

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Gene Harris

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Harris, Gene, 1953-
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Gene Harris,
Dates:	April 5, 2012
Bulk Dates:	2012
Physical Description:	6 uncompressed MOV digital video files (2:39:16).
Abstract:	School superintendent Gene Harris (1953 -) oversaw the Columbus City Schools from 2001 to 2013. Harris was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on April 5, 2012, in Columbus, Ohio. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2012_081
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

School superintendent Gene T. Harris was born in Columbus, Ohio on April 4, 1953 to Thelma Hunt and William Thomas, Sr. Harris graduated from Linden McKinley High School in Columbus, Ohio in 1971. After attending one year at Ohio State University, Harris transferred to the University of Notre Dame in South Bend, Indiana and obtained her B.A. degree in English in 1975. She then returned to Ohio State University and graduated with her M.A. degree in educational administration in 1979. Harris was then hired as an English teacher for the Columbus City Schools. In 1980, she was appointed assistant principal. Six years later, Harris was named principal in the Columbus City Schools district. She was appointed supervisor of principals for the Columbus City Schools before being hired as an assistant superintendent of curriculum. Two years later, Harris enrolled in Ohio University's doctoral program, where she obtained her Ph.D. degree in education in 1999. Harris then became the 19th superintendent of the Columbus City Schools (CCS) in 2001, Ohio's largest district, serving more than 51,000 students in 118 schools, and over 7,700 employees.

Under her tenure as superintendent, U.S. News and World Report ranked 12 of the district's high schools among the nation's best in their 2010 America's Best High Schools report; one high school receiving the "silver" award designation and 11 others receiving a "Bronze" designation.

Harris has earned numerous accolades throughout her career. The Buckeye Association of School Administrators (BASA) named her its 2012 Ohio Superintendent of the Year. She was the recipient of an honorary doctorate degree in community leadership from Franklin University in Columbus, Ohio. Harris has been twice awarded the Ingram Award for outstanding leadership as a principal, and in 1991, she was named a YWCA Woman of Achievement. Additionally, Harris received the Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity African American Role Model Award and the Who's Who in Black Columbus Master Achiever in Education Award. Other notable honors Harris has received include: the Columbus Metropolitan Area Community Action Organization (CMA CAO) Community Impact Award, the Cavaliers Club Award for Outstanding Accomplishments, and the National Council of 100 Black Women-Columbus Chapter Personal Achievement and Devoted Service Award. She is also the recipient of

the University Council for Educational Administration Excellence in Educational Leadership Award. Harris has received the Martin Luther King, Jr., Dreamer Award in 2004, the Champion of Children, the Children's Hunger Alliance Educator of the Year and the Buckingham, Doolittle & Burroughs Stellar Performer awards in 2005. Two years later, Harris was honored with the Donald and Gail Anderson Award from the Ohio State University College of Education and Ecology in 2007.

Harris is married to Stanley Eugene Harris and lives in Columbus, Ohio.

Gene T. Harris was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on April 5, 2012.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Gene Harris was conducted by Larry Crowe on April 5, 2012, in Columbus, Ohio, and was recorded on 6 uncompressed MOV digital video files. School superintendent Gene Harris (1953 -) oversaw the Columbus City Schools from 2001 to 2013.

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:

Harris, Gene, 1953-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews
Harris, Gene, 1953- --Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Columbus Public School Systems (Ohio)

Occupations:

School Superintendent

HistoryMakers® Category:

EducationMakers

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 Gene Harris, April 5, 2012. 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 Gene Harris, Section A2012_081_001_001, TRT: 1:28:30 ?

Gene Harris was born on April 4, 1953 in Columbus, Ohio to Thelma Hunt Thomas and William Thomas, Sr. Her mother was born in 1926 in Mount Sterling, Kentucky. There, Harris' grandmother worked in domestic service, and her grandfather was a chauffeur and gardener. When Harris' mother was a teenager, she answered a job advertisement from a man in Columbus, Ohio, who hired her parents to work for his family. She enrolled at Columbus' East High School, and went on to work for the Supreme Life Insurance Company of America. Harris' father was born in 1929 in Gainesville, Georgia, and later moved with his mother and brothers to Columbus, where he began his employment with the Sims Electric Company during elementary school. He attended Columbus' Central High School, at which time he met Harris' mother, who lived nearby. He served in the U.S. Army during World War II, and trained at Tuskegee Army Airfield. Harris was the youngest of her parents' three children, and grew up on the East Side of Columbus.

Video Oral History Interview with Gene Harris, Section A2012_081_001_002, TRT: 2:28:51 ?

Gene Harris grew up near Mount Vernon Avenue on the East Side of Columbus, Ohio. She began her education at the majority-black Garfield Elementary School in Columbus. After her family moved to the city's North Side, Harris lived with her maternal grandparents, Florine White Hunt and William Hunt, until she completed the sixth grade. Then, she entered Linmoor Junior High School, where she participated in the student council, choir and glee club. Harris went on to attend Linden-McKinley High School. She received support from the school librarian, Jayne Jakobsen, a white woman who introduced her to literature by African American authors like Ralph Ellison and Richard Wright. A few months before Harris' graduation in 1971, a school assembly was disrupted by one of her white classmates, who felt he was racially oppressed. As a result of the disturbance, the school closed for several weeks. At this point in the interview, Harris talks about the de facto segregation of Columbus.

Video Oral History Interview with Gene Harris, Section A2012_081_001_003, TRT: 3:30:51 ?

Gene Harris attended the formerly all-white Linden-McKinley High School in Columbus, Ohio during the late 1960s. Due to white flight, the school's African American population grew, and tensions developed between the black community and the remaining whites. Upon graduating in 1971, Harris enrolled at The Ohio State University in Columbus. After one year, she transferred to the University of Notre Dame in South Bend, Indiana to be with her future husband, Stanley Harris. She was one of eight African American female students, and majored in English under the advisement of Professor Maben Herring. In 1975, Harris began her career in the Columbus Public Schools as a teacher at Everett Junior High School. Two years later, Judge Robert Morton Duncan mandated school desegregation in the decision of *Penick v. Columbus Board of Education*. In 1979, Harris earned a master's degree and principal's license from The Ohio State University. She then became the assistant principal of Columbus' Central High School.

Video Oral History Interview with Gene Harris, Section A2012_081_001_004, TRT: 4:32:49 ?

Gene Harris served as an assistant high school principal in the Columbus Public Schools from 1980 to 1986, when she was promoted to principal of Briggs High School. After eighteen months there, she became the principal of Mifflin High School. Under her leadership, the institution was recognized as an exemplar for other high schools. Following a two-year assignment as the Columbus Public

Schools' supervisor of principals, Harris was selected by Superintendent Ronald E. Etheridge to become an assistant superintendent in 1991. In this role, she supervised and provided feedback for educators at twenty-seven elementary, middle and high schools in Columbus. In 1993, Harris began a Ph.D. degree in education at Ohio University in Athens, Ohio. For her dissertation, she examined the communication patterns between superintendents and teachers union presidents in urban contexts in Ohio. At this point in the interview, Harris talks about the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 and the limitations of standardized testing.

Video Oral History Interview with Gene Harris, Section A2012_081_001_005, TRT: 5:29:56 ?

Gene Harris was selected as the superintendent of the Columbus Public Schools by the Columbus Board of Education in 2001. During her tenure, Harris worked to improve the graduation rate, which increased from 54 percent to 85.1 percent between 2001 and 2011. She helped launch the International Baccalaureate program at Columbus Alternative High School, as well as the citywide Seniors to Sophomores program, through which students completed their senior years of high school on college campuses. Harris also partnered with community organizations in order to provide more support for students. In 2004, she traveled with Columbus Africentric Early College students to Ghana, where they visited the coastal slave castles and the University of Ghana in Accra. Harris talks about President Barack Obama's visit to Fort Hayes Arts and Academic High School in Columbus, and the school district's participation in Back to School With The HistoryMakers. She also describes her hopes and concerns for the African American community.

Video Oral History Interview with Gene Harris, Section A2012_081_001_006, TRT: 6:08:19 ?

Gene Harris became the nineteenth superintendent of the Columbus Public Schools in Columbus, Ohio in 2001. During her tenure, the district implemented the Capital Improvements program, which built or renovated thirty-five schools. The district was also renamed the Columbus City Schools in 2007. Harris describes the Columbus City Schools' commitment to arts education at the elementary, middle and high school levels. She also talks about the district's investment in technology and its partnership with the Columbus Metropolitan Library. With her husband, Stanley Harris, Harris had one son, Wade Harris, who was a graduate of Howard University in Washington, D.C. and Babson College in Babson Park, Massachusetts. He went on to develop a radio program called the 'Wade-O Radio Show.' Harris concludes the interview by describing how she would like to be remembered.