

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Dr. James Comer

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Comer, James P.
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Dr. James Comer,
Dates:	August 18, 2004
Bulk Dates:	2004
Physical Description:	6 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:51:44).
Abstract:	Child psychiatry professor and child psychiatrist Dr. James Comer (1934 -) was the developer of the Comer Process, a system of education that focused on child development in inner-city schools. Comer also founded the Comer School Development Program to promote the usage of his process in schools across the nation. In addition to his work in research and program development, Comer served as the Maurice Falk Professor of Child Psychiatry at the Yale School of Medicine for over thirty years. Comer was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on August 18, 2004, in Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2004_132
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Dr. James P. Comer, founder and chairman of the School Development Program at the Yale University School of Medicine's Child Study Center, was born on September 25, 1934, in East Chicago, Indiana. After earning his A.B. degree from Indiana University, Comer went on to earn his M.D. from Howard University College of Medicine in 1960, and his M.P.H. from the University of Michigan School of Public Health in 1964.

After completing his M.P.H., Comer completed his training at the Yale School of Medicine, the Yale Child Study Center, and the Hillcrest Children's Center in Washington, D.C. Comer was also enlisted in the military, completing his service in 1968 at the rank of Surgeon, Lt. Colonel, in the United States Public Health Service.

After 1976, Comer became the Maurice Falk Professor of Child Psychiatry at the Yale School of Medicine; in this role, he developed the Comer Process, which was a system of education that focused on child development in inner-city schools. Comer's process has been utilized in more than six hundred schools in eighty-two school districts across twenty-six states. In 1968, Comer founded the Comer School Development Program to promote the usage of his process in schools across the nation; to achieve this aim, an emphasis was placed on collaboration between parents, teachers, and the surrounding community to improve the lives of young students and, in turn, their prospects for succeeding on the path to higher education.

In addition to lecturing and consulting widely across the United States at colleges and universities, medical schools, scientific associations, and public school districts, Comer lectured, observed, and discussed child care, school conditions, and reform around the world, in places such as London, Paris, Tokyo, Dakar, Senegal, and

Sydney.

A prolific writer, Comer has authored ten books, including: *Beyond Black and White* (1972); *Black Child Care* (with Dr. Alvin Poussaint, 1975); *Raising Black Children* (1992); *School Power: Implications of an Intervention Project* (1980); and most recently, *Leave No Child Behind: Preparing Today's Youth for Tomorrow's World* (2004). Between 1978 and 1994, Comer wrote more than one hundred and fifty articles for *Parent's Magazine* and more than three hundred syndicated articles on children's health and development and race relations.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Dr. James Comer was conducted by Robert Hayden on August 18, 2004, in Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts, and was recorded on 6 Betacame SP videocassettes. Child psychiatry professor and child psychiatrist Dr. James Comer (1934 -) was the developer of the Comer Process, a system of education that focused on child development in inner-city schools. Comer also founded the Comer School Development Program to promote the usage of his process in schools across the nation. In addition to his work in research and program development, Comer served as the Maurice Falk Professor of Child Psychiatry at the Yale School of Medicine for over thirty years.

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:

Comer, James P.

Hayden, Robert (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews
Comer, James P.--Interviews

Universities and colleges--Faculty--Interviews

African American educators--Interviews

Youth workers--Interviews

African American psychiatrists--Interviews

Child psychiatrists--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Yale University. School of Medicine

Occupations:

Child Psychiatry Professor

Child Psychiatrist

HistoryMakers® Category:

EducationMakers|MedicalMakers

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 Dr. James Comer, August 18, 2004. 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 Dr. James Comer, Section A2004_132_001_001, TRT: 0:30:16
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Dr. James Comer was born on September 25, 1934 in East Chicago, Indiana. His mother, Maggie Nichols Comer, was born in 1904 in Woodland, Mississippi. Her father was killed by lightning during her childhood and her mother remarried a cruel man. She moved to East Chicago with the hope of pursuing education, but was unable to do so; instead, she worked as a domestic. Comer's father, Hugh Comer, was born in 1892 in Comer, Alabama. Comer's paternal grandfather was a minister and his great grandfather had been enslaved on the Comer family plantation. Comer's father worked in the steel mills and was very respectful of everyone but also very tough; he died when Comer was twenty years old. Both of Comer's parents emphasized education, created opportunities for their children and provided support for them to face discrimination. Comer's family was active in Zion Baptist Church. He recalls the importance of spirituals and the closeness of Sunday morning breakfasts. He still attends church occasionally.

Universities and colleges--Faculty--Interviews.

African American educators--Interviews.

Youth workers--Interviews.

African American psychiatrists--Interviews.

Child psychiatrists--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with Dr. James Comer, Section A2004_132_001_002, TRT: 0:31:00
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Dr. James Comer became interested in a medical career as a young child. His parents encouraged this dream, bought him a toy doctor's kit and chastised a neighbor who tried to discourage his goal. His family was very loving and, like many others in his East Chicago, Indiana neighborhood, poor. The racially mixed neighborhood taught him that poverty was not limited to African Americans; witnessing success stories in his community instilled confidence in his identity. Playing football with a young girl taught him about gender equality and he learned a lesson about treating children equitably during an Easter Sunday service at Zion Baptist Church. Comer attended the ethnically and

socioeconomically diverse George Washington Elementary School where he had supportive teachers but also encountered racism from a classmate's parent. At the age of twelve, his job helping a fruit seller taught him about the use of dissent and distraction to maintain power. Comer recalls how his parents met and lists his siblings.

Video Oral History Interview with Dr. James Comer, Section A2004_132_001_003, TRT: 0:31:11
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Dr. James Comer attended Washington High School in East Chicago, Indiana. Academic tracking functioned as a means to keep many black students in lower-level classes but Comer continued to excel academically. He enjoyed science and was encouraged by many teachers but also had a teacher who discriminated against him until he showed her evidence of her prejudice. Comer was president of the student body and active in many sports and extracurricular activities. At Indiana University in Bloomington, Indiana, he encountered segregation for the first time, wrestled with understanding race and poverty and overcame self-doubt. The support he received from his Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity helped him persevere. His father died his junior year of college without seeing him enter medical school. Comer attended Howard University College of Medicine in Washington, D.C. At Howard, he benefitted from the community of a historically black university. During this time, he had limited involvement with the Civil Rights Movement.

Video Oral History Interview with Dr. James Comer, Section A2004_132_001_004, TRT: 0:31:08
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Dr. James Comer describes his professors at Howard University College of Medicine. He interned at St. Catherine Hospital in his hometown of East Chicago, Indiana and changed his focus to psychiatry upon witnessing the psychological impacts of poverty and marginalization. Comer worked for the U.S. Public Health Service in Washington, D.C. for his military service. He volunteered at Hospitality House where he saw the educational system's lack of support for poor children. This motivated Comer to enter the School of Public Health at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor with the goal of influencing policy. From 1964 to 1967, he completed his residency at Yale School of Medicine in New Haven, Connecticut then returned to the Public Health Service to work at Hillcrest Children's Center. In 1968, he led the school program for the Yale Child Study Center. His work at the worst elementary schools in New Haven, Simeon Baldwin and Martin Luther King, Jr., led to the creation of the Comer School Development Program.

Video Oral History Interview with Dr. James Comer, Section A2004_132_001_005, TRT: 0:30:25
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Dr. James Comer developed the Comer School Development Program, which focuses on involving and building consensus among adults involved in education to foster child development, based on his work at elementary schools in New Haven, Connecticut. His program expanded nationally and helped many schools achieve excellence and close performance gaps. Comer estimates that about two thirds of the schools adopting this model excelled or saw improvements. Despite the program's success, there is still resistance to his developmental approach to education. Comer published 'Maggie's American Dream: The Life and Times of a Black Family' in 1988 about his mother's life and the lessons about child development he learned from her. His 2004 publication, 'Leave No Child Behind: Preparing Today's Youth for Tomorrow's World,' was inspired by the work of HistoryMaker Marian Edelman Wright's Children's Defense Fund. Comer explains the breakdown of community in

American society following WWII and reflects upon his life.

Video Oral History Interview with Dr. James Comer, Section A2004_132_001_006, TRT: 0:17:44
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Dr. James Comer explains why his 1997 publication, ‘Waiting for a Miracle: Why Schools Can’t Solve Our Problems--and How We Can,’ is his favorite book he has written. That book was not as well-received as some of his others, which made him decide adopting a more solution-oriented approach would be more palatable while still allowing him to address issues of social responsibility. Comer describes how he wants to be remembered, reflects upon his legacy and narrates his photographs.