

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Deborah Prothrow-Stith

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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>	Prothrow-Stith, Deborah, 1954-
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Deborah Prothrow-Stith,
<b>Dates:</b>	April 20, 2005 and December 7, 2005
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2005
<b>Physical Description:</b>	7 Betacame SP videocassettes (3:11:41).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Academic administrator, state government appointee, and public health professor Deborah Prothrow-Stith (1954 - ) was appointed as the first woman and youngest Commissioner of Public Health for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. In 1995, she was appointed by President Bill Clinton to the National Commission on Crime Control and Prevention. Prothrow-Stith was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on April 20, 2005 and December 7, 2005, in Boston, Massachusetts and Milton, Massachusetts. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2005_103
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Dr. Deborah Prothrow-Stith is a nationally recognized public health leader with applied and academic experience ranging from neighborhood clinics and inner city hospitals, to serving as a state commissioner of public health, to being a dean and professor at the Harvard School of Public Health (HSPH) in Boston, Massachusetts. Prothrow-Stith is a pioneer in defining, researching, and treating violence, especially among youth, as a public health crisis/problem rather than as a law and order issue. Violence prevention via public health strategies is the hallmark of her work. Prothrow-Stith also serves as Associate Dean for Faculty Development at the HSPH.

Prothrow-Stith was born in Marshall, Texas on February 6, 1954. In 1959, she moved with her family to Atlanta and in 1969 back to Texas where she finished Jack Yates High School in Houston, Texas in 1971. Prothrow-Stith graduated from Spelman College in Atlanta in 1975 and went on to study medicine, graduating from Harvard Medical School in 1979.

Throughout her professional life, Prothrow-Stith has been involved with developing and implementing violence prevention programs ranging from local neighborhoods to statewide and national levels. Her interest in violence prevention was stimulated by her work as a resident at Boston City Hospital, where she discovered that street violence was as deadly to her patients as any disease or accident and led her to examine violence as a social “disease” that could be prevented by public health strategies. Prothrow-Stith developed and wrote the first violence prevention curriculum for schools entitled, Violence Prevention Curriculum for Adolescents.

Appointed in 1987 as the first woman and youngest-ever Commissioner of Public Health for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, Prothrow-Stith expanded treatment programs for AIDS and drug rehabilitation, and oversaw a department of more than 4,500 employees. During her tenure as commissioner, she established the first-ever Office

of Violence Prevention in a state department of public health. Prothrow-Stith was appointed by President Bill Clinton to the National Commission on Crime Control and Prevention in 1995.

In the 1990s, Prothrow-Stith was tapped to be part of a broad-based coalition in Boston that included leaders in government, education, health, law enforcement, religion, and civic life and business. Their collective work became known as the “Boston Model”. By the mid to late 1990s, Boston had gone almost three years without a single juvenile homicide. In *Murder Is No Accident*, co-authored with Dr. Howard Spivak, Prothrow-Stith describes the “Boston Model” as well as factors that affect youth violence, such as poverty and domestic violence, and the means for its prevention, such as conflict resolution programs.

Prothrow-Stith is married to Reverend Charles Stith, a former U.S. Ambassador to Tanzania (East Africa). They have a son, Percy, born in 1978 and a daughter, Mary Mildred, born in 1980. Prothrow-Stith and her husband also raised her two nephews, sons of her sister – Trey Edmondson, born in 1972, and Tony Franklin, born in 1975.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Deborah Prothrow-Stith was conducted by Robert Hayden on April 20, 2005 and December 7, 2005, in Boston, Massachusetts and Milton, Massachusetts, and was recorded on 7 Betacame SP videocassettes. Academic administrator, state government appointee, and public health professor Deborah Prothrow-Stith (1954 - ) was appointed as the first woman and youngest Commissioner of Public Health for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. In 1995, she was appointed by President Bill Clinton to the National Commission on Crime Control and Prevention.

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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:

Prothrow-Stith, Deborah, 1954-

Hayden, Robert (Interviewer)

Burghelea, Neculai (Videographer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

**Subjects:**

African Americans--Interviews  
Prothrow-Stith, Deborah, 1954---Interviews

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**Organizations:**

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

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The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

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Massachusetts. Dept. of Public Health

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**Occupations:**

Health Advocate

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**HistoryMakers® Category:**

MedicalMakers

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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 Deborah Prothrow-Stith, April 20, 2005 and December 7, 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 Deborah Prothrow-Stith, Section A2005\_103\_002\_001, TRT: 0:30:16 ?

Deborah Prothrow-Stith was born on February 6, 1954 in Marshall, Texas to Mildred Boutin Prothrow and Percy Prothrow, Jr. Prothrow-Stith's mother was born in 1918 in New Orleans, Louisiana. She was adopted and raised by a plasterer and his wife from Jackson, Mississippi. In Jackson, she attended Catholic school. A graduate of Marshall's Wiley College, she taught elementary school and ran a daycare in Atlanta, Georgia. Prothrow-Stith's father was born in 1913 in Marshall, where his father was chef for the Marshall Hotel. After meeting Prothrow-Stith's mother at Wiley, he worked for Atlanta Life Insurance Company in Marshall and Atlanta. Prothrow-Stith grew up on Hermer Circle in Atlanta's Collier Heights. Her father was active in the community and in civil rights, and her mother enjoyed cooking. Prothrow-Stith attended elementary school and Warren United Methodist Church in Atlanta. When she was in high school, her family moved to Houston, Texas. She had one older sister, Lady Prothrow.

Video Oral History Interview with Deborah Prothrow-Stith, Section A2005\_103\_002\_002, TRT: 0:30:46 ?

Deborah Prothrow-Stith aspired to be a doctor as a child. After attending Atlanta's Anderson Park Elementary School, she transferred to Collier Heights Elementary School, where she competed with her future friend and colleague, HistoryMaker Evelyn M. Hammonds. With the advent of school desegregation, Prothrow-Stith became one of the few students who integrated Therrell High School in 1967. She remembers first hearing of Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s assassination at Therrell. When her family moved to a majority-white neighborhood in Houston, Texas, she insisted upon attending Jack Yates High School rather than endure integration again. However, Houston's school integration required her to transfer to Madison High School her senior year. Since Madison did not have a ROTC program or the math classes she required, Prothrow-Stith was able to return to Yates. At Spelman College, she majored in math. Participating in a United Negro College Fund summer medical program inspired her to pursue medicine.

Video Oral History Interview with Deborah Prothrow-Stith, Section A2005\_103\_002\_003, TRT: 0:29:05 ?

Deborah Prothrow-Stith planned to attend Baylor College of Medicine in Houston, Texas after graduating from Spelman College; with the help of her counselor, she enrolled at Harvard Medical School in Boston, Massachusetts instead. During this time, Prothrow-Stith married HistoryMaker Reverend Charles Richard Stith, who attended Harvard Divinity School in Cambridge, Massachusetts. When a Harvard Medical School professor insulted African American medical students, she received support from the assistant dean of

students, HistoryMaker Alvin Poussaint. While completing her surgery rotation at Brigham and Women's Hospital, she recognized the need for violence prevention. During her senior year, she created and implemented the Violence Prevention Curriculum for Adolescents at Boston Latin Academy. That same year, her son, Percy Stith, was born. While completing her three-year residency in internal medicine at Boston City Hospital, her daughter, Mary Stith, was born. She also describes her impression of Boston.

Video Oral History Interview with Deborah Prothrow-Stith, Section A2005\_103\_002\_004, TRT: 0:30:23 ?

Deborah Prothrow-Stith served as chair of the Adolescent Issues Task Force for Boston Public Schools, and implemented her Violence Prevention Curriculum for Adolescents at Boston Latin Academy. In 1987, Governor Michael Dukakis appointed her commissioner of public health for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. As commissioner, she addressed violence as a public health issue. After a brief stint at a for-profit hospital management company, she joined the faculty of the Harvard School of Public Health. In 1991, she authored 'Deadly Consequences,' which offers individual and community solutions to teenage violence. She and Howard R. Spivak co-authored 'Murder is No Accident,' which provides an overview of Boston's violence prevention efforts. The Blueprint for a Safer Philadelphia Initiative incorporated her research on violence prevention. She also collaborated with the Louis D. Brown Peace Institute to author 'PeaceZone,' a curriculum that addresses survivors' responses to violence.

Video Oral History Interview with Deborah Prothrow-Stith, Section A2005\_103\_002\_005, TRT: 0:30:41 ?

Deborah Prothrow-Stith moved to Tanzania with her husband, HistoryMaker Reverend Charles Richard Stith, when he was appointed U.S. Ambassador in 1988. At WAMATA, a Tanzanian NGO that supports individuals with HIV/AIDS, she collected personal histories to supplement her friend's photojournalism. She traveled frequently between Africa and Boston, Massachusetts while teaching at Harvard School of Public Health. As associate dean for faculty development, she addressed issues of gender equity and diversity in light of Harvard President Lawrence H. Summers' discouraging remarks about women in science. Her 2005 publication, 'Sugar and Spice and No Longer Nice,' examines violence committed by teenage girls. Prothrow-Stith describes public health issues she hopes to explore, her goals, her hopes and concerns for the African American community and how she would like to be remembered. She reflects upon her life, and shares advice for aspiring medical professionals. She concludes the tape by narrating her photographs.

Video Oral History Interview with Deborah Prothrow-Stith, Section B2005\_103\_001\_001, TRT: 0:20:15 ?

Deborah Prothrow-Stith was born on February 6, 1954 in Marshall, Texas to Mildred Boutin Prothrow and Percy Prothrow, Jr. Her mother was born in 1918 in Pointe a la Hache, Louisiana, near New Orleans. The Boutins, a couple from Jackson, Mississippi, adopted her as a young child and doted upon her. Her adopted father earned enough money as a plasterer to help provide food for the neighborhood. Inspired by civil rights leader James Farmer and the Wiley debate team, she attended and graduated from Wiley College in Marshall. She then taught for a year in Courant, Mississippi before returning to Marshall, where she raised her two daughters. Although she grew up separated from her seven biological siblings, she reconnected with them in adulthood. Prothrow-Stith's father was born in 1912 in Marshall. His father, a chef for the Marshall Hotel,

regularly fed Wiley College students. Gregarious and rambunctious, Prothrow-Stith's father imparted his optimistic worldview to his daughters.

Video Oral History Interview with Deborah Prothrow-Stith, Section B2005\_103\_001\_001E, TRT: 0:20:15 ?