

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Clayola Brown

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Brown, Clayola, 1948-
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Clayola Brown,
Dates:	July 13, 2005
Bulk Dates:	2005
Physical Description:	5 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:19:00).
Abstract:	Union leader Clayola Brown (1948 -) was vice president of the AFL-CIO, and the first female national president of the A. Philip Randolph Institute. Brown was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on July 13, 2005, in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2005_161
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Union leader Clayola Brown was born Clayola Beatrice Oliver on August 4, 1948, in Charleston, South Carolina. Of Gullah ancestry, Brown attended school in Key West, Florida and Oxnard, California before graduating from Philadelphia's Simon Gratz High School in 1966, where she was an athlete and majorette. At age fifteen, Brown joined her mother, Ann Belle Jenkins Shands, in a successful campaign to bring the Textile Workers Union of America (TWUA) to the Manhattan Shirt Factory in Charleston. Brown later attended Florida A&M University, graduating in 1970 with her B.S. degree in secondary education and physical education.

In 1970, Brown was hired by TWUA in their claims department in Opalaca, Alabama. Subsequently, Brown went on to play an organizing role in the seventeen-year struggle to unionize the textile giant, J.P. Stevens, culminating in 1980 with four thousand workers winning a contract through the newly formed Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union (ACTWU). Brown served as the ACTWU's education director, civil rights director, and also, for thirteen years, as manager of the ACTWU's Laundry Division. In 1991, Brown was elected international vice president of the ACTWU; a post which she was continually reelected to for over a decade. In 1994, President Bill Clinton appointed Brown to the National Commission on Employment Policy. In 1995, Brown helped merge the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU) with ACTWU to form the Union of Needle Trades, Industrial and Textile Employees (UNITE, now UNITEHERE!). That same year, Brown was elected international vice president of the AFL-CIO. In 2004, Brown became the first woman to serve as national president of the A. Phillip Randolph Institute.

Brown served on the board of Amalgamated Bank, the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation, and SCLC. At the NAACP, Brown served on the Labor Ad Hoc, and NAACP Image Awards Committees. Brown also served on the Executive Committee of the Workers Defense League and as the first vice president of the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists (CBTU). Brown was honored with the NAACP Leadership and Keeper of the Flame Awards, the CBTU Woman of Valor Award, the SCLC Drum Major for Justice Award and many others.

Brown and her husband, Alfred Brown, have a son, Alfred, Jr.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Clayola Brown was conducted by Larry Crowe on July 13, 2005, in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and was recorded on 5 Betacame SP videocassettes. Union leader Clayola Brown (1948 -) was vice president of the AFL-CIO, and the first female national president of the A. Philip Randolph Institute.

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:

Brown, Clayola, 1948-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Brown, Clayola, 1948---Interviews

African American women civil rights workers--Interviews

Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America. General Executive Board--Interviews

African American women civic leaders--Interviews

African American labor leaders--Interviews

Labor unions--United States--Officials and employees--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

AFL-CIO.A.

Occupations:

Union Leader

HistoryMakers® Category:

CivicMakers

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 Clayola Brown, July 13, 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).

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 Clayola Brown, Section A2005_161_001_001, TRT: 0:29:30 ?

Clayola Brown was born on August 8, 1948 in Charleston, South Carolina. Her maternal great-great grandfather was enslaved in Charleston, and her maternal grandfather was born there. Her mother, Annabell Jenkins Shands, was born in 1923 in Vance, South Carolina. Brown's grandfather left sharecropping for factory work and relocated his family to Charleston. He recounted family stories during Christmas and spoke Gullah, a creole language. In Charleston, her mother worked as a domestic from age seven. Brown's birth father, Prezzie Oliver, was born in Holly Hill, South Carolina and was Choctaw. He and Brown's mother met as field workers in Orangeburg, South Carolina. When Brown was six years old, her mother remarried William Shands, a U.S. Navy sailor born in Portsmouth, Virginia; they relocated to a naval base in Key West, Florida. She remembers a white boy's derogatory remarks, talking with her stepfather near the ocean and witnessing her mother's grief when her maternal grandmother passed away.

African American women civil rights workers--Interviews.

Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America. General Executive Board--Interviews.

African American women civic leaders--Interviews.

African American labor leaders--Interviews.

Labor unions--United States--Officials and employees--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with Clayola Brown, Section A2005_161_001_002, TRT: 0:28:10 ?

Clayola Brown's parents exposed her to blues and jazz music growing up, and she inherited her mother's strong sense of determination. While living in Charleston, South Carolina, Brown's family regularly traveled back to Vance for church, and her grandmother rewarded her good behavior with treats and Alaga Original Cane Syrup. Brown began school at East Bay Elementary, then attended a segregated school in Key West, Florida. Returning to East Bay in fourth grade, she was influenced by her teacher. Brown attended Port Hueneme High School in Oxnard, California for two years before entering Simon Gratz High School in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, where she lived with her uncle and struggled to adjust to a less sheltered environment. After graduating in 1966, she attended Florida A&M University in Tallahassee, Florida on the advice of her high school mentor. During her high school summer breaks, Brown worked with her mother at Manhattan Shirt Factory in Charleston where she discovered union organizing.

Video Oral History Interview with Clayola Brown, Section A2005_161_001_003, TRT: 0:28:20 ?

Clayola Brown learned the importance of respect from her parents and teacher, Ms. Daisy Richardson. Growing up, Brown was inspired by the songs of Billie Holiday and Etta James and the poetry of HistoryMaker Maya Angelou. At the Gloria Theater in Charleston, South Carolina, she and her friends often joked and conversed with white teenagers after the movie, despite sitting in segregated areas. In 1966, she entered Florida A&M University, where she majored in secondary and physical education and pledged Delta Sigma Theta Sorority. With

her growing independence, she joined a sit-in at a five and dime in Tallahassee and attended a campus rally lead by Stokely Carmichael, although she criticized the lack of female leadership in SNCC. After graduating in 1970, she and her husband moved to New York City, where she was hired by the Textile Workers Union of America after being turned down by Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America. She talks about the prevalence of segregated churches in Charleston and New York City.

Video Oral History Interview with Clayola Brown, Section A2005_161_001_004, TRT: 0:30:10 ?

Clayola Brown worked as a claims adjuster for the Textile Workers Union of America (TWUA) and instituted a coordination of benefits program for factories in Opelika, Alabama. She campaigned in Roanoke Rapids, North Carolina to unionize J.P. Stevens & Company workers, and after seventeen years, employees received union contracts. In 1976, TWUA merged to form the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union (ACTWU). As ACTWU's director of education, Brown developed training programs targeted to women workers. After directing an ACTWU affiliate, Brown was the first African American woman elected to the executive council of the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations. Brown describes the qualities needed for organizing and the role of religion and party affiliation in unionization. Brown also talks about the decline of unions in the U.S. and the impact of offshore companies. On the advice of her mentor, HistoryMaker William Lucy, Brown joined the NAACP and chaired its Image Award.

Video Oral History Interview with Clayola Brown, Section A2005_161_001_005, TRT: 0:22:50 ?

Clayola Brown shares her concerns for the labor movement in the United States and abroad, particularly in Asia and Africa where workers face poverty-level wages and exploitative working conditions while lacking legal protections. Considering the trajectory of the trade union movement, Brown talks about the offshoring of industries to countries without organizing capabilities. She shares her perspective about Walmart and its negative impact on labor, communities and small businesses. At the time of the interview, Brown had recently been elected as the first female president of the A. Philip Randolph Institute in Washington, D.C. She describes her plans for leading the organization. Brown also reflects upon her hopes for the African American community, her life, legacy and her mother's support. She concludes the tape by describing how she would like to be remembered.