

Biographical Description for The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Willy T. Ribbs

PERSON

Ribbs, Willy T., 1956-

Alternative Names: Willy T. Ribbs; Willy T.;

Life Dates: January 3, 1956-

Place of Birth: San Jose, California, USA

Residence: Driftwood, TX

Occupations: Race Car Driver

Biographical Note

William Theodore Ribbs, Jr. was born on January 3, 1956, in San Jose, California, to Geraldine and William T. Ribbs, Sr. Rather than managing the successful family plumbing business founded by his grandfather in 1927, Willy T. Ribbs races cars professionally. He is the first African American to compete in the Indianapolis 500 and one of the only African American NASCAR racers.

Ribbs' love of cars and racing began at the age of four. At age nine, Ribbs worked as a ranch hand on his grandfather's ranch. His first foray into motorsports was driving Formula Ford cars in Europe soon after his high school graduation in 1975. He won the Dunlop Championship in his first year of competition, then returned to the United States and raced Formula Atlantic cars. Ribbs won the pole in the Long Beach Formula Atlantic race in 1982, outpacing veteran drivers before his engine failed. In 1983, he won five races in the SCCA Trans-Am and was honored as Pro Rookie of the Year. After competing in two NASCAR Winston Cup races in 1986, financial difficulties including the lack of corporate sponsorship kept his team from finishing the season.

In 1989, Bill and Camille Cosby stepped in and funded the Raynor-Cosby Motorsports team with Ribbs as the star driver. Ribbs won two top-ten events in his 1990 Championship Auto Racing Team (CART) Indianapolis debut. In 1991, he became the first African American to qualify for the Indianapolis 500, and he qualified again in 1993. However, by 1994 it was clear that corporate sponsors were not yet willing to back an African American motorsports athlete, despite Cosby's offer of free television commercials in return for sponsorship. Ribbs was released from his Indianapolis 500 contract and spent the year competing in the CART series, finishing in the top ten at Michigan and Denver Grand Prix races.

In 1999, Ribbs raced in the Las Vegas Indy Racing League (IRL). In 2000, he signed with Victoria Motorsports SCCA Trans-Am team and finished second at Long Beach, third at Detroit and fourth at Las Vegas. He was awarded the Johnson Triple Crown. In 2001, Ribbs joined the NASCAR Craftsman Truck Series with the support of Dodge, which initiated a motorsports diversity program to provide opportunities for minorities to race. This made Ribbs the first African American in the modern era to compete full-time in a major NASCAR division. Ribbs successfully raised his two children, Sasha and William Theodore Ribbs, III as a single parent.

Related Entries

Hyde Park Academy High School [STUDENTOF]

[from ? to ?]

M.P.A.

James McEntee Science and Technology Academy [STUDENTOF]

[from ? to ?]

[EMPLOYEEOF]

[from ? to ?]

Race Car Driver