

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Leslie Outerbridge

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Outerbridge, Leslie, 1936-
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Leslie Outerbridge,
Dates:	December 9, 2003
Bulk Dates:	2003
Physical Description:	8 Betacame SP videocassettes (3:50:47).
Abstract:	Fire fighter and labor activist Leslie Outerbridge (1936 - 2021) formed the Afro American Firefighters League (AAFL), which helped the United States Justice Department win an anti-discrimination lawsuit against the City of Chicago. Outerbridge was also a founder of the International Association of Black Professional Firefighters. Outerbridge was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on December 9, 2003, in Chicago, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2003_291
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Fireman Leslie Outerbridge risked his life to save others and risked his job for racial justice. Born December 29, 1936 in Chicago, Outerbridge grew up in the Cabrini Green projects. His father, a former cricket champion from Bermuda, taught him about fair play. Outerbridge was a good student at Jenner School and entered Wells High School early at age twelve. Dropping out at age fifteen, he joined the Air Force in 1953. There, he played on the installations' basketball, football and baseball teams. After his discharge, Outerbridge drove a taxi, until his father's friend, Robert Thompson, a black firefighter, "sponsored" him for the Chicago Fire Department (CFD). Outerbridge passed the written exam, but "failed" his first physical. Later, Outerbridge found that his father's donation of \$300 ensured that he "passed" the second time around in 1961. Outerbridge later returned to school, earning a B.S. from Chicago State University in 1981.

In 1968, Outerbridge, along with Jim Winbush and Wesley Thompson and backed by the NAACP, Operation PUSH, and the Chicago Urban League, with inspiration from Father George Clements, Anderson Thompson, and legal assistance from Attorney Kermit Coleman, formed the Afro American Firefighters League (AAFL). The AAFL completed a study in 1973 that detailed the Chicago Fire Department's record of racial discrimination in hiring and promotional practices. The United States Justice Department filed a lawsuit against the City of Chicago that same year. Mayor Daley signed the court ordered "consent decree" in 1977, which resulted in increasing the number of black firefighters from 125 to 400 by 1979. Now, the number is over 1,000. Forced to fight a relentless paper war with unhappy CFD brass, Outerbridge discovered that paperwork was their weakness. For thirty-seven years he performed his duties and retired in 1995. Outerbridge was also a founder of the International Association of Black Professional Firefighters in 1969.

A talented photographer and part time model, Outerbridge has researched the history of African Americans, the CFD and the great Chicago fires – a history that goes back to 1873 when Willie Watkins was the first black

firefighter. Outerbridge lives in Chicago's West Chesterfield neighborhood with his wife, Annie.

Outerbridge passed away on September 17, 2020.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Leslie Outerbridge was conducted by Larry Crowe on December 9, 2003, in Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on 8 Betacame SP videocassettes. Fire fighter and labor activist Leslie Outerbridge (1936 - 2021) formed the Afro American Firefighters League (AAFL), which helped the United States Justice Department win an anti-discrimination lawsuit against the City of Chicago. Outerbridge was also a founder of the International Association of Black Professional Firefighters.

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:

Outerbridge, Leslie, 1936-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Outerbridge, Leslie, 1936- --Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Fire Fighter

Labor Activist

HistoryMakers® Category:

CivicMakers

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 Leslie Outerbridge, December 9, 2003. 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 Leslie Outerbridge, Section A2003_291_001_001, TRT: 0:29:40
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Leslie Outerbridge was born on December 29, 1936 in Chicago, Illinois. His mother, Lillie Taylor Outerbridge, was born in 1913 in Louisville, Kentucky. Her father made a living as a contractor. Outerbridge's father, Alexander Outerbridge, was born in 1913 in New York City. Outerbridge's paternal grandparents were natives of Bermuda. His paternal grandmother migrated alone to New York in the 1910s. His paternal grandfather was a renowned cricket player in England, known as "Freddy Hundreds" for the number of runs he could score. Outerbridge was raised in Cabrini-Green Homes on Chicago's Near North Side. His family was the second to move into the homes in 1940. As a child, he enjoyed playing sports and wanted to be a professional baseball player. He remembers being beaten up over a game of marbles. His father was a scout master at the Wayman A.M.E. Church and mentored HistoryMaker Congressman Bobby Rush. Outerbridge attended Edward Jenner Elementary School.

Video Oral History Interview with Leslie Outerbridge, Section A2003_291_001_002, TRT: 0:29:20
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Leslie Outerbridge's parents, Alexander and Lillie Taylor Outerbridge, were married in 1930. Outerbridge describes how they met. Outerbridge takes after both his parents. His father, worked for the Hobart Manufacturing Company and was district president of the Chicago A.M.E. Laymen League. Outerbridge recalls the family discussions about history as well as Edward Jenner Elementary School in Chicago, Illinois, including an incident with a classmate who had a crush on him. He skipped two grade levels and entered William H. Wells High School at twelve years old. There he joined the drum and bugle corps and JROTC. Outerbridge had a difficult time adjusting, however, because of young his age. He dropped out of William H. Wells High School at the age of fifteen and shined shoes in a local barbershop. Outerbridge joined the U.S. Air Force when he was seventeen years old and was assigned to the Youngstown-Warren Air Force Base in Ohio.

Video Oral History Interview with Leslie Outerbridge, Section A2003_291_001_003, TRT: 0:29:50
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Leslie Outerbridge talks about his experience on the U.S. Air Force Base in Youngstown, Ohio where he was invited to sing in neighboring cities and on television. He also was bailed out of jail by his lieutenant colonel. Outerbridge met his wife at a United States Organizations (USO) dance and left the Air Force in 1957. After his discharge he returned to Chicago, Illinois, alone; got a job in March of 1958 driving taxis and sent for his wife and child in Ohio. He talks about some of his passengers and celebrity clients. Outerbridge then talks about the history of African Americans in the Chicago Fire Department starting with the Great Chicago Fire of 1871 and the Black Chicago Fire in 1874. The Chicago Fire Department's first black employee was hired in 1873 as a stoker. Engine 21 was Chicago's first black fire company. Chicago's first black fire officer was promoted to the first black lieutenant and captain in 1922. After World War II, the number of black firefighters increased.

Video Oral History Interview with Leslie Outerbridge, Section A2003_291_001_004, TRT: 0:30:00
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Leslie Outerbridge describes the history of firefighting in Chicago, Illinois. In 1871, the Chicago Fire devastated the city's white and immigrant communities to the east and north of the Chicago River. The black community remained intact. However, the second Chicago Fire in 1874 destroyed the black

community and forced displaced Black residents to migrate further south to what became known as the Black Belt. The first black fire company moved to 34th and S. Rhodes Avenue. As the black community grew, more Black firefighters were hired to support the community. Outerbridge was hired by the Chicago Fire Department in April of 1961. He joined an all-black company at 34th and S Calumet Avenue. Outerbridge describes the segregation within the firefighter academy and discrimination within the department. Fire companies did not desegregate until 1965 when a black woman was killed by an unmanned hook and ladder truck. Overnight, Outerbridge was transferred to integrate a white firehouse on the North Side of Chicago.

Video Oral History Interview with Leslie Outerbridge, Section A2003_291_001_005, TRT: 0:30:00
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Leslie Outerbridge describes the incident that provoked the Chicago Fire Department to integrate in 1965, in what was called "overnight integration." A black woman was killed by a white fire company's unmanned hook and ladder truck on Chicago's West Side. Her death triggered tension between black residents and white firefighters. Residents wanted to see black firefighters in their neighborhoods. Outerbridge describes the mistreatment and discrimination black firefighters experienced post-integration. Outerbridge was the only black firefighter on his shift at a North Side Chicago firehouse. He describes working to help create the African American Firefighters League in 1967, and their study on the quality of equipment black fire companies were given. Outerbridge remembers challenging the chief at his firehouse, Chief Harper. Outerbridge was the only African American on the Chicago Fire Department baseball team in 1968 and remembers the racial tension experienced when playing in other cities.

Video Oral History Interview with Leslie Outerbridge, Section A2003_291_001_006, TRT: 0:25:54
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Leslie Outerbridge talks about how the International Association of Black Professional Firefighters (IABPFF) was created in 1969 when the existing International Association of Firefighters (IAFF) were not accepting of African American members. The IABPFF met for the first time in October of 1969 as a way of uniting black firefighters nationally. However, the president of the International Association of Firefighters had been invited to speak. Outerbridge expressed his disapproval, and boycotted the IABPFF for ten years. He returned in 1980, and was elected regional director of the association in 1983. Outerbridge describes the Chicago firefighters pre-training program and his petition to have the IABPFF appear at the National Fire Conference. He talks about challenging the Chicago Fire Commissioner Louis T. Galanti and Assistant Fire Commissioner and filing an employment discrimination lawsuit against the City of Chicago and the resistance of Mayor Richard J. Daley.

Video Oral History Interview with Leslie Outerbridge, Section A2003_291_001_007, TRT: 0:29:00
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Leslie Outerbridge personally opposed the 1980 Chicago firefighters strike which had begun because Chicago Mayor Jane Byrne, who was elected Mayor of Chicago in 1979, had failed to deliver a fireman's union contract with the City of Chicago that she had promised in exchange for the union's support of her candidacy. The strike began on February 14, 1980 and Outerbridge relocated to a firehouse at 40th and Dearborn for the duration of the strike. When the strike began, Outerbridge was president of the African American Firefighters League. However, he resigned as president when the League refused to take a unified position on the strike. Outerbridge describes the outcome of the Chicago Firefighters strike of 1980 and how Appendix G and affirmative action hiring

policies were added, the role of HistoryMaker Reverend Jesse Jackson, Sr. and how Outerbridge was able to effectively challenge the Chicago Fire Department.

Video Oral History Interview with Leslie Outerbridge, Section A2003_291_001_008, TRT: 0:27:03
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Leslie Outerbridge describes his hopes for the African American community. He considers his legacy, and talks about state of the relations between Chicago's black communities and firemen. He also talks about what he would have done differently and how he would like to be remembered. He ends by narrating his photographs.