

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Bernice Irene Sumlin

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Sumlin, Bernice, 1926-
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Bernice Irene Sumlin,
Dates:	February 26, 2008
Bulk Dates:	2008
Physical Description:	6 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:48:00).
Abstract:	Association chief executive and educator Bernice Irene Sumlin (1926 - 2018) was the 19th International President of the Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc. She served as a high school teacher, guidance counselor, community counselor and secondary principal. After retiring from education, she worked as an industrial consultant for Wright-Patterson Air Force Base. Sumlin was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on February 26, 2008, in Dayton, Ohio. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2008_030
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Association chief executive and educator Bernice Irene Sumlin (1926-2018) was born on November 29, 1926, in Dayton, Ohio, to Wright R. and Gussie Bingham Sumlin.

Sumlin was initiated into the Zeta Chapter of the Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc., at Wilberforce College in 1946. After graduating with her B.S. degree in 1948, Sumlin transferred her Sorority membership to the Beta Eta Omega Chapter in Dayton. She furthered her education by graduating from Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, where she earned her M.A. degree. Sumlin then began her career in education. She served as a high school teacher, guidance counselor, community counselor and secondary principal before retiring. She then worked as an industrial consultant for Wright-Patterson Air Force Base.

In 1962, Sumlin succeeded LaRue Walter Frederick as Great Lakes Regional Director of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc., in Detroit, Michigan. Following a productive four year term she was appointed as chairman of the Sorority's National Standards Committee in 1966. In 1972, Sumlin was elected First Supreme Anti-Basileus at the 45th Boule in Denver, Colorado.

In 1974, Sumlin was elected the 19th International President of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc. Sumlin's administration donated \$25,000 to Central State University for the restoration of the Hallie Q. Brown Collection of rare books by and about blacks, which had been damaged by a tornado. Additionally, during her tenure, AKA contributed half a million dollars to the United Negro College Fund. On October 25, 1974, Sumlin answered a challenge given by retiring Executive Director Carey B. Preston and initiated the Alpha Kappa Alpha Reading Experience, a national program offering individualized tutoring to undereducated inner-city youth.

In 1975, at the invitation of President and Mrs. Gerald Ford, Sumlin represented the Sorority at a reception held at

the White House launching the International Women's Year Conference. Later, she represented the Sorority at the International Women's Year Conference in Mexico, City. In addition, Sumlin's administration saw the installation of the Sorority's Founders' Window at Howard University in Rankin Chapel. She also began the recognition of sorority members with twenty-five years of service as Silver Sorors and those with fifty years of service as Golden Sorors.

Sumlin was a presenter at the Fourth African American Summit in Harare, Zimbabwe, in 1997, and attended the 1999 Summit in Ghana. Her involvement in civic, educational and professional services has brought her many awards and citations, including an honorary Doctorate of Humanities from Central State University. She has also been cited for outstanding service by the National Council of Negro Women, the Continental Society, the A.M.E. church and Outstanding Women of Dayton.

Sumlin passed away on January 11, 2018.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Bernice Irene Sumlin was conducted by Larry Crowe on February 26, 2008, in Dayton, Ohio, and was recorded on 6 Betacame SP videocassettes. Association chief executive and educator Bernice Irene Sumlin (1926 - 2018) was the 19th International President of the Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc. She served as a high school teacher, guidance counselor, community counselor and secondary principal. After retiring from education, she worked as an industrial consultant for Wright-Patterson Air Force Base.

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:

Sumlin, Bernice, 1926-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews
Sumlin, Bernice, 1926- --Interviews

African American women executives--Interviews

African American women teachers--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority.

Occupations:

Association Chief Executive

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 Bernice Irene Sumlin, February 26, 2008. 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 Bernice Irene Sumlin, Section A2008_030_001_001, TRT: 0:29:10 ?

Bernice Irene Sumlin was born on November 29, 1926 in Dayton, Ohio. She joined Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc. as an undergraduate at the Combined Normal and Industrial Department at Wilberforce University, where she was initiated into the Zeta Chapter in 1946. After serving as the thirteenth director of the Great Lakes Region from 1962 to 1966, she was encouraged to run for supreme basileus by the former president, Larzette Hale-Wilson, and was elected in 1974. As supreme basileus, Sumlin's vision for Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc. was one of high scholarship for all its sorors. She emulated the leadership style of former presidents Lottie Pearl Mitchell, Annetta G. McKamey Wallace and Larzette Hale-Wilson. During Sumlin's tenure, the sorority raised over one million dollars for the United Negro College Fund. Sumlin reflects upon Barbara McKinzie's tenure as the twentieth supreme basileus, and remembers holding a reunion of all the living former national presidents in Chicago, Illinois.

African American women executives--Interviews.

African American women teachers--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with Bernice Irene Sumlin, Section A2008_030_001_002, TRT: 0:28:50 ?

Bernice Irene Sumlin was born on November 29, 1926 in Dayton, Ohio to Gussie Bigham Sumlin and Wright Sumlin in Dayton, Ohio. Her maternal grandmother, Martha, came from a family of farmers in Palmetto, Georgia. After her maternal grandmother's early death, Sumlin's mother was raised by her older sister, Addie Arnold. Her father's family were also farmers in Georgia, where he was one of eleven children. Sumlin's parents were educated at the local African Methodist Episcopal church, and married in 1915, after her mother completed the eighth grade. In 1917, they moved to Dayton, where Sumlin's father worked at the Dayton Engineering Laboratories Company and Dayton Malleable Iron Company, before founding his own business. In 1974, Sumlin was elected supreme basileus of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc., which sponsored the United Negro College Fund's first telethon under her leadership. She describes how she would like to be remembered as supreme basileus, and her hopes for the future of the sorority.

Video Oral History Interview with Bernice Irene Sumlin, Section A2008_030_001_003, TRT: 0:28:50 ?

Bernice Irene Sumlin's father, Wright Sumlin, worked as a sewer development contractor for the City of Dayton, Ohio, and later for Dayton's Wright-Patterson Air Force Base. Her parents bought a home in the integrated Weaver

neighborhood of Dayton, where they raised Sumlin and her older brother, Oliver Sumlin, and were one of four black households on their block. Her family attended the Wayman Chapel A.M.E. Church, and often ate lunch at the predominantly African American Fifth Street YMCA, as they were barred from entering the segregated restaurants downtown. Sumlin was one of only three African American students at Weaver Elementary School. There, she developed her early interest in oratory, and often recited Paul Laurence Dunbar's poetry. Sumlin recalls historic locations in the City of Dayton, including Cox's Drugstore; the Classic Theater, where she saw movies with her family; and the Palace Theater, where she attended dances as a teenager.

Video Oral History Interview with Bernice Irene Sumlin, Section A2008_030_001_004, TRT: 0:31:10 ?

Bernice Irene Sumlin attended Weaver Elementary School in Dayton, Ohio, where she excelled in English. She admired her fourth grade teacher, Mrs. Angela, who encouraged Sumlin's interest in poetry recitation. Her father, Wright Sumlin, wanted her high school education to take place in an African American environment, so she transferred to Paul Laurence Dunbar High School. There, she was taught by an all-black faculty, who emphasized the importance of African American history and identity. She pursued her interest in oratory on the school's forensic team, and was a classmate of C.J. McLin, who became a politician, and James Bernard Carter, who went on to a judgeship. Sumlin was chosen to give the welcoming address at her graduation from Paul Laurence Dunbar High School in 1944. She then joined her older brother, Oliver Sumlin, at the Combined Normal and Industrial Department at Wilberforce University in Wilberforce, Ohio. During World War II, her brother was drafted into the U.S. Army, and deployed to Japan.

Video Oral History Interview with Bernice Irene Sumlin, Section A2008_030_001_005, TRT: 0:30:00 ?

Bernice Irene Sumlin majored in business at the Combined Normal and Industrial Department at Wilberforce University in Wilberforce, Ohio, where she focused on shorthand and typing. During her studies, she held a position as a switchboard operator in the office of the school president, Charles H. Wesley. Following the university's split with the African Methodist Episcopal church, she retained her position, and transferred with the president to the newly formed College of Education and Industrial Arts at Wilberforce. She also worked for accountant Leo Lucas' firm, where she filed income tax forms. Sumlin pledged Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc. in 1946, during her sophomore year. She also met educator Hallie Quinn Brown while in college. After graduation, Sumlin's former teacher William Harrison recruited her to teach business at Paul Laurence Dunbar High School, where she remained for over thirty-five years. Sumlin also recalls Harrison's arrest for theft of equipment from the public schools.

Video Oral History Interview with Bernice Irene Sumlin, Section A2008_030_001_006, TRT: 0:20:00 ?

Bernice Irene Sumlin was elected to serve as the nineteenth supreme basileus of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc. in 1974, and became the organization's first international president from Dayton, Ohio. During her tenure, she raised money for the United Negro College Fund, and supported the National Urban League and the NAACP. Through the Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc., Sumlin traveled to South Africa, where she had a luncheon with Nelson Mandela at his home after he was released from prison. Sumlin remembers notable African Americans from the City of Dayton, including civil rights activists Miley O.

Williamson and William Sumpter McIntosh; desegregation advocate and educator Charles Glatt; and her former student at Paul Laurence Dunbar High School, General Motors executive James E. Farmer. Sumlin describes her hopes and concerns for the African American community, and reflects upon her life, legacy and family. She concludes the interview by describing how she would like to be remembered.