

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with The Honorable Diane E. Watson

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Watson, Diane E.
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Diane E. Watson,
Dates:	July 25, 2008, November 26, 2012 and October 5, 2005
Bulk Dates:	2005, 2008 and 2012
Physical Description:	15 Betacame SP videocassettes uncompressed MOV digital video files (7:27:33).
Abstract:	Foreign ambassador and U.S. congresswoman The Honorable Diane E. Watson (1933 -) was the U.S. Ambassador to the Federated States of Micronesia and was a representative to the U.S. Congress from California's 33rd congressional district from 2001 to 2011. Watson was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on July 25, 2008, November 26, 2012 and October 5, 2005, in Los Angeles, California and Washington, District of Columbia. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2005_233
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Former U.S. Congresswoman and foreign ambassador Diane E. Watson was born on November 12, 1933 in Los Angeles, California in a devout religious household. Upon graduating from Dorsey High School (Los Angeles) in the late 1940s, Watson attended Los Angeles City College. She went on to receive her B.A. degree in education from University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) in 1956, and her M.A. degree in school psychology from California State University in 1958. In 1987, Watson earned her Ph.D. in education administration from Claremont Graduate School; and later, completed courses at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University.

Watson began her professional career in 1969 as a psychologist with California State University. Then, from 1971 to 1975, she worked as a health occupation specialist with the Bureau of Industrial Education of the California Department of Education. In 1975, Watson became the first African American woman to serve on the Los Angeles Unified School District Board of Education. There, she worked to expand school integration and make academic standards more rigorous. In 1978, Watson became the first African American woman to be elected to the California State Senate where she played a major role in formulating the state of California's TANF program. Watson also sought funding to help teen mothers complete their education and gain employment through the Cal-Learn program. In 1993, Watson authored the California Birth Defects Monitoring Program Act and the Residential Care Facilities Act. She introduced legislation to improve food health safety requirements for restaurants in 1997, and also played a key role in the enactment of legislation to promote breast cancer research. She served as chair of the Senate Health and Human Services Committee from 1981 to 1998, and also served on the Senate Judiciary Committee.

At the end of her senate term in 1999, President Bill Clinton appointed Watson to serve as the United States Ambassador to the Federated States of Micronesia. Watson continued in the role of U.S. Ambassador until 2001

when she was elected to fill the vacancy of the late U.S. Representative Julian Dixon under a special election. She was re-elected in 2002 and 2004 to serve two consecutive terms, and retired in 2011.

Former U.S. Congresswoman Diane Watson was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on October 5, 2005, July 25, 2008 and November 26, 2012.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with The Honorable Diane E. Watson was conducted by Larry Crowe and Paul Brock on July 25, 2008, November 26, 2012 and October 5, 2005, in Los Angeles, California and Washington, District of Columbia, and was recorded on 15 Betacame SP videocassettes uncompressed MOV digital video files. Foreign ambassador and U.S. congresswoman The Honorable Diane E. Watson (1933 -) was the U.S. Ambassador to the Federated States of Micronesia and was a representative to the U.S. Congress from California's 33rd congressional district from 2001 to 2011.

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:

Watson, Diane E.

Brock, Paul (Interviewer)

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews
Watson, Diane E.--Interviews

African American women civic leaders--Interviews

African American women legislators--California--Interviews

Ambassadors--United States--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

United States. Dept. of State

United States. Congress

Occupations:

Foreign Ambassador

U.S. Congresswoman

HistoryMakers® Category:

PoliticalMakers

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 The Honorable Diane E. Watson, July 25, 2008, November 26, 2012 and October 5, 2005. 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 The Honorable Diane E. Watson, Section A2005_233_001_001, TRT: 0:29:19 ?

The Honorable Diane E. Watson was born on November 12, 1933 in Los Angeles, California to Dorothy O'Neal Watson and William Watson. Her maternal great-grandmother, Mary Smith, was born into slavery on a Mississippi plantation to a slave and her white owner. She eventually escaped and fled to Chicago, Illinois. There, Smith had several daughters, including Watson's grandmother, Belle O'Neal, who was encouraged to pursue her education because she had darker skin than her other sisters. O'Neal became a surgical nurse at Provident Hospital in Chicago, where she assisted Dr. Daniel Hale Williams in heart surgery. She met her first husband, Captain Rabouin, while serving in the Spanish-American War. Due to prejudice in the South, the couple moved to California. When Rabouin disappeared, Belle O'Neal married James O'Neal, Watson's grandfather. They lived briefly in Oklahoma, where James O'Neal founded a benevolent burial society for African Americans. The couple then moved their six children to California.

African American women civic leaders--Interviews.

African American women legislators--California--Interviews.

Ambassadors--United States--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Diane E. Watson, Section A2005_233_001_002, TRT: 0:29:44 ?

The Honorable Diane E. Watson's mother, Dorothy O'Neal Watson, was seven years old when her parents, Belle O'Neal and James O'Neal, moved the family to the Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles, California, where her father started a farm. Shortly after, Watson's grandfather moved to Arizona for respiratory treatments, and her grandmother worked at Los Angeles County + USC Medical Center to support the family. Watson's mother graduated from Compton High School, and helped care for her siblings. Her paternal grandmother, Edith Jacques, was raised at the Order of the Holy Family orphanage in New Orleans, Louisiana. She was a staunch Catholic and a caterer for the du Pont family. Watson's father, William Watson, was born in Kansas City, Kansas, where he worked for the Eblon Theatre. He moved to Los Angeles and trained as a boxer, although he became an elevator operator at Los Angeles City Hall after marrying Watson's mother. Watson was the second of four children born to her parents'

union.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Diane E. Watson, Section A2005_233_001_003, TRT: 0:30:23 ?

The Honorable Diane E. Watson was raised in Los Angeles, California by her mother, Dorothy O'Neal Watson, and father, William Watson, an elevator operator at Los Angeles City Hall. In the 1930s, her father became an officer for the Los Angeles Police Department and was trained by Edward M. Davis, who later served in the California State Senate as a Republican. When Watson was seven years old, her parents divorced. Her father remarried, and moved to the West Adams neighborhood, where his neighbors included Maggie Hathaway, Eddie "Rochester" Anderson and the Nicholas Brothers. Watson attended Holy Name of Jesus Church with her mother and her grandmother, Belle O'Neal. She began her education at Hooper Avenue Elementary School, and then moved to 36th Street School. Watson recalls her later service in the California State Senate, where she befriended Davis and supported David Roberti in his bid to become the senate's president pro tempore.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Diane E. Watson, Section A2005_233_001_004, TRT: 0:30:37 ?

The Honorable Diane E. Watson and her family attended Catholic mass each Sunday in Los Angeles, California. At 36th Street School, she and her classmates repeated the fourth grade after her teacher left and a permanent replacement was never found. Nevertheless, Watson's sixth grade teacher, Birdielee V. Bright, inspired her to succeed, and stressed the importance of good grooming and proper diction. Watson was schoolmates with Yvonne Braithwaite Burke, who she later learned was a distant relative. She attended James A. Foshay Junior High School in Los Angeles, where she studied diligently to be placed in her correct grade. In her spare time, she read the newspaper and frequented museums with her maternal grandmother, Belle O'Neal. She remembers the concluding events of World War II like President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's death and the atomic bomb. At Susan Miller Dorsey High School, Watson was encouraged by her counselor to first attend the Los Angeles City College, where the tuition was affordable.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Diane E. Watson, Section A2005_233_002_005, TRT: 0:28:50 ?

The Honorable Diane E. Watson attended the Los Angeles City College for two years, and transferred to the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) in 1954. She chose UCLA over her other options for its affordability, and because many of her relatives, including her great aunt Pauline Slater, were alumni. As one of a few dozen black students, Watson lived at the multicultural Stevens House, joined Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority and befriended Rafer Johnson, Willard Johnson and Vivian R. Johnson. Watson graduated in 1956, and was the second black teacher to be hired at Coeur D'Alene Avenue School in Venice, California. In 1960, she volunteered to teach abroad with the U.S Department of the Army, and was sent to Okinawa, Japan, where she taught the future Donna Brown Guillaume. She recalls the locals' strange reactions to her height and skin tone. Watson also travelled to France in 1962, and visited other African Americans teachers working in Germany. In 1963, she returned home to care for ill family members.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Diane E. Watson, Section A2005_233_002_006, TRT: 0:30:20 ?

The Honorable Diane E. Watson taught at Selma Avenue Elementary School in Hollywood, Los Angeles, California in 1963. To teach her class about the legal

system, she established a student-run courtroom to address classroom offenses. During her time as a teacher and assistant to the school's principal, Watson encountered one mother who had a dartboard painted on her face and another father dressed in drag and went by the name Aunt Sweet Thing. Watson recalls her camaraderie with fellow teachers Les Usume and Sally Cole, and an affair that involved her school principal and the Parent Teacher Association president. In 1969, Watson earned her master's degree at California State University, Los Angeles, and later joined the Child Welfare and Attendance Unit as a school psychologist. She served on the Los Angeles Unified School District Board of Education, alongside Kathleen Brown-Rice, when the district was integrated by a court order in 1975.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Diane E. Watson, Section A2005_233_002_007, TRT: 0:28:52 ?

The Honorable Diane E. Watson recalls the Los Angeles Watts riots in 1965, and the experiences of her father, William Watson, as an officer for the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD). In 1966, LAPD officers killed Leonard Deadwyler during a traffic stop. After the officers in question were not charged for the offense, Watson's college classmate, Johnnie Cochran, filed a civil suit on behalf of Deadwyler's widow. Watson worked as a counselor in the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) in the late 1960s, and encouraged teachers to give students from a difficult home environment additional attention. In 1972, Watson ran for the LAUSD Board of Education with support from the local community leaders. Her friend Tom Stewart, who was an education commissioner in Los Angeles, served as her campaign manager. Due to his investigation into drug trafficking in schools, Stewart received death threats, and was murdered one night while driving home from a fundraiser.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Diane E. Watson, Section A2005_233_002_008, TRT: 0:30:20 ?

The Honorable Diane E. Watson lost her first race for the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) Board of Education in 1972, but was elected to the post in 1975, with support of the NAACP, SCLC, labor unions, and the wealthy residents of Los Angeles' Westside. Once on the board, Watson was obligated to visit each school in the district once a year; and when she visited a school in the San Fernando Valley of California, she was threatened by the Ku Klux Klan. She feuded with Bobbi Fiedler, a LAUSD school board member who founded Bus Stop, a group that opposed plans to integrate schools through forced busing. Watson later partnered with Fiedler to ease tensions at a district school where a student was killed on the first day of the busing initiative. Watson talks about the influx of Latino students during her time on the LAUSD board. After her election to the California State Senate, she befriended Republican senator Edward M. Davis, who was a former police chief of the Los Angeles Police Department.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Diane E. Watson, Section A2005_233_003_009, TRT: 9:29:12 ?

The Honorable Diane E. Watson was selected by President Bill Clinton to serve as ambassador to the Federated States of Micronesia in 1999. Initially, she traveled to Micronesia with her family, but eventually they returned to the United States, and Watson lived there alone. Her duties as ambassador included coordinating with nearby bases for the U.S. Air Force and the U.S. Coast Guard, and fighting illegal attempts by Chinese nationals to obtain visas into the United States from Micronesia. At this point in the interview, she talks about the customs of the Micronesian people, including their traditional dress and diet.

Watson also recalls seeing ancient artifacts and buildings while traveling to Egypt, Okinawa and Micronesia. After the death of U.S. Congressman Julian C. Dixon in 2000, Watson returned to California in 2001 to participate in a special election to replace Dixon as the representative from California's 32nd congressional district. She won the seat with over 80 percent of the vote.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Diane E. Watson, Section A2005_233_003_010, TRT: 10:28:34 ?

The Honorable Diane E. Watson was elected to the Los Angeles Unified School District board in 1975 after her unsuccessful campaign in 1972. She belonged to the New Frontier Democratic Club in California, which included U.S. Congressmen Julian C. Dixon, Nate Holden and Mervyn M. Dymally. During the 2000 U.S. presidential election between Al Gore and George Walker Bush, the U.S. Supreme Court made the controversial decision to stop the recount of voter ballots in Florida, and Bush was declared the president. Watson and other African American Congresswomen like Maxine Waters contested the result to no avail. After Dixon's death, Watson was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives in 2001. She served in Congress for the remainder of President Bush's term. After the death of her mother, Dorothy O'Neal Watson, in 2011, Watson retired from the U.S. Congress, and was succeeded by U.S. Congresswoman Karen Bass. Watson reflects upon the legacies of Yvonne Brathwaite Burke and Shirley Chisholm.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Diane E. Watson, Section A2005_233_003_011, TRT: 11:30:38 ?

The Honorable Diane E. Watson often disagreed with President George W. Bush's policies, particularly about the Middle East, and the efforts to improve the status of women and minorities. She was in a meeting at the U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C. on September 11, 2001, when she was escorted to the U.S. Capitol Police headquarters after reports of planes striking New York City's World Trade Center. After the attack, the Bush administration worked to tighten border security. Watson voted against the Authorization for Use of Military Force Against Iraq Resolution of 2002, and recalls the Bush administration's failures to find weapons of mass destruction and to suppress the subsequent insurgency during the Iraq War. She served on the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, and on subcommittees on Africa, Asia, the Pacific Islands, and global health, where her responsibilities included advocating for democratic elections in developing countries and improving health access.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Diane E. Watson, Section A2005_233_003_012, TRT: 12:30:10 ?

The Honorable Diane E. Watson chaired the Health and Human Services Committee in the California State Senate during the 1980s AIDS crisis, and implemented a policy of providing treatment while preserving patient privacy. After she was elected to the U.S. Congress in 2001, she joined the U.S. House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights, and International Organizations, where she helped to address the issue of AIDS in southern Africa through education. Watson's other subcommittee assignments included terrorism and oversight. She chaired the Entertainment Issues Caucus, recruiting stars like Denzel Washington to serve as goodwill ambassadors for the United States. Watson also joined the Congressional Caucus on Korea and the Congressional Caucus for Women's Issues. In 2010, she supported the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act. When Allen West was elected to U.S. Congress, Watson urged the Congressional Black Caucus to exclude black Republicans from its membership.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Diane E. Watson, Section A2005_233_003_013, TRT: 13:29:13 ?

The Honorable Diane E. Watson describes African American politicians in the Republican Party, ranging from the moderate J.C. Watts to the far-right Allen West and Ward Connerly. In 2004, she led a successful campaign to grant Dorothy Height the Congressional Gold Medal. Out of her loyalty to the Clinton family, Watson supported Hillary Clinton over Barack Obama during the 2008 Democratic presidential primaries. After President Obama's election, Republicans in the U.S. Congress frequently challenged his legislative platform, but Democrats were still able to pass the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act and the Don't Ask, Don't Tell Repeal Act of 2010. That year, Republicans gained twenty-six seats in the U.S. House of Representatives, and became the majority party. John Boehner was named Speaker of the House, although Watson questioned his leadership ability. In 2012, she was appointed to the Electoral College in the State of California during the presidential election.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Diane E. Watson, Section A2005_233_003_014, TRT: 14:35:50 ?

The Honorable Diane E. Watson focused on health and education issues early in her political career, advancing plans for forced busing to integrate schools in Los Angeles, California, and also mandating annual presentations on African American health issues for her fellow legislators in the California State Senate. Later, she concentrated on restructuring Medi-Cal and the welfare system in California, as these causes had bipartisan support. In 1980, Watson successfully petitioned the U.S. Census Bureau to change their option for disclosing race on the census form from "Black" to "African American." She describes her efforts to form coalitions with African American political leaders in the State of California, including Tom Bradley, Gus Hawkins, Laura Richardson, Willie L. Brown, Jr. and Mervyn M. Dymally, whose memoir she helped to edit just before his death. Watson introduced a set of bills titled the Gang Abatement Plan to combat gang violence while serving in the U.S. Congress in the 2000s.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Diane E. Watson, Section A2005_233_003_015, TRT: 15:25:31 ?

The Honorable Diane E. Watson reflects upon her family life, her role models as a child, and how she would like to be remembered. She concludes the interview by narrating her photographs.