

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Deborah A. Elam

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Elam, Deborah A., 1961-
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Deborah A. Elam,
Dates:	March 26, 2007
Bulk Dates:	2007
Physical Description:	6 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:42:32).
Abstract:	Human resources executive Deborah A. Elam (1961 -) climbed the ranks at General Electric, becoming vice president and chief diversity officer. Elam was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on March 26, 2007, in Fairfield, Connecticut. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2007_111
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Deborah Elam was the Chief Diversity Officer at General Electric (GE), Fairfield, Connecticut. Elam led efforts globally to ensure that all GE employees felt that they had an opportunity to contribute and succeed. Elam was a native of New Orleans, Louisiana, and an alumna of Ursuline Academy; she received her B.A. degree in sociology at Louisiana State University (LSU) and a Masters of Public Administration at Southern University in Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

Elam's career began in 1986 with an internship at General Electric while pursuing her graduate degree. Upon graduation, Elam joined GE's Human Resources Leadership Program in 1987, and had assignments at GE Global Exchange Services and GE Transportation. Upon completion of the training program, Elam was promoted to successively larger human resources roles in GE Consulting Services, GE Capital Mortgage Corp., GE Capital Insurance Services, and GE Capital Markets Services. In June of 2000, Elam became the managing director of Human Resources at GE Capital Commercial Finance; she was promoted in September of 2002 to the office of vice president. In February, 2006, GE's Board of Directors appointed Elam chief diversity officer of the company, making her one of the highest ranking women at GE. Elam held leadership roles in GE's African American Forum, GE Women's Network, and was a member of the Executive Leadership Council (ELC), an organization of the top African Americans in Corporate America. Outside of work, Elam served on the Board of Directors of the Fairfield County Community Foundation, *Working Mothers* Magazine-Women of Color Initiative, and the Elfun Community Foundation. Elam also acted as president of the Fairfield County Chapter of Links, Inc., a member of the National Black MBA Association, and president of the Fairfield County Alumnae Chapter, Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc. Elam held memberships in Jack and Jill of America, and the National Council of Negro Women.

Elam received numerous awards and was featured on the cover of the March 2005 issue of *The Network Journal* Magazine where she was named One of Twenty-five Influential Black Women in Business. Elam received the Brava Award, which was given by the YWCA of Greenwich, Connecticut, to women who achieved at work and gave back to their communities. Elam became a highly sought after speaker, addressing the Commission on Officer

Diversity Advancement of the U.S. Army, and serving as a keynote speaker for the Distinguished Speaker Series for the MBA program at LSU, her alma mater. In addition to her business endeavors, Elam and her husband have raised two daughters.

Bio Photo Courtesy of *Stuart Walls / Woodstock Studio*.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Deborah A. Elam was conducted by Shawn Wilson on March 26, 2007, in Fairfield, Connecticut, and was recorded on 6 Betacame SP videocassettes. Human resources executive Deborah A. Elam (1961 -) climbed the ranks at General Electric, becoming vice president and chief diversity officer.

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:

Elam, Deborah A., 1961-

Wilson, Shawn (Interviewer)

Burghelea, Neculai (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Elam, Deborah A., 1961- --Interviews

African American executives--Interviews

African American businesspeople--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

General Electric Company.

Occupations:

Human Resources 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 Deborah A. Elam, March 26, 2007. 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 Deborah A. Elam, Section A2007_111_001_001, TRT: 0:30:03
?

Deborah A. Elam was born on June 1, 1961 in New Orleans, Louisiana to Jeanne Cunningham Augustine and Henry Augustine, Sr. Her maternal grandfather owned a laundry service in New Orleans' Irish Channel neighborhood, and her grandmother was an elementary school principal. Elam's mother was born in 1930, and grew up in a large household in New Orleans. She graduated from McDonogh No. 35 Senior High School, one of the city's few all-black public high schools, and majored in social studies education at Dillard University. She was also a talented seamstress. Elam's father was born in Joyce, Louisiana in 1919. He moved to New Orleans to find employment, and met Elam's mother at Pilgrims Rest Baptist Church No. 2. Elam grew up in a close-knit neighborhood, and lived across the street from Paul Laurence Dunbar Elementary School, where she excelled at reading with her parents' encouragement. The school integrated when she was in the fourth grade.

African American executives--Interviews.

African American businesspeople--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with Deborah A. Elam, Section A2007_111_001_002, TRT: 0:30:00
?

Deborah A. Elam began her education at Martinez Kindergarten School, a private school for gifted African American students in New Orleans, Louisiana. Later, while she was a student at Paul Laurence Dunbar Elementary School, Elam took ballet lessons; read at home; and participated in a local Girl Scout troop. She also visited her maternal grandfather, Joseph Cunningham's luncheonette. Elam continued her schooling at Ursuline Academy, an all-girls, Catholic high school, which had better resources than her previous all-black school. She served as student body president during her freshman and junior years, and participated in New Orleans' debutante balls. Upon graduating in 1979, Elam received a scholarship to Xavier University of Louisiana in New Orleans. There, she pledged Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, and majored in pre-medical studies. Eventually, Elam became unhappy with the school's small size, and transferred to Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge, where she changed her major to sociology.

Video Oral History Interview with Deborah A. Elam, Section A2007_111_001_003, TRT: 0:30:39
?

Deborah A. Elam was a student at Xavier University of Louisiana in New Orleans when the city's first African American mayor, Ernest Morial, was in office. She eventually transferred to Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. During this time, she aspired to success, but had not decided on a career. Elam entered the public administration graduate program at Southern University and Agricultural and Mechanical College in Baton Rouge, where Wiley Harris of General Electric (GE) recruited her as an intern. She worked in the human resources (HR) department at General Electric Information Services in Rockville, Maryland, and incorporated her research on GE's compensation and benefits into her master's degree thesis. Upon graduating in 1987, Elam completed GE's two-year human resources training program, and returned to Rockville to work at GE headquarters for two years. After a six-month rotation at GE Aviation in Evendale, Ohio, Elam was assigned to an HR field position in

Atlanta, Georgia.

Video Oral History Interview with Deborah A. Elam, Section A2007_111_001_004, TRT: 0:29:57
?

Deborah A. Elam worked as a human resources (HR) manager for General Electric (GE) in Atlanta, Georgia in the early 1990s. In this role, Elam addressed the concerns of GE employees as GE divested from one of its subsidiaries. When Elam's fiancé, Archie Elam, transferred to Fort Bragg, North Carolina for his U.S. Army career, Elam moved to Raleigh, North Carolina, where she worked in HR at GE Capital Mortgage Corporation for two years. At this time, around 1993, Elam participated in one of GE's first diversity training exercises. She then became an HR manager for GE Capital Insurance Services in Stamford, Connecticut, at the same time as she became pregnant with her first daughter. Given her seniority and expertise, Elam served as HR managing director for GE Capital Market Services, which employed Wall Street bankers, a demographic she had not managed previously. After expressing interest in a higher level opportunity, Elam led HR for GE Corporate Finance during a period of growth and expansion.

Video Oral History Interview with Deborah A. Elam, Section A2007_111_001_005, TRT: 0:30:37
?

Deborah A. Elam became a senior executive at General Electric (GE) in 2002. She then filled Steven Thorne's role as the diversity leader for GE Capital in Fairfield, Connecticut. At the time of the interview, Elam had been in the position for over four years. She was responsible for mentoring the company's diverse talent, and ensuring that GE's leadership was diverse as well. In 2006, she was also named an officer of the company. Elam talks about GE's African American executives, like Lloyd G. Trotter and Arthur H. Harper; African American female corporate leaders like Paula Madison and Carla Harris; and her mentors at GE, including Wiley Harris and Anne Nohara Abaya. In addition to her employment at GE, Elam served as president of the Fairfield County Chapter of The Links, Incorporated, and was recognized by the White House Project for her corporate service. She reflects upon motherhood and her identity as an African American woman; the importance of history; and how she would like to be remembered.

Video Oral History Interview with Deborah A. Elam, Section A2007_111_001_006, TRT: 0:11:16
?

Deborah A. Elam narrates her photographs.