

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with T'Keyah Crystal Keymah

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Keymah, T'Keyan
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with T'Keyah Crystal Keymah,
Dates:	February 23, 2005, November 17, 2004 and October 6, 2004
Bulk Dates:	2004 and 2005
Physical Description:	13 Betacame SP videocassettes (5:57:03).
Abstract:	Actress T'Keyah Crystal Keymah (1962 -) has enjoyed a long career in film and television. Keymah's credits include appearances in <i>In Living Color</i> , <i>The Show</i> , <i>Cosby</i> , <i>The Commish</i> , <i>Pinky and the Brain</i> , <i>That's So Raven</i> , and the films <i>Jackie Brown</i> and <i>The Gilded Six Bit</i> . Keymah was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on February 23, 2005, November 17, 2004 and October 6, 2004, in Burbank, California, Chicago, Illinois and Glendale, California. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2004_194
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Actress T'Keyah Crystal Keymah was born in Chicago, Illinois, on October 13, 1962. By the age of three, Keymah was singing and dancing, and in high school she joined the Mary Wong Comedy Group. After high school, Keymah attended Florida A & M University's School of Business and Industry.

While attending Florida A & M, Keymah began teaching theater, dance, and pantomime. Upon graduation, she returned to her native Chicago, where she worked as a substitute teacher while performing at some of the city's most renowned theaters, including ETA and the Goodman. Keymah first broke onto the television scene with a role on *Quantum Leap* in 1989; the following year, she joined the cast of *In Living Color*. During Keymah's five years with *In Living Color*, she was nominated for an NAACP Image Award and a Soul Train Comedy Award. Over the next several years, Keymah was a cast member in a number of other television shows, including *On Our Own*, *Waynehead*, *The Show*, and, most notably, as Bill Cosby's daughter on *Cosby*. Keymah also had roles on *Roc*, *The Commish*, and *The John Larroquette Show*, as well as doing voice-over work on *Batman Beyond* and *Pinky and the Brain*. Keymah also made several movie appearances, including *Jackie Brown* and *The Gilded Six Bit*.

Keymah went on to do a variety show, T'Keyah Live!...Mostly: A True Variety Show, which received rave reviews; she also appeared on the Disney Channel's highly rated program, *That's So Raven*. Keymah produced the acclaimed short film *Circle of Pain* and was the executive producer of *One Last Time*.

In addition to her acting and producing, Keymah is the author of *Natural Woman / Natural Hair: Hairstyles and Hairstories From the Front*; she also co-hosted the national ACT-SO awards, and the Orange and Aloha Bowl parades. Keymah's alma mater, Florida A & M, has given her their second highest honor, the Meritorious Award; she is also listed among their 100 most influential FAMUans of the Century.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with T'Keyah Crystal Keymah was conducted by Larry Crowe on February 23, 2005, November 17, 2004 and October 6, 2004, in Burbank, California, Chicago, Illinois and Glendale, California, and was recorded on 13 Betacame SP videocassettes. Actress T'Keyah Crystal Keymah (1962 -) has enjoyed a long career in film and television. Keymah's credits include appearances in *In Living Color*, *The Show*, *Cosby*, *The Commish*, *Pinky and the Brain*, *That's So Raven*, and the films *Jackie Brown* and *The Gilded Six Bit*.

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:

Keymah, T'Kenyan

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Parker, Iris Dawn (Videographer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Keymah, T'Kenyan--Interviews

African American actresses--Interviews

African American television personalities--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Actress

HistoryMakers® Category:

EntertainmentMakers

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 T'Keyah Crystal Keymah, February 23, 2005, November 17, 2004 and October 6, 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 T'Keyah Crystal Keymah, Section A2004_194_001_001, TRT: 0:30:49 ?

T'Keyah Crystal Keymah was born Crystal Walker on October 13, 1962 to Arlene Carter and William Walker, Sr. Her mother, who was educated as a teacher at Chicago State University in Chicago, Illinois, died when Keymah was two years old. Keymah was raised by her maternal grandparents, Mary Louis Zeno and Carneil Carter. Her maternal great-great-grandmother was a slave who worked as a cook after emancipation. Keymah's great-grandparents, Arista and Mintha Zeno were well-to-do Creoles who were forced out of Louisiana by the Ku Klux Klan. In 1919, they settled in Chicago, Illinois during the Chicago riots and disowned their Creole roots. Arista became a stockyard worker and money lender, and Mintha worked as a domestic and seamstress. In 1986, Keymah changed her name from Crystal Walker to T'Keyah Crystal Keymah to sever any connection with her ancestors' slave masters. Her names, which are of Hebrew origin and symbolic of resurrection, were inspired by Ben Ammi's book "God, the Black Man, and Truth."

African American actresses--Interviews.

African American television personalities--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with T'Keyah Crystal Keymah, Section A2004_194_001_002, TRT: 0:30:20 ?

T'Keyah Crystal Keymah was raised by her maternal grandparents, Mary Louise Zeno and Carneil Carter, after her mother's death. Her grandfather was an accountant and also an insurance salesman at Metropolitan Insurance. Keymah's grandmother worked in sales until she was hired as a caseworker by the Illinois Department of Public Aid. Keymah's father, William Walker, Sr., an Illinois State Trooper, was born in Springfield, Illinois and was of Cherokee or Seminole Indian descent. Keymah's paternal ancestors owned Walker farm in Springfield, a safe house in the Underground Railroad. Keymah and her father had an estranged relationship. She shares her earliest childhood memories as well as the sights, sounds, and smells of her childhood in Auburn Gresham, one of many segregated neighborhoods in Chicago, Illinois where she attended St. Sabina Academy. Keymah recalls her childhood personality and the love of drama she developed the summer before entering Academy of Our Lady High School in 1980.

Video Oral History Interview with T'Keyah Crystal Keymah, Section A2004_194_001_003, TRT: 0:14:23 ?

T'Keyah Crystal Keymah credits her ease with the elderly to her close relationships with her grandparents and their friends who all played an influential role in her life. Keymah also benefitted from the instruction of many great teachers including her kindergarten teacher who introduced her to art; her elementary music teacher who taught her composition; and her third grade teacher who encouraged Keymah to write her first play. As a young girl, Keymah enjoyed watching TV programs like "Mary Poppins," "Cleopatra," and the "Bill Cosby Show," and remembers beautiful black actresses like Lola Falana and HistoryMaker Diahann Carroll. She joined the mime troupe as a high school student at the Academy of Our Lady in Chicago, Illinois, which she credits for shaping her future as a performer. Although Keymah's family was not politically active, she remembers the reverence her grandparents and their peers held for Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Video Oral History Interview with T'Keyah Crystal Keymah, Section A2004_194_002_004, TRT:

0:29:40 ?

T'Keyah Crystal Keymah attended St. Sabina Academy in Chicago, Illinois before enrolling at Academy of Our Lady High School in Chicago where she graduated in 1980. Academy of Our Lady was a predominately black all-girls high school operated by older white nuns. As a youth, Keymah found various performance outlets for her talents, not only with her family, but also as a cheerleader, in choir, and participating in a mime troupe. She commuted to school using public transportation. Although she had good grades, she did not work hard academically. Instead she enjoyed the attention she received from her peers after performing in her first talent show and discovered her affinity for improv during a production of "Godspell."

Video Oral History Interview with T'Keyah Crystal Keymah, Section A2004_194_002_005, TRT: 0:29:30 ?

T'Keyah Crystal Keymah documented her family tree for the history fair as a student at the Academy of Our Lady High School in Chicago, Illinois. As a youth, she challenged and then disowned the Catholic faith. After reading Toni Morrison's "Song of Solomon," Keymah started to identify strongly with her black heritage. She founded a club named Rafiki, the Kiswahili counterpart for her grandmother's club Les Ritz a Fin and her mother's club, Les Chers Amis. Keymah also ran unsuccessfully for senior class president. Her theater focus in high school brought her into contact with memorable performers at Academy of Our Lady like Cathy Williams who danced with the Najwa Junior Dance Corps and played the role of Jesus in a statewide production of "Jesus Christ Superstar." Keymah graduated from high school in 1980 and attended Florida A&M University in Tallahassee, Florida. At a recruiter's suggestion, Keymah majored in business to satisfy her grandmother. However, she knew that she also wanted to become an actress.

Video Oral History Interview with T'Keyah Crystal Keymah, Section A2004_194_002_006, TRT: 0:29:00 ?

T'Keyah Crystal Keymah recalls choosing Florida A&M University (FAMU) in Tallahassee, Florida over the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign for its beaches and palm trees. However, her first impressions upon arriving at FAMU were far removed from her expectations. Nonetheless, Keymah made good friends, participated in the freshman talent show, joined the university's dance company, and also co-founded a dance theater group with her friends in which she was an understudy for the role of Dorothy in "The Wiz." Initially a business major, Keymah switched over to theater after her freshman year. FAMU's struggling theater program was headed by Dr. Ronald Davis and Keymah created a box office system for the theater. She was also cast in a different production of "The Wiz" as well as "Moon on a Rainbow Shawl." Keymah also remembers her exposure to black shows like "Your Arms Are Too Short to Box With God" in high school and her rejection of the category of "black theater."

Video Oral History Interview with T'Keyah Crystal Keymah, Section A2004_194_002_007, TRT: 0:30:50 ?

T'Keyah Crystal Keymah reflects upon the impact of reading Ntozake Shange's "For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide" as a high school student. At Florida A&M University in Tallahassee, Florida, her favorite instructor was Dr. Theodore Hemingway. During her senior year, Keymah, took several courses at Florida State University in Tallahassee. She also won the National Miss Black and Gold Pageant in 1984 using a routine of singing impressions. After graduation, Keymah returned to Chicago, Illinois in search of an acting job. Encouraged by a fraternity brother, she competed in the Miss Black America

Pageant and became Miss Black Illinois in 1985, learning a great deal about the world of competitive pageants. Her pageant sponsor helped Keymah secure an audition and a role in the eta's production of "The Regal Theater," kicking off her theatrical career in Chicago. She then joined the Najwa Dance Corps, performed in "A Christmas Carol" at the Goodman Theatre, and received her Screen Actors Guild (SAG) card.

Video Oral History Interview with T'Keyah Crystal Keymah, Section A2004_194_002_008, TRT: 0:29:31 ?

T'Keyah Crystal Keymah received her Screen Actors Guild (SAG) card while working as a stunt double on the film "Big Shots." Her television career began after she was cast by Robi Reed for Keenan Ivory Wayans' "In Living Color." Keymah traces her television career from "In Living Color" to "On Our Own," "The Show," "Cosby," and finally, "That's So Raven." Keymah is well-known for "In Black World," her signature sketch on "In Living Color" which addressed inequity from the perspective of a little girl. She recalls the strain of making sure the show was "palatable" for network TV as well as other challenges on the set of "In Living Color" like fighting for writing credit and for her name change to appear. While filming "In Living Color", she remained active in the theater world since she was not actively cast in the show. During this time, she completed her play "Some of My Best Friends" which highlighted the voices of people neglected by society like poets, teenage black boys, and elders.

Video Oral History Interview with T'Keyah Crystal Keymah, Section A2004_194_002_009, TRT: 0:31:17 ?

As a young child, T'Keyah Crystal Keymah discovered the joy of writing which helped later to provide her a creative outlet in the "rough and tumble" world of television. Out of her frustration was born the play "Some of My Best Friends," which highlights the voices of people overlooked in society. Keymah recalls lessons she learned from producing her first film, "One Last Time" as well as racism she encountered in the entertainment industry including the production of Showtime's "Circle of Pain." Keymah talks about her bit part in Rusty Cundieff's horror film "Tales from the Hood." As an actress, she had reoccurring parts in various shows including "In Living Color," "The Show," and "Cosby." Keymah has fond memories of her experience on the "Cosby" show during the years of 1996 to 2000, where she played one of the daughters of the Bill Cosby and Phylicia Rashad. She ends this section of the interview reflecting upon her development as a performer and her experiences performing abroad in Senegal and Russia.

Video Oral History Interview with T'Keyah Crystal Keymah, Section A2004_194_003_010, TRT: 0:28:35 ?

T'Keyah Crystal Keymah describes her grandparents' encounters with historic figures like the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Joe Louis. Her favorite show was "On Our Own", but her most fun show was "Roc". In the early 1990s, Keymah had the opportunity to perform in a production of the play "The Old Settler" in Moscow and Shchyolkovo, Russia as part of a partnership between the Moscow Ministry of Culture and the Eugene O'Neill Playwriting Center. CCH Pounder, Jeffrey Sams, and HistoryMaker Lorraine Toussaint were also in the play. Then from 1996 to 2000, Keymah played the role of Erica Lucas on the "Cosby" show. While she thought her role was underdeveloped, she enjoyed the experience anyway and talks about the show's popularity and the popularity of Bill Cosby. After "Cosby" ended, Keymah returned to theater in a Chicago production of "A Raisin in the Sun", only to learn that her maternal

grandmother, who raised her, was in failing health and in need of a caretaker.

Video Oral History Interview with T'Keyah Crystal Keymah, Section A2004_194_003_011, TRT: 0:28:25 ?

T'Keyah Crystal Keymah talks about returning to Chicago, Illinois in 2000 at the end of the "Cosby" show and acting in a Chicago production of "A Raisin in the Sun" at the Goodman Theatre. Upon her return to Chicago, Keymah noticed her grandmother's failing health, taking on the role as her caretaker after her grandmother was diagnosed with dementia. At the same time, she was busy with negotiations on her tour, Tkeyah Live! Mostly a True Variety Show" which proved impossible given her grandmother's health and the events surrounding the September 11, 2001 attacks and sponsors subsequently retracting their sponsorships. In 2003, Keymah was hired to play the mother on "That's So Raven" as well as the opportunity to direct an episode. Keymah also describes the factors leading to her departure from "That's So Raven" in 2006 and chronicles incidents of historical racism at Disney.

Video Oral History Interview with T'Keyah Crystal Keymah, Section A2004_194_003_012, TRT: 0:28:25 ?

T'Keyah Crystal Keymah talks about the lack of black writers in the entertainment industry. Throughout the course of her television career, Keymah never saw a black head writer on a show. She continues with a description of the characters she is willing to play. Her interest is in making comedic, dramatic and historical films. In 2003, Keymah published the first edition of her book "Natural Woman/Natural Hair: A Hair Journey." Keymah describes why she wrote the book and its reception. She is also the author of "Some of My Best Friends: A Collection of Characters," a series of published monologues from her stage show of the same name.

Video Oral History Interview with T'Keyah Crystal Keymah, Section A2004_194_003_013, TRT: 0:16:18 ?

T'Keyah Crystal Keymah describes the varied responses she received to her book, "Natural Woman/Natural Hair: A Hair Journey" which was published in 2003. A recent project, "In Black World," expands upon Keymah's signature piece on the show "In Living Color." She also talks about her hopes and concerns for the African American community and what she would do differently in retrospect. Throughout her adult career, Keymah has enjoyed the support of her family members. She reflects upon her legacy and how she would like to be remembered.