

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Richard E. Stephenson, Jr.

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Stephenson, Richard E., 1929-
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Richard E. Stephenson, Jr.,
Dates:	October 30, 2002
Bulk Dates:	2002
Physical Description:	7 Betacame SP videocassettes (3:32:15).
Abstract:	School superintendent Richard E. Stephenson, Jr. (1929 - 2018) was the former interim general superintendent of Chicago Public Schools. Stephenson has also served as the vice-president of the Chicago area Boy Scouts. Stephenson was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on October 30, 2002, in Chicago, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2003_258
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Richard Earl Stephenson was born in Nashville, Tennessee on June 4, 1929. Following the divorce of his parents, his mother, Odessa returned to school. While there, she met the man who became Stephenson's stepfather, and both of them stressed the importance of education. When World War II broke out, Stephenson's stepfather George was drafted into the Army and Stephenson became the man of the house, working hard and continuing his schooling. A skilled pianist, Stephenson earned a piano fellowship to Fisk University and he also played in a jazz ensemble. Transferring to Tennessee A & I State College, Stephenson earned a B.S. in chemistry in 1950. He later returned to school to earn an M.A. from the University of Chicago in 1967 and an Ed.D. in administration and supervision from Nova University in Florida in 1976.

After earning his B.S., Stephenson joined the Army, where he served from 1951 to 1954 as an artillery and guided missile officer. Following his discharge, he relocated to Chicago, where he first worked as a research associate at the University of Illinois Medical School before going into education in 1959 as a teacher. From there, he began his ascent through the administrative levels, serving as first an assistant principal at Forrestville Elementary in 1962 and retiring in 1993 as the Interim General Superintendent of Chicago Public Schools. During his years of involvement with the Chicago public schools, Stephenson also served as vice-president of the Illinois High School Association and vice-president of the Chicago Area Boy Scouts.

Today Stephenson is still active with Chicago public schools, lending his support as chairman of the selection committee that chooses outstanding principals and administrators. He has also been involved with charter schools that oversee "at risk" youth. In 2002, he was honored by the National Association for Equal Opportunity in Higher Education as an outstanding alumnus of Tennessee State University. Stephenson is married to retired teacher Ruby Jordan Stephenson. They have four children.

Stephenson passed away on November 12, 2018.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Richard E. Stephenson, Jr. was conducted by Larry Crowe on October 30, 2002, in Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on 7 Betacame SP videocassettes. School superintendent Richard E. Stephenson, Jr. (1929 - 2018) was the former interim general superintendent of Chicago Public Schools. Stephenson has also served as the vice-president of the Chicago area Boy Scouts.

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:

Stephenson, Richard E., 1929-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Stephenson, Richard E., 1929- --Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Chicago Public Schools

Occupations:

School Superintendent

HistoryMakers® Category:

EducationMakers

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 Richard E. Stephenson, Jr., October 30, 2002. 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 Richard E. Stephenson, Jr., Section A2003_258_001_001, TRT: 0:30:10 ?

Richard E. Stephenson, Jr. was born on June 4, 1929 in Nashville, Tennessee. Stephenson's maternal and paternal families both hailed from Murfreesboro, Tennessee. His maternal grandfather worked in a foundry, and his maternal

grandmother managed the family finances. His paternal uncle, Eugene Stevenson, was a dean at both Fisk University and UC Davis. Stephenson's parents, Odessa Watkins Stephenson Thomas and Richard Stephenson, Sr., divorced in Stephenson's childhood. His father remained in the Nashville area, working as a mail carrier for the L&N Railroad and as a moneylender. Stephenson received expensive gifts, such as a Ford Model A, from his father although he only visited the family sporadically. Stephenson's mother married George Thomas, a foundry worker for the Phillips and Buttorff Manufacturing Company, in the 1930s. Both attended Tennessee Agricultural and Industrial State University in Nashville later in life. Stephenson often played pranks on his mother and stepfather as a child.

Video Oral History Interview with Richard E. Stephenson, Jr., Section A2003_258_001_002, TRT: 0:29:40 ?

Richard E. Stephenson, Jr. grew up in Nashville, Tennessee in a house with his maternal grandparents and other extended family, in addition to his mother, his stepfather and his two sisters. Though his family was Methodist, Stephenson attended St. Vincent de Paul School, run by the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament, where he played football, dealt with harsh punishments from nuns and was teased by his peers because he was cross-eyed. Stephenson attended Washington Junior High School and Pearl High School in Nashville. At Pearl, he played basketball against Joseph Bertrand and Clarence Wilson and was elected president of his class every year. Stephenson worked as a news manager to support the family during WWII. He also played regular piano gigs at Nashville's Brown's Dinner Club; his favorite piano players were Nat King Cole and Oscar Peterson. Upon graduating from Pearl, Stephenson attended Tennessee Agricultural and Industrial State University.

Video Oral History Interview with Richard E. Stephenson, Jr., Section A2003_258_001_003, TRT: 0:31:15 ?

Richard E. Stephenson, Jr. attended at Tennessee Agricultural and Industrial State University in Nashville, Tennessee where he joined Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity and served as class president for four years. Stephenson majored in chemistry and studied under Drs. Carl and Mary Hill and Clyde Dillard. During college, he continued playing piano gigs around the city. Stephenson gave a commencement address at his college graduation in 1950. Stephenson married his wife, whom he had known since kindergarten, right before he enlisted in the U.S. Army in 1950. In 1951, he enrolled in Officer Candidate School. His white roommate defended him after another officer insulted him with a racial slur. On his first assignment as an officer at Camp Chaffee, Stephenson confronted a regimental commander about racial discrimination at the enlisted men's service club. Stephenson retired from the Army in 1954 and became a research assistant at University of Illinois College of Medicine in Chicago.

Video Oral History Interview with Richard E. Stephenson, Jr., Section A2003_258_001_004, TRT: 0:31:00 ?

Richard E. Stephenson, Jr. often played pranks on his colleagues when he was a research assistant at University of Illinois College of Medicine in Chicago, Illinois from 1954 to 1958. Stephenson decided to pursue a teaching career after his department failed to promote him. He began teaching at Marshall High School in Chicago in 1958 but soon left to train math and science teachers, and tutor members of a South Side family. Stephenson was assigned as an assistant principal of Forrestville Upper Grade School in 1967. The school was located near 47th Street, a once bustling black business and entertainment district in Chicago's Englewood neighborhood, and was out of control because white

administrators were intimidated by the students and surrounding gangs. Stephenson eventually became principal of the school in 1970. At Forrestville, he witnessed a shootout between a student and a police officer and fostered relationships with members of local gangs. He became principal at Chicago's Dunbar High School in 1971.

Video Oral History Interview with Richard E. Stephenson, Jr., Section A2003_258_001_005, TRT: 0:30:00 ?

Richard E. Stephenson, Jr. became principal of Dunbar High School, a vocational high school in Chicago, Illinois' Bronzeville neighborhood, in 1971. Stephenson accepted the position despite the pay cut and unrest that accompanied it. He brought a background in the manual arts, languages, and music to his work at Dunbar. His ability to propose creative, solution-oriented ideas earned him the nickname, Creative Rebel. Stephenson remembers how he successfully managed teachers, such as shop teacher Lovell Roebuck and music teacher Willie Naylor, by catching them off-guard. After challenging Naylor to a music competition, the two became good friends. During his seventeen year tenure as principal of Dunbar, he met individuals such as community organizer James I. Cage and musician Jimmy Tillman. Stephenson also elevated Dunbar's national ranking to a top twenty vocational school. Stephenson briefly talks about moving into an Eastern European neighborhood in Chicago.

Video Oral History Interview with Richard E. Stephenson, Jr., Section A2003_258_001_006, TRT: 0:30:30 ?

Richard E. Stephenson, Jr. witnessed the demographics of Chicago, Illinois' Chatham neighborhood shift from Eastern European blue-collar workers to black white-collar workers during the 1960s and 1970s. At this time, Chicago School Superintendent Benjamin Willis resisted the integration of schools and addressed school overcrowding by placing black students in mobile classrooms, later termed "Willis Wagons." Stephenson investigated whether city education funds were properly allocated for administrative positions and instituted better accounting procedures as principal of Chicago's Dunbar High School. He talks about the allocation of federal education funds and the respective roles of CPS school administrators and central staff. Stephenson left Dunbar to become district superintendent of Chicago school District 11. In 1988, he became district superintendent for District 9, which covered fifty-nine schools, on the city's Southeast side. Stephenson talks about the qualities of successful school administrator.

Video Oral History Interview with Richard E. Stephenson, Jr., Section A2003_258_001_007, TRT: 0:29:40 ?

Richard E. Stephenson, Jr. once intervened in the principal selection process at a local school council meeting when he served as district superintendent of Chicago, Illinois' District 9. Stephenson became interim superintendent for the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) after the Chicago Board of Education ousted General Superintendent Ted Kimbrough in 1993. Stephenson held the post for approximately eight months before retiring. He has contributed to several education nonprofits, serving as chair of the Chicago United Negro College Fund and working with the Joint Negro Appeal. He shares his views on social reform, charter schools, and public school vouchers. Stephenson assesses the contemporary state of CPS teacher salaries and the state of the CPS system under the policies of Mayor Richard M. Daley. He describes his hopes and concerns for the African American community and how he would like to be remembered. He reflects upon his legacy, considers what he would have done differently and narrates his photographs.