, Roberts studied business administration at Bronx Community College and at the City University of New York's Baruch College. When she left Phillip Morris in 1992, Roberts was senior manager of corporate and government affairs. In 1996, Roberts served as chair and chief executive officer of the American Women's Forum for Economic Development Strategies. In 2001, Roberts co-founded the Bronx River Research Group and, with her husband Allen Roberts and John Besold, she founded Clean Energy Systems for New York (CESNY) three years later. Working in conjunction with local and state utilities and the United States Department of Energy's Rebuild America and Business Partner programs, CESNY provides schools and other public venues the services needed to design, install and maintain clean stationary power equipment.

Winner of many honors including the Harriet Tubman Award from the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists and the New York Urban League Building Brick Award, Roberts serves on the boards of the Mid-Bronx Senior Citizens

Council, the New York Coalition of 100 Black Women, the National Black Caucus of State Legislators' Corporate Roundtable, the National Association of Black County Officials' Business Roundtable, the Harlem YMCA Black Achievers in Industry and the New Professional Theatre.

Roberts passed away on January 27, 2014.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Allene Singho Roberts was conducted by Shawn Wilson on July 28, 2005 and March 10, 2005, in New York, New York, and was recorded on 7 Betacame SP videocassettes. Corporate executive and association chief executive Allene Singho Roberts (1943 - 2014 ) was hired as the first black showroom model for Sloat and Company, and modeled in the Johnson Publishing Company's Ebony Fashion Fair. She later became the chair and chief executive officer of the American Women's Forum for Economic Development Strategies and co-founder of the Bronx River Research Group and Clean Energy Systems for New York.

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## 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®.

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## 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.

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## Controlled Access Terms

This interview collection is indexed under the following controlled access subject terms.

### Persons:

Roberts, Allene Singho, 1943-

Wilson, Shawn (Interviewer)

Burghelea, Neculai (Videographer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

### Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews  
Roberts, Allene Singho, 1943---Interviews

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**Organizations:**

- HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)
  - The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection
  - Philip Morris Group of Companies
  - American Women’s Forum for Economic Development Strategies
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**Occupations:**

- Model
  - Association Chief Executive
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**HistoryMakers® Category:**

CivicMakers|StyleMakers

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**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 Allene Singho Roberts, July 28, 2005 and March 10, 2005. 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).

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**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.

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## Detailed Description of the Collection

### Series I: Original Interview Footage

Video Oral History Interview with Allene Singho Roberts, Section A2005\_062\_001\_001, TRT: 0:29:20 ?

Allene Singho Roberts was born on April 14, 1943 in New York City to Harriet Franklin Singho and Albert Singho. Her maternal great-great-grandmother was enslaved in Suffolk, Virginia. Her mother was the only surviving child of Charles Franklin and Effie Hardy Franklin, and was raised by her father and maternal grandmother when her mother died. She did crochet beading for a living before becoming a homemaker. Robert's father was a merchant seaman from Sri Lanka who came to New York City in the 1920s. He worked at the docks and learned to cook cuisines from various parts of the world from his coworkers' recipes. Because Roberts' father was an immigrant and did not know English, her parents' marriage was criticized by some. Roberts and her seven siblings identified as African American rather than South Asian, although they were often asked about their mixed heritage. Roberts describes the ethnically diverse community where she was raised in the Bronx and the neighborhood becoming less white as she grew older.

Video Oral History Interview with Allene Singho Roberts, Section A2005\_062\_001\_002, TRT: 0:28:40 ?

Allene Singho Roberts' father, Albert Singho, was born in Sri Lanka. His mother died during childbirth and he was not close with his father, so he decided to stay and work in the U.S. when the merchant ship he worked on left him behind in New York City while he was recuperating from an illness. He lived in a rooming house and met Roberts' mother, Harriet Franklin Singho, through a mutual friend. He never returned to Sri Lanka, although he did reconnect with his brother later in life. Roberts grew up with the smells of her father's cooking and the sounds of the neighborhood children. She admired her oldest brother, Romiel Singho, and her godmother, Gladys Lawson Challinor. In her tight-knit community in the Bronx, her mother often took care of neighbors' children. Robert T. Johnson, who later became the district attorney for the Bronx, was friends with her brothers. Roberts compares her childhood to that of younger generations.

Video Oral History Interview with Allene Singho Roberts, Section A2005\_062\_001\_003, TRT: 0:30:00 ?

Allene Singho Roberts attended P.S. 10, the elementary school adjacent to her home in New York City where she was taught by one of her favorite teachers, Miss Klotz. She also encountered her first African American guidance counselor, Miss Mitchellson, who held high expectations for the black students, and discovered she needed glasses. At Paul Laurence Dunbar J.H.S. 120, Roberts played basketball and volleyball, was influenced by her teacher Mr. Liel, and attended after school programs. She did not aspire to a particular career, but she knew she did not want to be confined to a desk job. She recalls her close friends from the neighborhood and her parents' strict upbringing. Her family enjoyed television and radio programs together, and Roberts remembers her surprise at receiving a bike for Christmas one year. Roberts admired and

emulated her two older sisters, Gwendolyn Singho and Rosalynd Singho. She recalls her shock and grief at Gwendolyn's premature death from heart failure.

Video Oral History Interview with Allene Singho Roberts, Section A2005\_062\_001\_004, TRT: 0:31:09 ?

Allene Singho Roberts attended Evander Childs High School, where many of the students came from affluent families. She found that teachers had lower expectations for students like her who came from Paul Laurence Dunbar J.H.S. 120. Despite their limited income, her parents worked hard to give her the chance to attend the prom and Trinity Episcopal Church's debutante ball. Roberts explains how the death of her sister, Gwendolyn Singho, shook her religious faith and made her think about social and economic inequality. Encouraged by her mother to become a nurse, Roberts volunteered at a hospital, where she worked primarily with newborn babies and became particularly attached to one abandoned infant. She also grew more aware of the lower quality healthcare that poorer people often received. As career options for women expanded, her sister's death influenced Roberts to select a career that would make a positive impact on the world. Roberts concludes by narrating her photographs.

Video Oral History Interview with Allene Singho Roberts, Section A2005\_062\_002\_005, TRT: 0:29:46 ?

Allene Singho Roberts graduated from Evander Childs High School and worked in the New York City Parks Department for a year. She joined Metropolitan Life Insurance in 1960. In 1964, she began attending night classes for business administration at Bronx Community College. Other than participating in fashion shows at Ophelia Devore Charm School as a teenager, she had no prior modeling experience. However, a friend at The New York Times asked her to model for the newspaper's annual fashion magazine, which launched Roberts' career. She then toured with the Ebony Fashion Fair. Due to the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the models were allowed to stay in hotels across the South for the first time. Roberts helped integrate New York City's Fashion Garment District as Sloat and Company's first black showroom and fitting model. She appeared in fashion shows for Oleg Cassini and Oscar de la Renta. Philip Morris USA hired her to promote cigarettes in 1967, and she also worked for the company as a sales representative.

Video Oral History Interview with Allene Singho Roberts, Section A2005\_062\_002\_006, TRT: 0:29:41 ?

Allene Singho Roberts worked as a promotional representative for Philip Morris USA before transitioning to sales, where she saw more opportunity for growth. She became an area manager and one of the first women of color in the department. She remembers the loss of Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X, whom she met when he spoke in New York City. When Roberts joined Philip Morris, only a few studies addressed the health risks of smoking, yet public awareness about the dangers of tobacco grew during her time there. As community relations advisor, Roberts worked to enhance Philip Morris' image within the communities of its consumers and with government agencies. As a member of the Minority Vendor Program, she encouraged the company to purchase from local women and minority-owned businesses. In 1977, she married Allen Roberts. In 1992, she helped Philip Morris host the Democratic National Convention and Republican National Conventions. Roberts reflects upon the impact of her work with Philip Morris.

Video Oral History Interview with Allene Singho Roberts, Section A2005\_062\_002\_007, TRT: 0:31:10 ?

Allene Singho Roberts sued Philip Morris USA for discrimination in 1992 after being repeatedly passed over for a promotion. At the time of the interview, the lawsuit was ongoing, but Roberts was committed to fighting for civil rights since she benefitted so much from the efforts of advocates before her. After leaving Philip Morris, she founded the Bronx River Research Group, which advocates for cleaner energy solutions to combat the high number of health issues related to pollution in the borough. Through the organization, she works to educate residential developers on the benefits of building with clean technology. Roberts describes the Bronx River Research Group's latest project, the creation of a demonstration building where local college students can be trained on environmentally friendly practices. Roberts reflects upon the changes in corporate culture over her lifetime and describes her hopes and concerns for the African American community. Roberts concludes by considering her legacy.