

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Deborah M. Sawyer

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Sawyer, Deborah M., 1956-
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Deborah M. Sawyer,
Dates:	November 23, 2008
Bulk Dates:	2008
Physical Description:	5 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:07:20).
Abstract:	Environmental entrepreneur Deborah M. Sawyer (1956 - 2016) founded Environmental Design International, a firm that advises on solid, toxic, hazardous, and industrial waste disposal. Sawyer received the U.S. Small Business Administration's Minority Small Business Person of the Year Award at the district, regional and national levels in 1994. Sawyer passed away on August 8, 2016. Sawyer was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on November 23, 2008, in Chicago, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2008_143
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Environmental scientist and civil engineer Deborah Mabel Sawyer was born May 11, 1956, in Columbus, Ohio. Sawyer received her B.A. degree in political science from Emory University and her M.S. degree in petroleum microbiology from Eastern New Mexico University.

Sawyer began her career as an environmental scientist for the Ohio Environmental Protection Agency. From 1986 to 1989, Sawyer worked as an environmental scientist for the Solid and Hazardous Waste Management Division of The Ohio Environmental Protection Agency in Columbus, Ohio. Sawyer also entered the private sector in 1986 where she worked as an associate and Midwest operations manager for the URS Corporation in Columbus. Sawyer then became senior vice president, board member & operations manager for the Solid, Toxic, and Hazardous Waste Management Division of Beling Consultants, Inc., in Moline, Illinois, from 1988 through 1990. Sawyer briefly served as the operations manager for the Toxic and Hazardous Waste Management Division of Environmental S/E, Inc. in Glen Ellyn, Illinois. Sawyer then founded her own company, Environmental Design International (EDI), in 1991. The firm had 100 employees, three offices in Illinois and one in Ohio, and an annual revenue of nearly \$10 million. EDI provided direction to project managers for solid, toxic, hazardous, and industrial waste, and industrial hygiene projects. Her company held some eighty state and local certifications in seven Midwest states and several federal departments. EDI's client base included the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the Department of Veterans Affairs, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, and Chicago Public Schools among others. From 2006 through 2007, EDI worked on Chicago's Dan Ryan Expressway Reconstruction Project through a \$70 million contract for construction inspection.

Sawyer belonged to the American Council of Engineering Companies of Illinois and the Consulting Engineers Council of Illinois. Sawyer was a member of many boards of directors and was honored with numerous awards.

She received the U.S. Small Business Administration's Minority Small Business Person of the Year Award at the district, regional and national levels in 1994. Governor George Ryan appointed Sawyer to the Illinois Institute for Entrepreneurship Education in 2001. She also joined the Alliance for the Great Lakes' board of directors in 2005.

Sawyer passed away on August 8, 2016.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Deborah M. Sawyer was conducted by Larry Crowe on November 23, 2008, in Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on 5 Betacame SP videocassettes. Environmental entrepreneur Deborah M. Sawyer (1956 - 2016) founded Environmental Design International, a firm that advises on solid, toxic, hazardous, and industrial waste disposal. Sawyer received the U.S. Small Business Administration's Minority Small Business Person of the Year Award at the district, regional and national levels in 1994. Sawyer passed away on August 8, 2016.

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:

Sawyer, Deborah M., 1956-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Sawyer, Deborah M., 1956- --Interviews

Women environmentalists--Interviews

African American scientists--Interviews

African American women executives--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Environmental Entrepreneur

HistoryMakers® Category:

ScienceMakers

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 M. Sawyer, November 23, 2008. 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 M. Sawyer, Section A2008_143_001_001, TRT: 0:30:10 ?

Deborah Sawyer was born on May 11, 1956 in Columbus, Ohio to Betty Pride Sawyer and William Sawyer. Her great-great-great grandfather was Armistead Pride, a free black man who owned a barbershop in Lynchburg, Virginia in the 1850s. Sawyer is named after her maternal grandmother, Mabel King, a beer drinker who owned three Shell gas stations, and drove a Buick in Columbus, Ohio. Sawyer's mother graduated from Bennett College in Greensboro, North Carolina and worked for the federal government. Sawyer's father attended Morehouse College in Atlanta, Georgia. He was a medic in World War II and his brother, Harold Sawyer was a Tuskegee Airman in World War II who was recognized with the Distinguished Flying Cross. Sawyer's father became the Columbus, Ohio's assistant director of public housing in the Poindexter Village development. Judge Robert Duncan, who desegregated Columbus public schools, lived in Sawyer's neighborhood. Sawyer was a student at Eastgate Elementary and Columbus School for Girls.

Women environmentalists--Interviews.

African American scientists--Interviews.

African American women executives--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with Deborah M. Sawyer, Section A2008_143_001_002, TRT: 0:28:10 ?

Deborah Sawyer traveled to St. Simons Island as a student at the Columbus School for Girls. She also experienced the French Alps, the Palace of Versailles, and Paris, France. Columbus School for Girls was integrated by Sawyer's sister. Influential teachers included her algebra and art teachers. In high school, Sawyer took pottery and drawing classes. She also participated in the Service Club and co-founded the school's scholarship walk to raise money for scholarship. Sawyer describes her experiences of racial discrimination in high school. She also talks about the public housing movement. Her own father worked for the public housing authority at Poindexter Village in Columbus, Ohio. After graduating in 1974, Sawyer began her studies at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia. She describes the disjointed black student community on campus and the climate of Atlanta during the 1970s. Waitlisted for medical school, Sawyer returned to Columbus, Ohio in 1978 and enrolled in Ohio State University's anatomy program.

Video Oral History Interview with Deborah M. Sawyer, Section A2008_143_001_003, TRT: 0:28:40 ?

Deborah Sawyer enrolled at Eastern New Mexico University in Portales, New Mexico in 1979. As a graduate student researcher, she worked with professor Tony Guerrero on a project sponsored by the National Institutes of Health which monitored the impact of radioactive waste on small mammals and fish. For her thesis project, Sawyer investigated the use of microorganisms to remediate oil spills. Sawyer graduated from Eastern New Mexico University in 1982 with a M.S. degree in petroleum microbiology and started working at the Ohio Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). She talks about hazardous waste

disasters like the Love Canal in New York, Valley of the Drums in Kentucky, and Ohio's own Cuyahoga River. In 1986, Sawyer left the EPA for the URS Corporation before transitioning to Beling Engineering Consultants in 1988. She talks about racial discrimination in the industry and the lack of African Americans in the sciences. Sawyer founded Environmental Design International in 1991.

Video Oral History Interview with Deborah M. Sawyer, Section A2008_143_001_004, TRT: 0:28:40 ?

Deborah Sawyer talks Environmental Design International (EDI). After the firm's founding in 1991, Sawyer struggled to find financial backing as a young, black woman in business. She was ultimately granted a loan by a woman at Harris Bank and her first client was Montgomery Elevator. One of the firm's major projects was a five-mile long construction inspection and environmental air monitoring study on the Dan Ryan Expressway Reconstruction Project in Chicago, Illinois from 2006 to 2007. The project marked the first time that the Illinois Department of Transportation (IDOT) had hired a black engineering firm for a large scale project. Sawyer describes the project and the differences between construction materials. Other projects included I-294, a runway at O'Hare International Airport, a permeable pavement parking lot at U.S. Cellular Field, and the demolition of Cook County Hospital. Sawyer describes the future of EDI. The firm's clients include ComEd, Alliant Energy, Wisconsin Energy, BP, and Wal-Mart.

Video Oral History Interview with Deborah M. Sawyer, Section A2008_143_001_005, TRT: 0:11:40 ?

Deborah Sawyer talks about missteps in her professional career and obstacles she has faced as a female black business owner. Sawyer chairs the board of the Young Women's Leadership Charter School in Chicago, Illinois and she also teaches reading there. Sawyer talks about her family and her pets. She also reflects upon her legacy, how she would like to be remembered, and her hopes and concerns for the African American community.