

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Howard Woolley

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Woolley, Howard, 1957-
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Howard Woolley,
Dates:	July 27, 2008 and June 17, 2012
Bulk Dates:	2008 and 2012
Physical Description:	10 Betacame SP videocassettes uncompressed MOV digital video files (4:27:11).
Abstract:	Telecommunications executive Howard Woolley (1957 -) was Senior Vice President of Wireless Public Policy and Government Relations for Verizon. He was the first African American to lead federal government relations for a major wireless company. Woolley was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on July 27, 2008 and June 17, 2012, in Potomac, Maryland and Washington, District of Columbia. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2008_096
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Telecommunications industry lobbyist Howard Woolley is senior vice president of wireless public policy and government relations for Verizon. His family roots are in government and entertainment. Woolley's mother, Ora Leak Woolley, was a Katherine Dunham dancer. In the mid-1940s, she appeared in *Show Boat* with Buddy Ebsen on Broadway and *Finian's Rainbow* in London. Herman Woolley, a World War II veteran, was active in local politics and helped establish the Frederick Douglass political club and the Langston Hughes Library in their community in Queens, New York. Although both of his parents were Ohio natives, Woolley was born in New York City in 1957.

In the mid-1960s, Woolley's parents transferred him from the local public school in Queens to the Downtown Community School in Manhattan's Greenwich Village. Upon graduation, he was accepted into the Bronx High School of Science. A college internship at a local television station launched him on a path to the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications at Syracuse University, where he studied television and radio broadcasting. While obtaining his B.S. degree from the Newhouse School, he met his future wife, Gail Campbell.

Following his graduation from Syracuse University, Woolley was hired into membership sales by the National Association of Black-Owned Broadcasters in 1980. His work caught the attention of the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB). Woolley was hired by the NAB to work on increasing opportunities for minorities in the industry. With the help of senior executives of the NAB and advice from his uncle, a lobbyist for a multinational oil company, he transitioned into government relations in 1984. Woolley also obtained his M.A.S. degree in management from Johns Hopkins University during this period.

In 1991, Woolley was named Vice President - Regulatory Affairs for NAB. Two years later, Bell Atlantic Corporation offered him an opportunity to lead their government relations initiatives. In this role, he worked on the

historic 1996 Telecommunications Act. Company mergers resulted in Woolley leading Bell Atlantic's government relations on wireless and international issues. In 2000, a joint venture created Verizon Wireless. Woolley was appointed to head federal government relations, the first African American to lead this function for a major wireless company. In 2002, he assumed additional responsibilities for state government relations. Woolley was promoted to Senior Vice President for Wireless Public Policy in 2004. In 2008, he was named one of the top corporate lobbyists by *The Hill* newspaper.

Woolley is a member of the Executive Leadership Council, an organization of senior African American corporate executives. Woolley serves on the advisory boards of the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications and the Johns Hopkins Carey Business School Leadership Development Program. He serves on the Board of Directors of the World Affairs Council, Congressional Black Caucus Foundation, Everybody Wins – D.C., and the Community Academy Public Charter School. Woolley also serves as a Trustee of the National Urban League and a Corporate Advisory Board member of the National Council of La Raza.

Woolley and his wife, Gail, are active in charities and have established an endowment for minority students at the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications. They live in Potomac, Maryland.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Howard Woolley was conducted by Larry Crowe on July 27, 2008 and June 17, 2012, in Potomac, Maryland and Washington, District of Columbia, and was recorded on 10 Betacame SP videocassettes uncompressed MOV digital video files. Telecommunications executive Howard Woolley (1957 -) was Senior Vice President of Wireless Public Policy and Government Relations for Verizon. He was the first African American to lead federal government relations for a major wireless company.

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:

Woolley, Howard, 1957-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews
Woolley, Howard, 1957- --Interviews

African American executives--Interviews

Lobbyists--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Verizon

Occupations:

Telecommunications Executive

HistoryMakers® Category:

BusinessMakers

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 Howard Woolley, July 27, 2008 and June 17, 2012. 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 Howard Woolley, Section A2008_096_001_001, TRT: 0:29:50 ?

Champion, Alex (10/19/2012): Howard Eugene Woolley was born May 19, 1957 in Queens, New York to Ora Leola Woolley (nee Leak), born December 27, 1921 in Little Rock, Arkansas and Herman Lincoln “Kelly” Woolley, born December 23, 1919 in Adger, Alabama. Ora Woolley’s parents were Harvey Leak and Mayme Staton Leak. The Statons moved to various parts of the south until Ora’s side of the family settled in Cleveland where Ora was raised. Different branches of Ora’s family moved to California and Seattle. Ora was dedicated to her schooling but was very inclined in the arts, especially dance, and familiarized herself with local white philanthropists who supported the Karamu House and boosted her career. While at the Karamu House Ora was a protégé of Marjorie Wood Johnson. Ora initially enrolled at Tuskegee, where she occasionally saw George Washington Carver, but transferred to Fisk after her first year. She was widely regarded as an up and coming figure in American dance and was highly sought after in social and arts scenes. She graduated magna cum laude with a sociology degree in 1943. She was recruited by the Katherine Dunham Dance Troop shortly thereafter. She married Kelly Woolley around 1953 and retired from professional dance upon her daughter Joy’s birth in 1954.

Herman Lincoln “Kelly” Woolley died on July 5, 1969 when Woolley was only twelve years old. He was called “Kelly” since boyhood by all who knew him. Kelly’s father Edward Woolley was born in 1876 and died in 1951. Edward’s father was Calhoun Woolley, a white former slaveowner, and his mother was the former slave Lamar Burton. Edward was raised with Calhoun’s other sons and was unaware of his black heritage until his teens. As an adult he became a merchant seaman. Once, in Italy, Edward was detained for reasons unknown to Woolley. Upon release, he stowed away on another U.S. bound vessel. He surfaced after the ship departed and was put to work. The Woolley’s left Alabama for Cleveland sometime in the early 20th century. There were five brothers and four sisters, with one brother dying in infancy and one sister dying at a slightly older age. Woolley’s uncle Howard helped the family purchase a home on 89th street in Cleveland, which became the gathering place for all Cleveland Woolleys and was retained by three of his aunts until 2000. At the home there were numerous pictures of Caucasian and Native American Woolley

relatives. Kelly alleged that he and Ora were in the same French class in High School but did not formally meet until New York. Kelly and his first wife Hope divorced and had one child named Melody.

African Americans--Social conditions.

African American families--Ohio--Cleveland.

Slavery--United States.

African American dancers.

Video Oral History Interview with Howard Woolley, Section A2008_096_001_002, TRT: 0:29:50 ?

Champion, Alex (10/19/2012): Champion, Alex (10/19/2012): Herman "Kelly" Woolley and Ora met in New York and married sometime after his divorce from Hope, with whom he had a girl named Melody. Ora worked as an administrator or social worker in various institutions while Kelly, who was trained as a welder during World War II, drove a truck for a local company. Kelly was intelligent but, due to the demands of raising a family, was unable to realize his talent and ambition through education or vocational training. He achieved satisfaction through politics by co-founding the Frederick Douglass Political Club with John Bell and John Booker in the East Elmhurst/Corona neighborhood of Queens. Kelly was a man of presence who commanded the attention of those around him and tackled problems directly.

Woolley's family was not well off but was comfortable in their rented houses. He was born near Jamaica, Queens. Lifelong friendships developed from that neighborhood; the Woolley children were kept busy with after school programs or babysat by relatives or neighbors until their parents returned. Neighbors constantly monitored the children's activities outside of the home as well. The Woolley's left Jamaica when he was five. At nine they moved to East Elmhurst, which brought back their sense of community and was the setting for the Political Club's founding. It was a bustling community for blacks and boasted the residencies of actor Frank Silvera and Louis Armstrong. Kelly and Ora helped establish the Langston Hughes Library on Northern Blvd and Ora was well connected in the cultural scene; she personally knew author John Henry Clarke, Paul Robeson, and Langston Hughes. Kelly and Ora were engaged with politics and civil rights for much of their lives, with Ora even assisting W.E.B. Du Bois in her college days. Her move from Tuskegee to Fisk was possibly motivated by the philosophical differences of the Booker T. Washington and Du Bois' schools of thought.

Woolley enjoyed going to the park with his father to fly kites and hand launched airplanes. The family did not own a car and, even at times of hardship, Woolley did not feel deprived. Kelly and Ora compensated for this deficit by giving Woolley a lot of attention and pushing him to succeed academically. In 1964 Woolley started attending a private school in Greenwich Village and came to appreciate the scale and grandeur of Manhattan as well as the opportunities it afforded. Many local events of significance were the Beatles concert in Shea Stadium and the 1964 World's Fair where Ma Bell unveiled the video phone, a device whose components are smaller and cheaper but has not caught on because of privacy concerns, technophobia, and Webcams. Kelly rented a large Chrysler to shuttle visiting relatives. During this same period, the Woolley's visited his Aunt Loula "Lou", one of the relatives who helped Kelly's family come to Ohio, who moved to Harlem. It was there that Woolley met Kelly's cousin the famous basketball player William "Pop" Gates.

In the second grade Woolley was taken out of PS 214 in Flushing because they were concerned about his high test scores but low report card grades.

Political participation--New York (State)--New York.

New York World's Fair (1964-1965)

Alternative education--New York (State)--New York.

Video Oral History Interview with Howard Woolley, Section A2008_096_001_003, TRT: 0:29:20 ?

Champion, Alex (10/19/2012): A series of incidents with PS 214 convinced Woolley's parents Kelly and Cora to remove him from the school and into a private alternative school in lower Manhattan. Woolley's parents and his Aunt Hazel took issue to the discrepancy between his high test scores and low marks on his report cards but also disliked the informal, four tiered classification system that ranked and clustered students based on their intelligence; Woolley was the highest ranked black student but was only in the second highest tier. An separate incident was when several white students assaulted Woolley in the auditorium but were successfully fended off; Ora refused to let his teacher, Mrs. Dominitz, reprimand him by writing "I will not fight in the auditorium" 100 times on the black board and composed a note for her. He urged Ora not to write him a note because Mrs. Dominitz once embarrassed him in by reading an innocent, motherly one aloud. Mrs. Dominitz read the note and the incident was never discussed again. The note stated that, while Kelly and Ora did not condone violence, they believed Woolley's exercise of the right to defend himself would build character. From grades three through eight Woolley attended the Downtown Community School. It was an early model of the types of alternative schools Woolley saw more frequently as an adult. With smaller class sizes, a supplemental curriculum, and teachers and students from around the globe, Woolley believed he was getting an education with a greater world view. The school was founded by Norman Studer. Kelly and Ora remained active in Woolley's education and assisted with their yearly fundraising drives. Although there was only one other black student when Woolley enrolled, at his eighth grade graduation in 1971, over half the class was black. From age eight Woolley used public transportation mostly on his own for the one hour commute.

This was a time when Greenwich Village, particularly at The Fillmore East, experienced a folk and rock renaissance that Woolley was too young to experience firsthand. Pete Seeger was a staple at Downtown Community School. Woolley began dressing in loud bellbottoms and wore an afro, which contrasted with the conventional styles of Queens.

Woolley's favorite instructor was a seventh grade literature teacher named Mr. Halverson. Halverson provided a well rounded curriculum of novels and non-fiction that explored contemporary black concerns such as economic independence. Woolley was impressed by a young black male teacher who seemed in tune to the atmosphere of the 1960s but was also impressed by his third grade teacher who spoke with a British accent.

Woolley was frequently reminded of his school's unique approaches to education. The curriculum at Downtown Community School focused on the fundamentals of math, English, science, history, but also the arts, international issues, and politics. Memorable moments included a half day in order to attend the first ever Earth Day celebration and a trip to the Catskills for a folk music festival. Since Downtown Community School did not take the same holidays off as public schools, bus drivers occasionally challenged Woolley's student pass.

Woolley's strongest subject was math but he became more interested in history, particularly black history, as the Civil Rights movement unfolded and student pressures encouraged the school to include more black studies. Woolley was 11 years old when Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated. The Woolley's followed the news very closely following his death.

Alternative education--New York (State)--New York.

Segregation in education--New York (State)--New York.

Cultural pluralism--New York (State)--New York.

Multicultural education--Curricula--New York (State)--New York.

Video Oral History Interview with Howard Woolley, Section A2008_096_001_004, TRT: 0:30:10 ?

Champion, Alex (10/19/2012): Following Kelly Woolley's death and the hardship his family faced, The Downtown Community School provided enough financial assistance to enroll in seventh and eighth grade, the final years the school was open. The school closed following budget problems but also differences between Norman Studer and the school's financiers. For the graduation ceremony the students put on a pageant that included songs by The Temptations.

The graduating class undertook an exam to qualify themselves for the higher tier public schools in New York. Woolley and three other students out of the class of fifteen were accepted to the top choice, the Bronx High School of Science, and others were accepted to Stuyvesant High School just a few blocks away from Downtown Community School, and others were not accepted to either; it is possible that DCS did not adequately cover core curriculum. The Bronx High School of Science, as a public school, was more structured with a higher ratio of students to teachers. Woolley joined the junior varsity basketball team and learned karate under Ron Taganashi. A black Japanese, Sensei Taganashi co-founded the Nisei Goju-Ryu system that emerged from the American Goju-Ryu style imported by Peter Urban. Martial arts were very popular in film and television and for a time Woolley believed he could be a full time martial artist.

Woolley only attended Bronx High School of Science for three and a half years. Woolley lacked a sense of commitment during his time at Downtown Community School and did not apply himself at BHS. When it was apparent he may not graduate on time, he transferred out to and graduated from New Town High School in Queens. As an adult, Woolley regretted the decision, which he saw as emblematic of his lack of focus. He enrolled in City University of New York and, in 1977, secured an internship with Channel 5 (WNEW) Midday Live, a chat show hosted by Bill Boggs and produced by a black woman named Gwen Barrett.

Woolley did not have a particular career in mind. After puberty his voice became similar to his father's and he was gently pushed into media and broadcasting. On one momentous occasion Woolley talked with James Earl Jones on the air, which his mother serendipitously watched. Afterwards Jones gave him college and career advice, including a referral to a voice coach in Philadelphia. At Bill Clinton's inauguration Woolley met Jones once more and reminded him of their encounter; Jones was polite and claimed to remember the encounter. Woolley also participated in an on air panel discussing young adult ambitions; a Midday Live director and alumnus of Syracuse University urged Woolley to network with his former professors. Although he was encouraged to attend Howard University by his uncle, he finished his junior and senior years at the Newhouse School of Public Communications. Woolley did not adopt any mentors. An incident where a professor passed over him for a production assignment, yet claimed Woolley had much to offer, convinced him that Newhouse limited his ambition to do well at a younger age.

At Newhouse he met Gayle Campbell. A housemate of Woolley's, and former roommate of Gayle's, arranged for them to meet. Their first date at the Delta Ball was disastrous since Gayle was busy handling the photography and Woolley was dancing with other women.

Woolley earned an internship with the MacNeil/Lehrer Report and was present for the ten thousandth program.

Alternative education--New York (State)--New York.

African American martial artists--New York (State)--New York.

African American journalists--New York (State)--New York.

WNEW-TV (Television station : New York, N.Y.)

City University of New York. City College.

Syracuse University.

Video Oral History Interview with Howard Woolley, Section A2008_096_001_005, TRT: 0:17:30 ?

Champion, Alex (10/19/2012): Howard Woolley shared personal photographs.

Video Oral History Interview with Howard Woolley, Section A2008_096_002_006, TRT: 6:29:38 ?

Video Oral History Interview with Howard Woolley, Section A2008_096_002_007, TRT: 7:31:54 ?

Video Oral History Interview with Howard Woolley, Section A2008_096_002_008, TRT: 8:30:10 ?

Video Oral History Interview with Howard Woolley, Section A2008_096_002_009, TRT: 9:31:46 ?

Video Oral History Interview with Howard Woolley, Section A2008_096_002_010, TRT: 10:07:03 ?