

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Arthur H. Harper

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Harper, Arthur H., 1955-2017
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Arthur H. Harper,
Dates:	August 27, 2005
Bulk Dates:	2005
Physical Description:	9 Betacame SP videocassettes (4:20:25).
Abstract:	Corporate chief executive Arthur H. Harper (1955 - 2017) was the president and CEO of General Electric Equipment Services and founded GenNx360 Capital Partners. Harper was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on August 27, 2005, in Stamford, Connecticut. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2005_208
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Arthur Henry "Art" Harper, President and CEO of General Electric (GE) Equipment Services, based in Stamford, Connecticut, was born in Trenton, New Jersey on December 3, 1955 to Eleanor Graham Harper from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, a maid, and Joseph Harper from Harlem, New York. Harper received his B.A. degree in chemical engineering from the Stevens Institute of Technology in 1978.

For four years following graduation, Harper worked as a technical sales representative in the Chemical Division of Conoco, Incorporated in Houston, Texas. In 1983, he became a marketing representative for the Polymer Products Department of the DuPont Corporation. Harper joined GE Plastics in 1984 as a market development and aerospace specialist and as the aircraft application program manager. He was appointed to the position of district sales manager for GE Silicones in Brea, California in 1987, and was named as manager of the Plastics plant in Oxnard in 1991. In 1992, Harper was put in charge of crystalline materials in Pittsfield, Massachusetts and in 1994, became head of the LEXAN (polycarbonate resin, a high performance plastic) business. In 1996, he served as president of GE Plastics of Greater China. Harper was then appointed Vice President of Global Manufacturing for GE Plastics in Bergen Op Zoom, the Netherlands in 1998. In May 2000, he became President and Senior Managing Director for GE Plastics Europe.

At GE Equipment Services, Harper headed one of four separate divisions formed when GE Capital split into four different corporate units in 2002. Harper oversaw GE Plastics Europe, Middle East, India, and Africa and GE's SeaCo, a venture with Sea Containers, an international marine containers dealer. Additionally, Harper was a member of GE's Corporate Executive Council. In December of 2005, Harper retired from GE and started his own private equity firm called NexGen Capital Partners.

Harper received the Black Achievers in Industry Award in 1994 and the Career Achievement Award at Stevens Institute of Technology in 1998. He received the Social Justice Hero Award from the Fairfield County Region National Conference for Community and Justice, and the Whitney M. Young, Jr. Service Award from the Boy

Scouts of America Greater New York Councils in 2004. Additionally, he is a member of the Executive Committee of GE's African American Forum and serves as Chair of the Stamford Commission on Education Achievement. He is also a board member of the Yerwood Center, a non-profit community center in Stamford, Connecticut.

Harper passed away on September 19, 2017, at age 61.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Arthur H. Harper was conducted by Julieanna L. Richardson on August 27, 2005, in Stamford, Connecticut, and was recorded on 9 Betacame SP videocassettes. Corporate chief executive Arthur H. Harper (1955 - 2017) was the president and CEO of General Electric Equipment Services and founded GenNx360 Capital Partners.

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:

Harper, Arthur H., 1955-2017

Richardson, Julieanna L. (Interviewer)

Burghelea, Neculai (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Harper, Arthur H., 1955-2017 --Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Corporate Chief Executive

HistoryMakers® Category:

BusinessMakers

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 Arthur H. Harper, August 27, 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 Arthur H. Harper, Section A2005_208_001_001, TRT: 0:30:52 ?
Arthur H. Harper was born on December 3, 1955 in Trenton, New Jersey. His

mother, Eleanor Graham Harper, was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and her family originated from Georgia. She worked as a maid for most of her life. His father, Joseph Harper, was born in 1918 and grew up Catholic in Harlem, New York, New York. He served in the U.S. Navy during World War II and was the first African American to work for Pan American World Airways in New York City. Although a trained mechanic, the company insisted he work as a baggage handler. Unhappy with this arrangement, he left to join The Boeing Company. Harper was raised in a predominately African American neighborhood in Pleasantville, New Jersey where he attended Farmington Elementary School. While growing up, his mother exhorted him to do good while his father insisted he stand up for himself. Although his family was loving, he encountered bullies at a young age, including in an incident where he was hit by a bottle thrown from a car of racist teenagers.

Video Oral History Interview with Arthur H. Harper, Section A2005_208_001_002, TRT: 0:30:04 ?

Arthur H. Harper enjoyed listening to his parents' discussions of world events during road trips to his grandmother's home in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Though he and his younger brother fought as children, they later developed a close friendship. After joining the Nation of Islam, Harper's parents raised him in the Muslim faith. Growing up, he admired strong African American Muslim leaders like Elijah Muhammad and Malcolm X as well as the principles of self-sufficiency. As he grew older, though, Harper began to question the Nation's stance on segregation and other religious beliefs. The outpouring of grief at the death of Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. made an impression on him. Although Harper's early aspirations were discouraged by high school counselors and some in his community, he refused to be deterred. Harper excelled in college prep courses where oftentimes, to his disappointment, he was the only African American student. Harper talks about misperceptions of the Muslim faith.

Video Oral History Interview with Arthur H. Harper, Section A2005_208_001_003, TRT: 0:31:09 ?

Arthur H. Harper attended a high school so overcrowded it operated in shifts, sparking race riots. At Absegami High School in Galloway, New Jersey, he played football, enjoyed math and chemistry and took college prep courses despite being discouraged from doing so. After learning of Harper's interest in chemistry and engineering, his father introduced him to a black chemical engineer from The Boeing Company. On his first day at Stevens Institute of Technology in Hoboken, New Jersey, Harper's white roommate switched rooms upon meeting him, and he fought with a white neighbor who refused to turn down his loud music. This led to a meeting with a professor who gave him life-changing advice. Harper joined the Black Student Union his sophomore year and began to feel his adolescent anger transform into purpose and determination. He decided to pursue business after his experience as a chemical engineer at a plant in Monaca, Pennsylvania made him realize his preference for working with people instead of machines.

Video Oral History Interview with Arthur H. Harper, Section A2005_208_001_004, TRT: 0:29:11 ?

Arthur H. Harper was the president of the Black Student Union and held other campus leadership roles at Stevens Institute of Technology in Hoboken, New Jersey. With his record of involvement, Harper received eighteen job offers upon graduating in 1978. Although Continental Oil Company did not offer him the most money, Harper chose them for their meritocratic system. He started in their offices in Southern California working first in customer service, then technical service and finally transitioning to sales. At Continental, he met his first corporate mentor who taught him the written and unwritten rules of the

business, business etiquette and quality customer service. He moved to Detroit, Michigan where he sold specialty chemicals to General Motors, Ford and Chrysler. When E.I. du Pont de Nemours and Company acquired Continental in 1981, he left to work for GE Plastics in Southern California. Though saddened to leave his friends and mentor, he appreciated the opportunity to join General Electrics.

Video Oral History Interview with Arthur H. Harper, Section A2005_208_001_005, TRT: 0:30:41 ?

Arthur H. Harper joined General Electric in 1984 and found that the more disciplined environment suited him well. Resolved to work within corporate America to facilitate change rather than fight against it, Harper sought out mentors and met with other African Americans at the company informally to share ideas about advancing in the business. He appreciated CEO Jack Welch's brilliance and vision in holding diversity meetings, which led to Lloyd G. Trotter creating the African American Forum, comprised of high level African American officers at General Electric. Harper was an active member. In 1987, Harper was promoted to district sales manager, the second African American in management during that same time. He developed a strategy of setting new challenges for himself and then accepting positions that would give him the skills to meet those. Networking and exceeding goals helped him earn many job promotions and projects. Harper shares his thoughts on the difference between a manager and a leader.

Video Oral History Interview with Arthur H. Harper, Section A2005_208_001_006, TRT: 0:30:29 ?

Arthur H. Harper married his wife, Linda Harper, in 1982. After becoming a plant manager in 1991, he adopted a business management strategy he called rhythm and rigor to ensure consistency and results. Under CEO of General Electric Jeffrey R. Immelt, Harper worked as head of the Lexan business, which produced a high-performance plastic. Harper filled management positions at various locations including Mount Vernon, Indiana and a General Electric Lexan plant in Burkville, Alabama. The latter was in Lowndes County and built on old plantation grounds. When Harper realized there was racial tension between the African American and white workers left over from Lowndes County's cruel slavery past, he developed community outreach programs for school children and an adult literacy program to educate African Americans so they would meet the basic requirements to work for the plant. His programs' success inspired his continuing community involvement. In 1996, Harper became the president of GE Plastics Greater China.

Video Oral History Interview with Arthur H. Harper, Section A2005_208_001_007, TRT: 0:29:59 ?

Arthur H. Harper became the first African American at General Electric to head the company's business in China. During Harper's tenure there, he learned about cultural differences in business and communication. In 1998, he was appointed vice president of global manufacturing for General Electrics in the Netherlands and tasked with steering the company through Y2K. His experience working in Asia, Europe, and the United States taught him to tailor his communication style to each culture's customers and employees. While overseeing the opening of a Lexan Plant in Cartagena, Spain, he encountered a crisis when chemicals used at the plant kept dissolving equipment. With assistance from his network and encouragement from Jack Welch, Harper was able to navigate his team through the crisis. After an eight-month delay and an additional \$100 million, the plant opened. Although Harper considered the debacle one of his biggest career failures, finding a solution taught him valuable lessons about effective leadership.

Video Oral History Interview with Arthur H. Harper, Section A2005_208_001_008, TRT: 0:30:46 ?

Arthur H. Harper became the CEO and senior managing director of GE Plastics in Europe in 2000. He was also responsible for all financial operations in the Middle East, Asia, India, and Africa. In 2001, Jack Welch stepped down as CEO of General Electric and Jeffrey R. Immelt replaced him. Harper served on the Corporate Executive Council for GE and in 2002, when General Electric consolidated twenty six divisions to four operations, he became president and CEO of GE Equipment Management. He produced \$7 billion in revenue and \$19 billion in earning assets and was responsible for 4,000 people. His division was in charge of leasing and asset management services for commercial and transportation equipment operating in nineteen countries, and he worked with top companies like Penske Truck Leasing. Harper reflects on what he learned about leadership from Welch and Immelt. He talks about the gains made by African Americans, and the continuing struggles they face, in advancing in corporate America.

Video Oral History Interview with Arthur H. Harper, Section A2005_208_001_009, TRT: 0:17:14 ?

Arthur H. Harper's business travels in China helped him see similarities between African American and Chinese culture. In reflecting on the place of African Americans in a global context, Harper believes that the black diaspora and an appreciation for origins and history gives black people a unique asset to harness in leadership. Harper gives advice to young African Americans wanting to pursue a career in business, noting that they should follow their passion. Though he regrets that his mother did not see his success, he hopes that he lived up to her exhortation to "do good" and appreciates the closer relationship he has with his father. His future plans and aspirations include more community outreach to the African Americans. He reflects upon his hopes and concerns for the African American community and his legacy. He concludes by narrating a photograph of him and his wife at a holiday party.