

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Valerie Wilson Wesley

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Wesley, Valerie Wilson
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Valerie Wilson Wesley,
Dates:	March 30, 2017
Bulk Dates:	2017
Physical Description:	6 uncompressed MOV digital video files (2:31:06).
Abstract:	Author Valerie Wilson Wesley (1947 -) was executive editor of Essence magazine and published several award winning novels. Wesley was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on March 30, 2017, in New York, New York. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2017_079
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Author Valerie Wilson Wesley was born on November 22, 1947 in Willimantic, Connecticut to Bertram W. Wilson and Mary Wilson. Wesley attended Howard University, where she earned her B.A. degree in 1970. She went on to receive two M.A. degrees, one from the Bank Street College of Education and another from the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism.

Wesley began her career as an associate editor for *Scholastic News* in 1970, where she remained until 1972. In 1988, she joined *Essence* magazine as the travel editor. Wesley served in many editing positions at the magazine. She served as executive editor from 1992 until 1996 and as contributing editor from 1994 until 1997. Wesley has also served as a writer for *Essence*. In 2005, she was named as an artist-in-residence at Columbia College of Chicago, Illinois. Wesley also served as an adjunct professor at Ramapo College of New Jersey in 2013.

Wesley was the author of numerous works in genres including mystery, romance, children's, and nonfiction. She was the author of the *Tamara Hayle Mysteries* series, as well as the *Willemena Rules!* childrens book series. Wesley also wrote: *Where Do I Go from Here?*, which won the American Library Association's Best Book for Reluctant Readers citation in 1993, *When Death Comes Stealing*, and *Ain't Nobody's Business If I Do*, which received the Award for Excellence in Adult Fiction from the American Library Association Black Caucus in 2000. Wesley was the recipient of the Griot Award from the New York chapter of the National Association of Black Journalists in 1993, and the Author of the Year Award from Amigirls Book Club in 2004, in addition to being named the author of the year by the Go Go, Girls Book Club.

An active participant in community organizations, Wesley was a board member of Sisters of Crime, a professional organization committed to fighting discrimination against women who write mystery novels, and was a member of the board of directors for the Newark Arts Council. She has also served on the Board of Trustees for the Montclair Art Museum and the YWCA of North Essex, New Jersey.

Wesley and her husband, Richard Wesley, have two daughters, Nandi and Thembi.

Valerie Wilson Wesley was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on March 30, 2017.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Valerie Wilson Wesley was conducted by Larry Crowe on March 30, 2017, in New York, New York, and was recorded on 6 uncompressed MOV digital video files. Author Valerie Wilson Wesley (1947 -) was executive editor of Essence magazine and published several award winning novels.

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:

Wesley, Valerie Wilson

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Wesley, Valerie Wilson--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Author

HistoryMakers® Category:

ArtMakers

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 Valerie Wilson Wesley, March 30, 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 Valerie Wilson Wesley, Section A2017_079_001_001, TRT: 1:29:10 ?

Valerie Wilson Wesley was born on November 22, 1947 in Willimantic, Connecticut to Mary Spurlock Wilson and Bertram Wilson. Her maternal ancestors had Native American and European roots, and a few of them passed for white. Wesley's maternal grandmother, Laura Spurlock, married Preston

Spurlock, who was a train conductor. They raised eighteen children on their property in Salem, Virginia, including Wesley's mother, who was born in 1923. She attended West Virginia State College. Wesley's paternal grandfather was an educator in Salem, and was married to Carmen G. Wilson, a registered nurse. They divorced shortly after Wesley's father was born in 1920. After Wesley's parents married, her father served as a Tuskegee Airman in World War II, for which he received the Distinguished Flying Cross. Her parents later moved to Willimantic, where her mother worked as a secretary while her father continued his career in the U.S. Air Force as a lieutenant colonel.

Video Oral History Interview with Valerie Wilson Wesley, Section A2017_079_001_002, TRT: 2:30:07 ?

Valerie Wilson Wesley grew up in a rural community in Ashford, Connecticut. She began her education at the Ashford School, where she and her sister, Patricia Wilson-Coker, were bullied for being the only black students. Around that time, Wesley enjoyed reading mysteries by Agatha Christie and Edgar Allan Poe, and won a state writing contest for her paper on President Abraham Lincoln. In the early 1960s, Wesley's father was stationed at the U.S. Air Force base in Madrid, Spain. She attended high school on the majority-white base, where she was encouraged to develop her writing ability. After three years, her family relocated to the Sembach Air Base in Germany, where she attended the integrated Kaiserslautern High School. Upon graduating in 1964, Wesley and her family returned to Connecticut, where she read the works of James Baldwin for the first time. She also enrolled at Howard University, where she was influenced by Professor Nathan Hare and began wearing a natural hairstyle.

Video Oral History Interview with Valerie Wilson Wesley, Section A2017_079_001_003, TRT: 3:29:44 ?

Valerie Wilson Wesley graduated with a degree in philosophy from Howard University in 1970. She then obtained a master's degree in early childhood education from the Bank Street College of Education in New York City, where she studied the potential for literature to enhance black children's self-esteem. Around this time, she married the playwright Richard Wesley. In 1975, Wesley joined the Harlem Writers Guild, where she was encouraged by fellow authors like Walter Dean Myers. She became a public relations writer for the Newark Public Schools Board of Education in New Jersey, and then enrolled at the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism in 1981. After completing her degree, Wesley became an assistant editor for Scholastic News. Then, she joined the staff of Essence magazine as an assistant editor, and was later promoted to executive editor under the leadership of Susan Taylor and Audrey Edwards. During this time, Wesley published her first young adult novel, 'Where Do I Go From Here?'

Video Oral History Interview with Valerie Wilson Wesley, Section A2017_079_001_004, TRT: 4:28:01 ?

Valerie Wilson Wesley became an assistant editor at Essence magazine in 1988. That same year, she collaborated with publishers Cheryl Willis Hudson and Wade Hudson to write the 'Book of Black Heroes from A to Z.' In 1993, Wesley won the Griot Award for her Essence article, 'Anatomy of a Party Gone Wrong,' which addressed discriminatory policing in the aftermath of her daughter's wrongful arrest. Wesley's first novel, 'Where Do We Go From Here?' was also published in 1993. In 1994, she wrote 'When Death Comes Stealing,' the first book in her mystery series about private investigator Tamara Hayle. Wesley later published several standalone novels, including 'Ain't Nobody's Business if I Do.' In 2003, Wesley wrote the first volume of the

‘Willimena Rules!’ children series, which featured a black heroine, Willimena Thomas. In 2013, Wesley adopted the penname Savanna Welles, under which she authored paranormal romances novels, including ‘When the Night Whispers.’

Video Oral History Interview with Valerie Wilson Wesley, Section A2017_079_001_005, TRT: 5:26:18 ?

Valerie Wilson Wesley published the first Tamara Hayle mystery, ‘When Death Comes Stealing,’ in 1994. At the time, it was the only novel about an African American private investigator written by an African American author. ‘When Death Comes Stealing’ was later adapted into an audio book format, narrated by Angela Bassett. Wesley featured the character Tamara Hayle in several additional installments of the series, including ‘Of Blood and Sorrow’ in 2008. She later gave the screen rights for the character to her nephew, Cheo Hodari Coker, who was the executive producer of ‘Luke Cage.’ At this point, Wesley describes her writing process and the inspiration behind her stories. She talks about her upcoming projects, and recalls her favorite written works. Wesley also reflects upon her family, legacy and career as an author and editor. She describes her hopes and concerns for the African American community, and concludes this part of the interview by describing how she would like to be remembered.

Video Oral History Interview with Valerie Wilson Wesley, Section A2017_079_001_006, TRT: 6:07:46 ?

Valerie Wilson Wesley narrates her photographs.