

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Nichelle Nichols

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Nichols, Nichelle
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Nichelle Nichols,
Dates:	December 17, 2013
Bulk Dates:	2013
Physical Description:	8 uncompressed MOV digital video files (3:52:01).
Abstract:	Actress Nichelle Nichols (1932 - 2022) was honored with a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame for her role as Lieutenant Commander Uhura in the original Star Trek television series and movie franchise. Nichols was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on December 17, 2013, in Woodland Hills, California. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2013_343
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Actress Nichelle Nichols was born on December 28, 1932 in Robbins, Illinois near Chicago. Her father, Samuel Earl Nichols, was a factory worker who also served as the mayor of Robbins and as its chief magistrate. Her mother, Lishia Mae (Parks) Nichols, was a homemaker. As a child, Nichols' family moved to Chicago where she studied dance at the Chicago Ballet.

During the late 1940s, Nichols was discovered by jazz legend Duke Ellington and toured with both Ellington and Lionel Hampton as a lead singer and dancer. Her acting career began in the film *Porgy and Bess* (1959); and her first television role was on "The Lieutenant" (1964). Nichols went on to record two albums, including "Down to Earth" (1968), and "Out of This World" (1991).

In 1966, Nichols was cast as Lieutenant Commander Uhura in *Star Trek*, which marked one of the first times that an African American actress was portrayed in a non-stereotypical role on television. Nichols went on to appear as Uhura numerous times in the *Star Trek* movie and television series, including *Star Trek: The Motion Picture* (1979), *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan* (1982), *Star Trek III: The Search for Spock* (1984), *Star Trek IV: The Voyage Home* (1986), , *Star Trek V: The Final Frontier*, Paramount (1989), *Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country* (1991). She was also cast as Ruana in two Tarzan films: *Tarzan's Jungle Rebellion* (1967) and *Tarzan's Deadly Silence* (1970).

In 1975, Nichols established Women in Motion, Inc., a company that produced educational materials using music as a teaching tool and was expanded to become an astronaut recruitment tool after Nichols won a grant from the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA). This resulted in thousands of women and minorities applying to NASA's space program such as Sally Ride, Judith Resnik, Ronald McNair, and Ellison S. Onizuka. In addition to her autobiography, *Beyond Uhura: Star Trek and Other Memories* (1994), Nichols is co-author of *Saturn's Child* (1995) and a contributor to publications of the National Space Institute.

In October of 1984, Nichols was presented with NASA's Public Service Award for her many efforts towards integrating the U.S. space program. She was honored with a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame in 1992, and became the first African American actress to place her handprints in front of Hollywood's Grauman's Chinese Theatre, along with the rest of the *Star Trek* cast. Nichols was elected an honorary member of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc.; and, on June 8, 2010, she received an honorary doctorate degree from Los Angeles Mission College.

Nichelle Nichols was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on December 17, 2013.

Nichols passed away on July 30, 2022 at the age of 89.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Nichelle Nichols was conducted by Larry Crowe on December 17, 2013, in Woodland Hills, California, and was recorded on 8 uncompressed MOV digital video files. Actress Nichelle Nichols (1932 - 2022) was honored with a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame for her role as Lieutenant Commander Uhura in the original Star Trek television series and movie franchise.

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:

Nichols, Nichelle

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews
Nichols, Nichelle--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Actress

HistoryMakers® Category:

EntertainmentMakers

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 Nichelle Nichols, December 17, 2013. 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 Nichelle Nichols, Section A2013_343_001_001, TRT: 1:27:04 ?

Nichelle Nichols was born on December 28, 1932 in Robbins, Illinois to Leshia Parks Nichols and Samuel Nichols, Sr. Her paternal grandfather, Samuel G. Nichols, was born to a racially mixed family in Louisiana. He married a black woman named Lydia Haverson Nichols, with whom he raised Nichols' father in Robbins, Illinois. Nichols' father served as the mayor of Robbins for a time, and also worked as a physicist at the Hydrox Chemical Company, Inc. in nearby Chicago, Illinois. Nichols' mother was born in Oklahoma, and grew up in Dallas, Texas. She completed her college education there, and then moved to Chicago with her maternal aunt. Nichols' parents were introduced by their friends on a double date, and married soon afterwards. They had six children, of whom Nichols was the third born. Nichols aspired to enter show business from an early age, and obtained her parents' permission to change her name from Grace to Nichelle when she was twelve years old.

Video Oral History Interview with Nichelle Nichols, Section A2013_343_001_002, TRT: 2:32:13 ?

Nichelle Nichols grew up on the South Side of Chicago, Illinois. She lived with her family in the Washington Park subdivision at 60th Street and South Parkway. Her father, Samuel Nichols, Sr., purchased property in the area upon the advice of Carl Augustus Hansberry, who succeeded in integrating the previously all-white neighborhood for African Americans. Nichols was influenced by Hansberry's daughter, the author Lorraine Hansberry, who often walked her to class at Betsy Ross Elementary School. Nichols also took dance lessons at the Sammy Dyer School of the Theater and the Chicago Ballet Academy. She was offered a one-year scholarship to the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, but decided to focus on ballet, acrobatics and tap dance instead. Nichols' father was supportive of her interests, and rented a private practice room for her at a dance studio. There, Nichols was invited to participate in a tap class led by Carmencita Romero.

Video Oral History Interview with Nichelle Nichols, Section A2013_343_001_003, TRT: 3:30:12 ?

Nichelle Nichols was twelve years old when she began studying dance under Carmencita Romero, who was a noted performer in Chicago, Illinois. Under Romero's direction, Nichols learned tap dancing and began choreographing shows that combined tap and ballet techniques. When Nichols was fourteen years old, she was recruited to dance at the Sherman House Hotel's College Inn restaurant, where Romero produced a show for hotelier Ernie Byfield. Nichols became a regular act at the hotel, where she danced for an all-white audience. Her parents chaperoned her each night, and required her to complete her education at Englewood High School. Nichols performed outside of Chicago for the first time when she was sixteen years old. At that time, she was recruited by an agent to dance at a supper club resort in Hawaii. After a year there, Nichols decided to change her focus to singing, which had more potential as a long term career. She went on to perform with such notable musicians as Duke Ellington and Lionel Hampton.

Video Oral History Interview with Nichelle Nichols, Section A2013_343_001_004, TRT: 4:28:36 ?

Nichelle Nichols transitioned from dancing to singing in the supper clubs of Chicago, Illinois. During the late 1940s, she performed in the 'Calypso Carnival' revue with Jimmy Payne, Jr. Nichols married Broadway dancer Foster Johnson in 1951, and gave birth to their son, Kyle Foster, later that year. She went on to play the role of Hazel in Oscar Brown, Jr.'s 'Kicks and Company.' In 1959, Nichols secured her first movie role as a chorus singer in the film adaptation of 'Porgy and Bess,' where she appeared alongside Sidney Poitier, Sammy Davis,

Jr., Brock Peters and Dorothy Dandridge. Afterwards, she returned to work as a supper club performer, and used songs from the musical in her act. In the early 1960s, Nichols moved to southern California. She began work on Gene Roddenberry's 'The Lieutenant' television series in 1963, and performed in the West Coast production of the musical 'The Roar of the Greasepaint - The Smell of the Crowd.'

Video Oral History Interview with Nichelle Nichols, Section A2013_343_001_005, TRT: 5:29:49 ?

Nichelle Nichols finished her work on Gene Roddenberry's 'The Lieutenant' television series in 1964. That year, she made also an appearance in James Baldwin's 'Blues for Mister Charlie.' During this time, Nichols was active in the Civil Rights Movement, although she did not attend the March on Washington. Around the mid-1960s, Nichols was approached again by Gene Roddenberry, who told her about his idea for a futuristic television series called 'Star Trek.' They began meeting regularly for lunches, where they planned and wrote the show. Nichols was offered the role of the communications officer, for whom she developed a backstory and the name Nyota Uhura. At this point in the interview, Nichols talks about Roddenberry's focus on diverse casting, including the choice of George Takei as Hikaru Sulu and Leonard Nimoy as Spock. Nichols also remembers her friendship with James Doohan, a prank that DeForest Kelley played on William Shatner and the challenges that 'Star Trek' faced during its first season on NBC.

Video Oral History Interview with Nichelle Nichols, Section A2013_343_001_006, TRT: 6:28:41 ?

Nichelle Nichols played the role of Lieutenant Nyota Uhura on 'Star Trek' from 1966. The show had a racially diverse main cast, and featured African American guest stars like William Marshall and Percy Rodrigues. Nichols' character was the only female lead; and, as the ship's communications officer, she ranked fourth in command of the Starship Enterprise. Despite the show's focus on inclusivity, Nichols faced racial discrimination behind the scenes of 'Star Trek.' The producers withheld fan mail from the minority actors, and gave parking advantages to the white cast. Nichols also remembers the filming of the first interracial kiss on television for the 'Plato's Stepchildren' episode. The scene was shot late at night, after most of the cast and crew left the set. Following the first season, Nichols considered leaving 'Star Trek' to pursue musical work on Broadway. However, she was convinced by Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. to continue representing African American women on television.

Video Oral History Interview with Nichelle Nichols, Section A2013_343_001_007, TRT: 7:29:35 ?

Nichelle Nichols played Lieutenant Nyota Uhura from 1966 to 1969, when 'Star Trek' was cancelled and syndicated. Four years later, Nichols provided the voice of Uhura for the animated 'Star Trek' series, which received an Emmy Award. She acted in the blaxploitation film 'Truck Turner' in 1974, and went on to star in a series of 'Star Trek' films from the late 1970s to 1991. During this time, 'Star Trek' attracted a cult following, and Nichols appeared regularly at science fiction conventions. She supported the minority actors on the spinoff 'Star Trek' series, which depicted both female and African American starship commanders. She also worked with the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) to recruit astronauts of color like Mae Jemison, who became the first black woman in space in 1992. Nichols published her autobiography, 'Beyond Uhura: Star Trek and Other Memories,' in 1995. She went on to write her first science fiction novel, 'Saturn's Child,' with Margaret Wander Bonanno.

Video Oral History Interview with Nichelle Nichols, Section A2013_343_001_008, TRT: 8:25:51 ?

Nichelle Nichols partnered with actresses like Judy Pace-Flood to establish the Kwanza Foundation, which supported black women in the film and television

industries. Nichols concludes the interview by reflecting upon her life, legacy and how she would like to be remembered.