

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Craig Watkins

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Watkins, Craig, 1967-
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Craig Watkins,
Dates:	September 14, 2017
Bulk Dates:	2017
Physical Description:	5 uncompressed MOV digital video files (2:28:09).
Abstract:	Lawyer Craig Watkins (1967 -) was the first African American District Attorney elected in the state of Texas. Watkins was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on September 14, 2017, in Dallas, Texas. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2017_166
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Lawyer Craig Watkins was born on November 16, 1967 in Dallas, Texas to Richard Watkins and Paula Watkins. Watkins graduated from David W. Carter High School in Dallas, Texas in 1986. He earned his B.A. degree in political science from Prairie View A&M University in Prairie View, Texas in 1990 and received his J.D. degree from the Texas Wesleyan University School of Law in Fort Worth, Texas in 1994.

Watkins began his legal career working in the Dallas city attorney and public defender's office. He subsequently left the City of Dallas office and formed his private practice, Craig Watkins Attorney at Law, PLLC, where he worked mainly as a licensed bail bondsman. Although he campaigned and lost a 2002 election for district attorney, Watkins won the election in 2006 and became the first African American district attorney elected in the State of Texas. He served as district attorney from 2007 until 2015, during which time he was credited with securing a 99.4% conviction rate with a focus on prosecuting cases of child sexual abuse. Watkins also worked to resolve cases of wrongful conviction through the use of DNA testing and the review of evidence illegally withheld from defense attorneys. Watkins ran for re-election as district attorney in 2014, but was defeated by former Judge Susan Hawk.

As district attorney, Watkins attracted state and national recognition for his work. He was featured in *Texas Monthly*, *Jet*, and *Ebony* magazines in 2007. In 2008, Watkins was named Texan of the Year by the *Dallas Morning News*. During the same year, he was featured on an episode of *60 Minutes*. Watkins also appeared on *PBS NewsHour* in a live interview with journalist Ray Suarez for his office's 2011 exoneration of Cornelius Dupree, who was previously convicted of armed robbery in Texas.

Watkins' involvement in the community included Friendship-West Baptist Church, Alpha Psi Fraternity Incorporated, the Circle 10 Council of the Boy Scouts of America, and the Prairie View A&M Alumni Association.

Watkins and his wife, Tanya, have three children: Chad, Cale, and Taryn.

Craig Watkins was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on September 14, 2017.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Craig Watkins was conducted by Larry Crowe on September 14, 2017, in Dallas, Texas, and was recorded on 5 uncompressed MOV digital video files. Lawyer Craig Watkins (1967 -) was the first African American District Attorney elected in the state of Texas.

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:

Watkins, Craig, 1967-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Watkins, Craig, 1967- --Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Lawyer

HistoryMakers® Category:

LawMakers

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 Craig Watkins, September 14, 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 Craig Watkins, Section A2017_166_001_001, TRT: 1:31:20 ?

Craig Watkins was born on November 16, 1967 in Dallas, Texas to Paula Clark Watkins and Richard Watkins. His maternal grandmother was a maid, while his grandfather was a carpenter. Originally from Marshall, Texas, they moved to Dallas, where Watkins' parents met at James Madison High School. Watkins' paternal grandfather lived in Dallas, and held a teaching degree from Wiley

College in Marshall. Watkins' father attended Marshall's Bishop College. He later earned a master's degree from Southern Methodist University in Dallas, and became a manager at Texas Instruments, Inc. Watkins' mother was a graduate of North Texas State University, and held a doctorate in education. They raised Watkins and his brother, Craig Watkins, in a middle class community in the Oak Cliff section of Dallas. There, Watkins attended Adelle Turner Elementary School, William Hawley Atwell Middle School and David W. Carter High School, where he first became interested in politics.

Video Oral History Interview with Craig Watkins, Section A2017_166_001_002, TRT: 2:28:51 ?

Craig Watkins graduated in 1986 from David W. Carter High School in Dallas, Texas. He went on to major in political science at Prairie View A&M University in Prairie View, Texas. There, he joined the Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, through which he expanded his knowledge of African American history. He was also a member of the debate team. Upon graduating in 1990, Watkins first applied for a position in the Dallas Police Department. However, he was soon inspired by black attorneys like Royce West and Louis A. Bedford, Jr., and decided to pursue a career in law. Heeding the advice of his mother, Paula Clark Watkins, Watkins enrolled at the Texas Wesleyan University School of Law in Fort Worth, Texas in 1991. At this point in the interview, Watkins talks about his experiences of discriminatory policing in Dallas County, Texas, where he was once pulled over without cause and accused of driving a stolen car. He also remembers reconnecting with his elementary school teacher on Facebook.

Video Oral History Interview with Craig Watkins, Section A2017_166_001_003, TRT: 3:28:36 ?

Craig Watkins attended the Texas Wesleyan University School of Law in Fort Worth, Texas, where he became interested in constitutional law. After graduating in 1994, he worked as a prosecutor for the City of Dallas, Texas. He then joined the Dallas County Public Defender's Office, where he gained further trial experience. In 1998, Watkins left the office to open a private practice, the Craig Watkins Law Firm, PLLC in Dallas. He also established a title and bail bond business with his wife, Tanya Watkins. In 2002, Watkins ran against Peter Lesser in the Democratic primary for district attorney of Dallas County, Texas. He won the primary vote, but then lost to the incumbent Bill Hill. Four years later, Watkins was successful in his campaign for district attorney. In that election, Democratic candidates secured all of the county's judgeships. At this point in the interview, Watkins talks about Justice Clarence Thomas and Anita Hill; and Mayor Ron Kirk, whose communication skills he emulated.

Video Oral History Interview with Craig Watkins, Section A2017_166_001_004, TRT: 4:30:46 ?

Craig Watkins became the first African American district attorney to be elected in the State of Texas in 2006. In this role, he created the Conviction Integrity Unit of the Dallas County District Attorney's Office, which became the exemplar for similar units nationwide. During Watkins' eight years of service as district attorney, the Conviction Integrity Unit used DNA evidence to exonerate thirty-eight inmates who were wrongly convicted in Dallas County. At this point in the interview, Watkins describes the unreliability of eyewitness identification. He also talks about criminal justice reform, including the benefits of educational initiatives and the dangers of prison privatization. While Watkins' efforts were applauded by organizations like Ebony magazine and the Dallas Morning News, he was criticized by conservative groups for his lifestyle and use of campaign funds. Watkins' exposure as district attorney was also stressful for his wife, Tanya Watkins, and their three young children.

Video Oral History Interview with Craig Watkins, Section A2017_166_001_005, TRT: 5:28:36 ?

Craig Watkins served as the district attorney of Dallas County, Texas from 2006

to 2014. He campaigned for reelection in 2014, but lost the race to Susan Hawk, who eventually resigned due to mental health issues. After the loss, Watkins focused on his practice at the Craig Watkins Law Firm, PLLC. At this point, he reflects upon the success of the Conviction Integrity Unit, which exonerated thirty-eight inmates in Dallas County under his leadership as district attorney. At the time of the interview, Watkins was considering mounting another campaign for district attorney or Texas attorney general. Watkins and his wife, Tanya Watkins, had three children: Chad Watkins, Cale Watkins and Taryn Watkins. He reflects upon his career and legacy, and explains his opposition to the death penalty. He also shares his hopes and concerns for the African American community, and his advice to aspiring law professionals. Watkins concludes the interview by describing how he would like to be remembered.