

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Carolyn Whigham

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Whigham, Carolyn, 1949-
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Carolyn Whigham,
Dates:	March 28, 2017
Bulk Dates:	2017
Physical Description:	6 uncompressed MOV digital video files (2:37:52).
Abstract:	Funeral director Carolyn Whigham (1949 -) presided over the funeral services for celebrities like U.S. Congressman Donald Payne and Whitney Houston during her tenure as director of Whigham Funeral Home in Newark, New Jersey. Whigham was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on March 28, 2017, in New York, New York. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2017_076
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Funeral director Carolyn Whigham was born on January 5, 1949 in Newark, New Jersey to Marie Foster Whigham and Charles Whigham. She attended St. Mary's School, and was among the first African Americans to attend Vailsburg High School. Upon graduating in 1966, Whigham enrolled at Virginia State College in Petersburg, Virginia to study business administration, but left in order to pursue a career in mortuary science. Whigham earned her degree from the American Academy McAllister Institute of Funeral Service in New York City in 1986.

Whigham began working in her father's funeral home, Whigham Funeral Home while still in high school. After leaving Virginia State College, Whigham married and lived in California for ten years. There, she and her then husband became successful real estate investors as the founders of Bennett and Bennett Associates, the largest black owned property management company in Los Angeles at the time. Upon her father's retirement in 1986, Whigham became the director of Whigham Funeral Home. She oversaw the services for jazz singer Sarah Vaughn, as well as other celebrities from Newark, New Jersey. In 2003, she directed funeral services for John Russell Houston, Whitney Houston's father. Whigham was called again by the Houston family to oversee funeral services for Whitney Houston in 2012, and her daughter Bobbi Christina Brown in 2015. She also oversaw the funeral of Congressman Donald M. Payne in 2012. She went on to host the "How to Conduct High Profile Funerals" seminars accredited by the New Jersey State Board of Mortuary Science. Whigham employed a predominately female staff, which included her wife, Terry Fields Whigham, and her daughter, Kara-Lynn Whigham. Over the course of her career as director, Whigham oversaw over 6,000 funerals at Whigham Funeral Home. Whigham has been featured in *The New York Times* and the *Star-Ledger*. She was a member of the National Funeral Directors, Garden State Funeral Directors Association and Morticians Association, Inc, a professional organization for African American funeral directors. She also served on the New Jersey Board for the Statutes of Women. In addition, Whigham also worked with the Newark YMCA to establish housing for homeless people.

Whigham has six children: Stevland, Kara-Lynn, Aazim, Chastity, Chad and Nyle.

Carolyn Whigham was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on March 28, 2017.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Carolyn Whigham was conducted by Larry Crowe on March 28, 2017, in New York, New York, and was recorded on 6 uncompressed MOV digital video files. Funeral director Carolyn Whigham (1949 -) presided over the funeral services for celebrities like U.S. Congressman Donald Payne and Whitney Houston during her tenure as director of Whigham Funeral Home in Newark, New Jersey.

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:

Whigham, Carolyn, 1949-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Whigham, Carolyn, 1949- --Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Funeral Director

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 Carolyn Whigham, March 28, 2017. 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 Carolyn Whigham, Section A2017_076_001_001, TRT: 1:27:28 ?

Carolyn Whigham was born on January 5, 1949 in Newark, New Jersey to Marie Foster Whigham and Charles Whigham. Her maternal grandmother, Vera Foster, married John Foster, Sr., a railroad worker from Virginia. Together, they raised

six children in Newark, including Whigham's mother. Whigham's paternal grandmother married Albert Whigham, Sr. in Sparta, Georgia. He was abusive, and she later fled to Newark with Whigham's father. While working as a janitor at a doctor's office, he met Newark's first black doctor, Walter T. Darden, who encouraged him to open the Whigham Funeral Home. After marrying Whigham's mother, he also opened New Jersey's first black-owned bank, the City National Bank. Whigham was raised in Newark's black professional Central Ward, and spent the summers on her family's twelve-acre farm in Hackettstown, New Jersey. She began her education at St. Mary's School, and became the first black student to enroll at Newark's Vailsburg High School in 1962.

Video Oral History Interview with Carolyn Whigham, Section A2017_076_001_002, TRT: 2:29:58
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Carolyn Whigham grew up in the integrated Central Ward of Newark, New Jersey, where her father, Charles Whigham, owned the Whigham Funeral Home. She aspired to become a funeral director, and although her father told her that women were unsuited to the profession, she changed his mind by successfully embalming a body while in high school. At this point in the interview, Whigham remembers the frequent police brutality against the black community in Newark, and talks about the riots that occurred after a white police officer killed black taxicab driver John Smith in 1967. Following the riots, many white residents left the Central Ward, which quickly became all-black. After graduating from Vailsburg High School in 1966, Whigham enrolled at the historically black Virginia State College in Petersburg, Virginia. She left after deciding to attend mortuary school. Additionally, Whigham talks about the black Muslim community in Newark, including the role of activist and poet Amiri Baraka.

Video Oral History Interview with Carolyn Whigham, Section A2017_076_001_003, TRT: 3:28:01
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Carolyn Whigham was attracted to women from an early age. She grew up during the 1950s, and faced many hardships because of her sexual orientation. After coming out as lesbian to her parents, she was beaten by her father so severely that he had a heart attack. To escape his abuse, Whigham married a man and moved to California, where she had two children. After ten years, Whigham divorced him and returned to New Jersey. She studied at the American Academy McAllister Institute of Funeral Service in New York City, and graduated at the top of her class. She then became the director of the Whigham Funeral Home in Newark, New Jersey, where she worked with her wife, Terry Fields Whigham, and an all-female staff. Whigham oversaw the funerals of many notable residents of Newark, including singer Whitney Houston and her daughter, Bobbi Kristina Brown. Whigham also talks about providing pro bono funeral services to needy families.

Video Oral History Interview with Carolyn Whigham, Section A2017_076_001_004, TRT: 4:31:12
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Carolyn Whigham was the director of the Whigham Funeral Home in Newark, New Jersey. There, she oversaw the funerals of numerous high profile figures, including singer Sarah Vaughan and Congressman Donald M. Payne. In 2012, Cissy Houston asked Whigham to watch over the remains of her daughter, singer Whitney Houston. She oversaw the embalming in Los Angeles, California, and evaded the media while transporting the remains to Newark with help from family friend Tyler Perry. In 2016, Whigham gave a presentation on high profile funerals to the National Funeral Directors and Morticians Association, Inc. At this point in the interview, Whigham talks about the need

for security personnel during funerals and embalmings. She also describes the differences between black and white funeral homes, and recalls her experiences with Chinese funeral customs. Whigham remembers the discrimination against people who died from AIDS during the 1980s, and reflects upon the changes in the funeral industry.

Video Oral History Interview with Carolyn Whigham, Section A2017_076_001_005, TRT: 5:31:48
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Carolyn Whigham's father, Charles Whigham, was unable to obtain a business loan for the Whigham Funeral Home in Newark, New Jersey during the early 1970s. He went door to door and sold shares of stock, and then founded New Jersey's first black-owned bank, the City National Bank, in 1972. Later, the bank expanded to six branches, including locations in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania and New York City. Whigham eventually took over the funeral business from her father. At this point, she describes the services she provided to bereaved families, including durable metal caskets for those of limited financial means; headstone and vault company recommendations; and transportation of remains from out of state. Whigham also talks about the funerary customs of various cultures, and describes her interactions with gangs during funeral services. Whigham reflects upon her life, legacy and family. She concludes this part of the interview by describing her hopes and concerns for the African American community.

Video Oral History Interview with Carolyn Whigham, Section A2017_076_001_006, TRT: 6:09:25
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Carolyn Whigham describes how she would like to be remembered, and concludes the interview by narrating her photographs.