

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Hellen O'Neal-McCray

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## Overview of the Collection

<b>Repository:</b>	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
<b>Creator:</b>	O'Neal-McCray, Hellen, 1941-2010
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Hellen O'Neal-McCray,
<b>Dates:</b>	March 21, 2006
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2006
<b>Physical Description:</b>	6 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:41:22).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Civil rights activist and high school teacher Hellen O'Neal-McCray (1941 - 2010 ) taught African American literature and composition at Wilberforce University. She was a staff member with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, taught in a Freedom School in McComb, Mississippi and worked for the National Sharecroppers Fund in Atlanta, Georgia. O'Neal-McCray was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on March 21, 2006, in Wilberforce, Ohio. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2006_046
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Civil rights volunteer, Hellen Jean O'Neal-McCray was born in Clarksdale, Mississippi on March 4, 1941 to Willie Long Anderson and Lester Calvin O'Neal. She attended Immaculate Conception School, Myrtle Hall Colored School and Holy Rosary School in Lafayette, Louisiana. Keeping up with current events, O'Neal-McCray knew activist druggist "Doc" Aaron Henry and read the *Chicago Defender*. A member of the school band, she graduated from W.A. Higgins High School in Clarksdale in 1959.

In 1961, O'Neal-McCray met Southern Christian Leadership Council (SCLC) organizers, James Bevel and Bernard Lafayette and they encouraged her to get involved in the nonviolent Civil Rights Movement. As a student, O'Neal-McCray helped Diane Nash when the Freedom Rides came to Jackson. She and Charles Cox became co-chairs of the Jackson Non-Violent Movement, working with Paul Brooks, Thomas Gaither, Marion Barry, Levaughn Brown, Richard Haley and Jesse Harris. They organized a demonstration at the Southern Governor's Conference at the Heidelberg Hotel, enraging segregationist Mississippi Governor Ross Barnett. O'Neal-McCray was arrested (the first of many times) for "disturbing the peace and tranquility of the State of Mississippi." Defended by William Kuntzler, O'Neal-McCray was sentenced to six months, but only served ten days. Soon, her civil rights activity found its home with the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). She served as a SNCC staff member before graduating from Jackson State in 1963. O'Neal-McCray, knew and worked with SNCC's Ella Baker, Bob Moses, Casey Hayden, Annelle Ponder and Fannie Lou Hamer. She taught in a SNCC Freedom School in McComb, Mississippi.

In 1965, O'Neal-McCray helped staff the Lawyers Constitutional Defense Committee in Shreveport, Louisiana. She worked for the Southern Regional Council and National Sharecroppers Fund in Atlanta before retiring from intense movement activity. Moving to Yellow Springs, Ohio in 1966, O'Neal-McCray quietly worked at Fels

Research Institute and attended Wright State University. She taught school in Springfield, Ohio for twenty-nine years and taught African American literature and composition at Wilberforce University. She attended the 30th Anniversary of Freedom Summer and the 40th Anniversary Freedom Riders Reunion in Jackson, and O'Neal-McCray wrote about her experiences in the Movement.

O'Neal-McCray was married to fellow SNCC activist, Willie McCray and has two grown sons, a grandson and a granddaughter.

Hellen O'Neal-McCray passed away on February 24, 2010.

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# Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Hellen O'Neal-McCray was conducted by Larry Crowe on March 21, 2006, in Wilberforce, Ohio, and was recorded on 6 Betacame SP videocassettes. Civil rights activist and high school teacher Hellen O'Neal-McCray (1941 - 2010 ) taught African American literature and composition at Wilberforce University. She was a staff member with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, taught in a Freedom School in McComb, Mississippi and worked for the National Sharecroppers Fund in Atlanta, Georgia.

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# 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®.

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# 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.

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# Controlled Access Terms

This interview collection is indexed under the following controlled access subject terms.

## Persons:

O'Neal-McCray, Hellen, 1941-2010

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

## Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews  
O'Neal-McCray, Hellen, 1941-2010 --Interviews

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## Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

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The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

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## Occupations:

Civil Rights Activist

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## HistoryMakers® Category:

CivicMakers

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## 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 Hellen O'Neal-McCray, March 21, 2006. 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).

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## 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.

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## Detailed Description of the Collection

## Series I: Original Interview Footage

Video Oral History Interview with Hellen O'Neal-McCray, Section A2006\_046\_001\_001, TRT: 0:28:59 ?

Hellen O'Neal-McCray was born on March 4, 1941 in Clarksdale, Mississippi to Willie Long Anderson and Lester O'Neal. Her mother's grandparents and parents owned farms in Mississippi. O'Neal-McCray's mother wanted to pursue an education, but had to work to support her family. Instead, she encouraged her children to attend college; eventually attended Clarksdale's Coahoma Community College; and taught at the local Head Start program as an adult. O'Neal-McCray's paternal great-grandfather, Bailey Harrington, moved from Oklahoma to Mississippi, where he owned a farm. Her paternal grandmother eloped with an Irish immigrant, Irving O'Neal, and they had four children, including O'Neal-McCray's father. He grew up in Goodman, Mississippi on his grandparents' farm, and served in World War II. O'Neal-McCray's parents divorced when she was young, and she spent time with both sides of her family. She heard about lynchings in Clarksdale from her family, although they tried to shield her from these conversations.

Video Oral History Interview with Hellen O'Neal-McCray, Section A2006\_046\_001\_002, TRT: 0:28:37 ?

Hellen O'Neal-McCray lived with her mother in Clarksdale, Mississippi after her parents' divorce, but took after her father in personality and looks. O'Neal-McCray's stepfather often read aloud from African American newspapers, and defended her when O'Neal-McCray demanded a white storeowner call her Miss. She befriended two white children, but their refusal to call her mother Miss led her mother to forbid her from playing with them. She and her siblings played in pesticide sprays, and accompanied their parents to blues joints. She knew NAACP branch leader Aaron Henry, who owned Fourth Street Drug Store. Her family attended Mt. Moriah C.M.E. Church. O'Neal-McCray started at Clarksdale's Immaculate Conception School, and transferred to Myrtle Hall Colored School, where she admired her teacher, Willye B. Shanks. She then attended Holy Rosary Institute, a boarding school in Lafayette, Louisiana, for one year. She returned to graduate at W.A. Higgins High School in 1949, and enrolled at Jackson State College.

Video Oral History Interview with Hellen O'Neal-McCray, Section A2006\_046\_001\_003, TRT: 0:30:49 ?

Hellen O'Neal-McCray began at Jackson State College as a biology major, hoping to become a doctor. She worked in Chicago the summer after her freshman year, but remained in Jackson the next year where she met Bernard LaFayette and Reverend James Bevel. They invited her to participate in local civil rights activities, and she met Paul Brooks and Marion Barry. O'Neal-McCray became co-chair of the Jackson Nonviolent Movement with Charles Cox, organized by Thomas Gaither. The summer of 1961, she was arrested for the first time while picketing the Southern Governors Conference. She was sentenced to six months in jail, but served only three days with the assistance of civil rights attorney William Kunstler. She later met Constance Baker Motley while testifying about her arrest. In 1963, O'Neal-McCray began working for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee office, and she recalls being threatened and manhandled by the police while in custody that summer after being arrested at a student protest.

Video Oral History Interview with Hellen O'Neal-McCray, Section A2006\_046\_001\_004, TRT: 0:29:38 ?

Hellen O'Neal-McCray was interviewed by the Federal Bureau of Investigation after her arrest in 1963. That summer, she worked with Casey Hayden, Doris Derby, John O'Neal, and Lee Jack Morton on the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee's Literacy Project, run by Robert Parris Moses and John W. Blyth. She also taught at a Freedom School in McComb, Mississippi. As a skilled typist, she primarily worked in the SNCC offices rather than registering voters. O'Neal-McCray saw the formation of the Council of Federated Organizations, working with Mateo "Flukie" Suarez and other civil rights leaders. After the murders of James Chaney, Michael Schwerner and Andrew Goodman, O'Neal-McCray assisted in searching for them. O'Neal-McCray recalls SNCC's democratic process, as well as the rising tensions among its members. Although she mostly remained separate from the arguments, conflicts and the exhaustion that came from working against racial injustice in the South led to her moving to New York City in September of 1964.

Video Oral History Interview with Hellen O'Neal-McCray, Section A2006\_046\_001\_005, TRT: 0:29:25 ?

Hellen O'Neal-McCray understood Fannie Lou Hamer's refusal to accept on seat at the 1964 Democratic National Convention. In 1965, O'Neal-McCray worked for the Lawyers Constitutional Defense Committee in Shreveport, Louisiana. In New York City she saw Malcolm X speak and met her husband, Willie McCray, who lived next door in an apartment with Reggie Robinson. They moved to Atlanta, Georgia, where she worked for Vernon E. Jordan, Jr., Margaret Long and attorney Charles Morgan, Jr. After nine months, she moved to Yellow Springs, Ohio in 1966 to work for the Samuel S. Fels Research Institute at Antioch College, where she participated in student protests. She began attending Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio, and taught in the public school system in Springfield, Ohio. After obtaining her master's degree, O'Neal-McCray taught literature at Wilberforce University. She reflects upon her activism with SNCC, and talks about civil rights leaders, Ella Baker, and Marion Barry, and those less well-known leaders.

Video Oral History Interview with Hellen O'Neal-McCray, Section A2006\_046\_001\_006, TRT: 0:13:54 ?

Hellen O'Neal-McCray lists her favorite authors, including Walter Mosley and Edwidge Danticat, and talks about teaching their works in her courses at Ohio's Wilberforce University. She describes her students, family, and hopes and concerns for the African American community. O'Neal-McCray also reflects upon her life and legacy; how she would like to be remembered; and the legacy of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee.