

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with John Harris

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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>	Harris, John, 1961-
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with John Harris,
<b>Dates:</b>	October 6, 2007
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2007
<b>Physical Description:</b>	9 Betacame SP videocassettes (4:21:38).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Nonprofit chief executive and academic administrator John Harris (1961 - ) founded Encouragement Unlimited, Inc., a faith based charitable organization. He also served as an instructor for the University of Nebraska - Lincoln. Harris was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on October 6, 2007, in Omaha, Nebraska. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2007_282
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Founder and president of Encouragement Unlimited, Inc., John Leonard Harris was born on July 4, 1961 in St. Louis, Missouri to Reverend Eugene Harris, Jr. and Maeola Wilson Blanchard. Harris attended the University of Missouri-Columbia, where he obtained his B.A. degree in radio, television and film production in 1984.

In 1989, Harris published *Campus Programming for Life: The Challenge of the 1990s and Beyond* for the National Association for Campus Activities Research Foundation. He worked for the University of Nebraska at Omaha as a student activities advisor from 1989 until 1991, serving as the primary advisor for a variety of groups including the Women's Resource Center, American Multicultural Students and the Disabled Students Agency, handling a budget of more than \$100,000. In 1992, Harris was published in the *Journal of Intergroup Relations* where his "Portrayal of the Black Family in Prime time Network" piece was awarded the first "Article of the Year" Award by the National Association for Human Rights Workers.

In 1991, Harris became the special assistant to the Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and was involved in maintaining the presence of underrepresented minority populations on campus. In 1999, Harris joined the Lincoln based, City Impact, Inc. as the Men's Youth Ministry Coordinator, leading a social club of primarily African American high school and middle school-aged boys. He remained there for three years.

Harris founded Encouragement Unlimited, Inc. in 2002, serving as chief executive and administrator for the faith-based charitable organization. In 2004, Harris returned to academia, working as a service-learning coordinator for Nebraska Wesleyan University.

In 2005, Harris obtained his M.Ed. degree from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln in Teaching, Learning and Teacher Education, and in 2006, he became an instructor at the University. Harris is a popular keynote and conference speaker, lecturing nationally in academia and to businesses on issues of diversity, cultural awareness,

leadership, motivation and organizational effectiveness.

Harris is married to his wife Charlene (Maxey) of Lincoln, Nebraska, and they have four children, Preston, Shannon, JoAnna and John, Jr.

Harris was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on October 6, 2007.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with John Harris was conducted by Larry Crowe on October 6, 2007, in Omaha, Nebraska, and was recorded on 9 Betacame SP videocassettes. Nonprofit chief executive and academic administrator John Harris (1961 - ) founded Encouragement Unlimited, Inc., a faith based charitable organization. He also served as an instructor for the University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

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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:

Harris, John, 1961-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

### Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Harris, John, 1961- --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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## Occupations:

Academic Administrator

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## HistoryMakers® Category:

EducationMakers

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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 John Harris, October 6, 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).

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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 John Harris, Section A2007\_282\_001\_001, TRT: 0:28:26 ?

John Harris was born on July 4, 1961 in St. Louis, Missouri to Maeola Wilson

Blanchard and Eugene Harris, Jr. Harris' paternal great-great-grandfather, Elliot Harris, was a freedman and landowner in Arkansas. Many years later, his paternal grandfather, Eugene Harris, Sr., became a Pentecostal preacher in Hughes, Arkansas, where Harris' father was born. Harris' maternal great-grandmother had Native American ancestry, and married his maternal great-grandfather, who was a descendant of slaves. Harris' mother was raised on her grandfather's farm in Mississippi, and later moved to St. Louis, where she met Harris' father. A Pentecostal minister, he also drove a taxi, and worked at the McDonnell Douglas aircraft company. Harris' parents divorced when he was twelve years old; and, although he lived with his mother, he was influenced by his father throughout his youth. Harris also describes the history of the Pentecostal church, which originated in the early 20th century with the Azusa Street Revival.

Video Oral History Interview with John Harris, Section A2007\_282\_001\_002, TRT: 0:28:41 ?

John Harris was raised in a close-knit African American community in Wellston, Missouri, which was located at the edge of St. Louis, Missouri. Much of Harris' childhood was spent playing football and corkball with his six siblings and friends from the neighborhood, who were required to return home when the streetlights turned on. In addition to playing sports, Harris often listened to football games on the radio, and saw the St. Louis Cardinals play at the Busch Stadium in St. Louis. He also supported the St. Louis Blues hockey team and St. Louis Hawks basketball team. Harris and his siblings were raised in the Pentecostal church, which prohibited congregants from listening to secular music. However, they secretly played records by Motown artists like The Temptations, The Spinners and The Four Tops. Harris attended Wellston's Spensmar Elementary School, Central Elementary School and Spector Junior High School, where he was a strong student.

Video Oral History Interview with John Harris, Section A2007\_282\_001\_003, TRT: 0:28:06 ?

John Harris was raised by his mother, Maeola Wilson Blanchard, in a home on Irving Avenue in Wellston, Missouri. Harris was mentored by the men of the community, as well as the staff of the Salvation Army Euclid Corps community center, where he belonged to the sports leagues. Many of Harris' friends were also raised by single mothers, and received support from the community. With help from a neighbor named Mr. Hopkins, Harris enrolled in the eighth grade at the all-boys Saint Louis Priory School in St. Louis, Missouri. He excelled as a member of the school's basketball team, but was unaccustomed to the Catholic environment and rigorous coursework. In addition, because of his race and working class background, Harris faced discrimination from the faculty and his classmates, who were mostly white and wealthy. He was frequently assumed to be the culprit behind the students' pranks, and was accused without evidence after an instance of drug use among his peers.

Video Oral History Interview with John Harris, Section A2007\_282\_001\_004, TRT: 0:30:07 ?

John Harris attended the Saint Louis Priory School in St. Louis, Missouri, where he played football and basketball, and struggled academically. Unable to afford the tuition fees, Harris' mother transferred him to St. Louis' Cleveland High School for the eleventh grade. He was a student there for one day; and then, with help from an anonymous donor, returned to the Saint Louis Priory School. He continued to have difficulty in his classes, but worked hard to remain eligible for the sports program. Upon graduating, Harris matriculated to the University of Missouri in Columbia, Missouri, where he intended to study French. However, shortly after his arrival on campus, his advisor convinced him to major in journalism because of the lack of opportunity for African Americans to work as

language interpreters. Harris eventually switched to communications. He also joined the Legion of Black Collegians and Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity, and took courses with black studies professors Walter C. Daniel and Arvarh Strickland.

Video Oral History Interview with John Harris, Section A2007\_282\_001\_005, TRT: 0:29:21 ?

John Harris became aware of hostility between the African American fraternities while a student at the University of Missouri in Columbia, Missouri. In response, he and his peers created the Nu Phi Nu Fraternity; but, finding that they were unable to influence the community at large, disbanded and pledged to the Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity. With his fraternity brothers, Harris organized study groups during finals week, integrated the school's homecoming celebration and encouraged partnerships between the fraternities and sororities. Harris went on to be elected chapter president of the Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity, as well as the Pan-Hellenic Council. Aspiring to become a sportscaster, Harris majored in communications at the University of Missouri, and hosted MTV's locally broadcast 'Columbia Rock Report.' He also studied African American literature under Professor Walter C. Daniel. Upon graduating in 1984, Harris returned to St. Louis, Missouri, where he became a salesman at the Westinghouse Broadcasting Company.

Video Oral History Interview with John Harris, Section A2007\_282\_001\_006, TRT: 0:28:59 ?

John Harris met his wife, Charlene Maxey Harris, during a visit to his alma mater, the University of Missouri in Columbia, Missouri. The couple began a long distance relationship; and, following an eighteen month-long courtship, were married in 1986. Harris settled with his wife in Hanover, New Hampshire, where he worked as a media specialist for Dartmouth College. In this role, he helped produce one of the Republican presidential debates of 1988, and supervised the evening theater programs mounted by groups like the Negro Ensemble Company. He also had access to the sole recording of a speech given by Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1962. Although Harris did not belong to the faculty, he served in a number of leadership roles on campus, including as an advisor to the school's fraternal organizations and the Black Underground Theater Association. In 1988, Harris accepted a student activities position at the University of Nebraska-Omaha, and moved with his family to Omaha, Nebraska.

Video Oral History Interview with John Harris, Section A2007\_282\_001\_007, TRT: 0:29:29 ?

John Harris was hired as a student activities advisor at the University of Nebraska-Omaha in Omaha, Nebraska. He created The Real Reason for College, a program to help new students succeed; and developed relationships with local businesses. During this time, Harris became interested in motivational speaking; and, in 1990, began lecturing on college campuses about a variety of subjects, including diversity. In 1991, Harris left Omaha to become the special assistant to the vice chancellor for student affairs at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln in Lincoln, Nebraska. During his tenure there, he faced resistance from the school's African American community. He was initially disliked by the students for his association with the white vice chancellor; and, after attempting to unite the black professors against discriminatory campus policing, he attracted the distrust of the faculty. Eventually, Harris overcame these perceptions, and became known as an advocate for the school's black students.

Video Oral History Interview with John Harris, Section A2007\_282\_001\_008, TRT: 0:28:55 ?

John Harris left the University of Nebraska-Lincoln in 1998 in order to pursue a career in ministry and civic engagement. In 1999, he was recruited as the men's youth ministry coordinator for City Impact, a faith-based community organization in Lincoln, Nebraska. Harris remained in that position until 2002,

when he founded Encouragement Unlimited, Inc. At this point in the interview, Harris describes the structure of the organization, which engaged in three types of community service: partnerships, programs and the postcard project, which sent inspirational messages to people across the country. Although the organization was not affiliated with a religion, it was influenced by Harris' Christian faith. As the founder and president of Encouragement Unlimited, Inc., Harris oversaw the organization's daily operations, and travelled the country as a motivational speaker. In addition, Harris reflects upon his life and plans for the future, as well as his hopes and concerns for the African American community.

Video Oral History Interview with John Harris, Section A2007\_282\_001\_009, TRT: 0:29:34 ?

John Harris was the founder of Encouragement Unlimited, Inc., a community organization that provided diversity programs to corporations and universities. The organization was based in Lincoln, Nebraska, where Harris raised four children with his wife, Charlene Maxey Harris. Harris also remembers his childhood friends from Wellston, Missouri; and reflects upon his legacy and how he would like to be remembered. He concludes the interview by narrating his photographs.