

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Sondra Akins

---

## 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>	Akins, Sondra, 1944-
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Sondra Akins,
<b>Dates:</b>	May 15, 2012
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2012
<b>Physical Description:</b>	9 uncompressed MOV digital video files (4:18:45).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Education professor and chemist Sondra Akins (1944 - ) was an authority in the field of science education with over thirty-nine years of professional teaching and consulting experience. Akins was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on May 15, 2012, in Teaneck, New Jersey. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2012_108
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

---

## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Education professor and chemist Sondra Akins was born on March 16, 1944 in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. She became interested in chemistry by the time she graduated from Atkins High School in 1962. Akins earned her B.S. degree in chemistry in 1967 from the University of California, Berkeley where she also worked as a laboratory technician. She received her M.S. degree in chemistry with a minor in higher education from Florida State University in 1970.

After earning her master's degree, Akins taught physical science at Greco Junior High School in Tampa, Florida. Between 1971 and 1974, she served as instructor of chemistry at St. Petersburg Junior College which is currently known as St. Petersburg College. She left St. Petersburg in 1974 to teach at Hillsborough Community College where she rose to the rank of associate professor. In 1978, she taught at Northern Virginia Community College, and in 1980, Akins worked as an honors physics teacher in Lexington Massachusetts Public Schools. She also spent two years as an industrial hygienist at Hewlett Packard, Co. from 1981 to 1983. Akins began her long career with the Englewood Public School District in Englewood, New Jersey in 1983 where she started as a science and mathematics teacher. In 1988, she became the director of mathematics, science, and technology. In 1993, she received her Ed.D. degree in science education from Columbia University. She returned to teaching at Englewood Public Schools between 1995 and 1997 and served as a high school principal for one year in 1997. From 1998 to 2001, Akins was a staff developer for Englewood Public Schools where she served as a mentor, giving advice to teachers. Since 2001, Akins has worked as a professor in the Department of Secondary and Middle School Education at William Paterson University. She has written numerous essays on science education including a chapter in the National Science Teachers Association book, *Exemplary Science: Best Practices in Professional Development*.

Over her long career in science education, Akins has been recognized many times by her community including the Award for Dedication to Science Teaching from Sigma Xi of Ramapo College. She has been a member of the

American Chemical Society, the National Science Teachers Association and the Association of Science Teacher Educators. Sondra Akins lives with her husband Daniel Akins, a chemist, in Teaneck, New Jersey.

Sondra Akins was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on May 15, 2012.

---

## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Sondra Akins was conducted by Larry Crowe on May 15, 2012, in Teaneck, New Jersey, and was recorded on 9 uncompressed MOV digital video files. Education professor and chemist Sondra Akins (1944 - ) was an authority in the field of science education with over thirty-nine years of professional teaching and consulting experience.

---

## 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:

Akins, Sondra, 1944-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

### Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Akins, Sondra, 1944- --Interviews

---

## Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

---

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

---

## Occupations:

Chemist

---

## HistoryMakers® Category:

ScienceMakers

---

## 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 Sondra Akins, May 15, 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 Sondra Akins, Section A2012\_108\_001\_001, TRT: 1:30:25 ?  
Sondra Akins describes her family background. Her mother, Mabel Savannah Sharpe Barber, was born in Greensboro, North Carolina in 1919. After her parents divorced, Mabel Sharpe was raised by her paternal grandmother, Mary

Ivy Barber. She attended Mary Potter School in Oxford, North Carolina, and then went on to Winston-Salem Teacher's College. Akins' father, Alexander Eugene Barber, was born in Charlotte, North Carolina, in 1911. Barber began working at Winston-Salem Teacher's College at the age of seventeen, where he met Mabel Sharpe. They married, had four children, and continued to work at the college for over three decades at the campus laundry and at a dry-cleaning facility that they ran adjacent to the campus. Akins talks about her parents' long marriage of sixty-six years, and describes their personalities. She also talks about her siblings, their close-knit family, and her memories of Winston-Salem African American families--North Carolina.

Winston-Salem Teachers College.

Married people--Conduct of life--North Carolina.

Childhood and youth--Winston-Salem (N.C.).

Video Oral History Interview with Sondra Akins, Section A2012\_108\_001\_002, TRT: 2:28:58 ?

Sondra Akins was raised in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, where she attended Skyland Elementary School. Akins describes the town of Winston-Salem, her memories of her childhood there, and her experiences at Winston-Salem Teacher's College, while spending time with her parents. She recalls segregation in the City of Winston-Salem and within the public school system in the 1950s. Akins also talks about the influence of Zion Memorial Church on her awareness of the Civil Rights Movement, and her interest in science and talent shows, when she first started watching television in the 1950s.

Winston-Salem (N.C.).

Winston-Salem Teachers College.

Segregation in education--North Carolina.

Civil rights--Religious aspects.

Television programs--United States--History.

Video Oral History Interview with Sondra Akins, Section A2012\_108\_001\_003, TRT: 3:29:48 ?

Sondra Akins attended Skyland Elementary School and Atkins High School in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. Akins' early interest in science developed during the eighth grade, where she was first exposed to scientific experiments. She recalls her first science project in the ninth grade, when she demonstrated the crystalline structure of sodium chloride. Akins excelled in her studies, and was also involved in extracurricular activities throughout her schooling. She talks about her teachers, Togo West, Sr. and Inez Scales, who influenced her decision to study chemistry. Akins recalls her experience with integration, while taking a high school AP chemistry class. She also talks about the demographics of Winston-Salem Teachers College, her family's travels across the United States, and the 1960 Civil Rights sit-ins at the Woolworth's store in Greensboro, North Carolina. After graduating from high school in 1962, Akins received a merit-based scholarship to attend Howard University.

Science projects.

Chemistry--Study and teaching--North Carolina.

School integration--North Carolina--History--20th century.

Advanced placement programs (Education).

Civil rights demonstrations--North Carolina--Greensboro--History--20th century.

Video Oral History Interview with Sondra Akins, Section A2012\_108\_001\_004, TRT: 4:27:56 ?

After graduating from Atkins High School in 1962, Sondra Akins received a

full-scholarship to attend Howard University, where she began her undergraduate studies in chemistry. Akins describes her experience at Howard, and her interest in the science department there. She also talks about the dawn of the 'black is beautiful' cultural movement in the 1960s, and her exposure to black history and culture at Howard University. Akins met fellow-chemist and HistoryMaker, Daniel Akins, at Howard. The couple married in 1963, and moved to Berkeley, California, where Akins continued her B.S. degree in chemistry at the University of California, Berkeley. She describes her experience at U.C. Berkeley, and talks about becoming a parent while in college. She also talks about the advent of the space age, and her reasons for pursuing a career in scientific research.

African American college students--Scholarships, fellowships, etc.

Howard University.

African American--Intellectual life--20th century.

Scientist couples.

Parenthood.

Video Oral History Interview with Sondra Akins, Section A2012\_108\_001\_005, TRT: 5:29:44 ?

In 1963, Sondra Akins transferred to the University of California, Berkeley, where her husband, HistoryMaker Daniel Akins, began his Ph.D. degree in chemistry under the guidance of C. Bradley Moore. After receiving her B.S. degree in chemistry in 1967, she spent a year as a research technician, also in Moore's lab. Akins recalls the growing presence of the Black Panther Party, and the signing of the 1964 Civil Right Act. In 1968, the family moved to Tallahassee, Florida, where Akins began her M.S. degree in chemistry. She describes her role model, Lidia Vallerino, and reflects upon the visibility of women in science. In 1970, Akins began working as a physical science teacher at Greco Junior High School in Tampa, but transitioned to a position as a chemistry instructor at St. Petersburg Junior College, where she taught at the university level.

University of California, Berkeley--Students.

Chemistry--Study and teaching (Higher)--California.

Black Panther Party.

Women in science.

Science--Study and teaching--United States.

Video Oral History Interview with Sondra Akins, Section A2012\_108\_001\_006, TRT: 6:30:10 ?

Sondra Akins began her university teaching career in the 1970s, as a chemistry instructor at St. Petersburg Junior College and Hillsborough Community College. She describes her early teaching experience, talks about the diverse styles of learning and teaching, and reflects upon balancing a family with her career. In 1977, her family moved to Virginia, where Akins began to work at Northern Virginia Community College. When they moved again to Massachusetts a few years later, Akins worked at Lexington High School. She also began studies for her Ph.D. degree in chemistry at Brandeis University, but decided to discontinue her studies there to work as an industrial hygienist at Hewlett-Packard. By the mid-1980s, Akins started teaching in the Englewood School District in New Jersey, while also pursuing her Ed.D. degree in science education at Columbia University. Akins describes her doctoral dissertation on the restructuring of math and science curriculum for elementary school.

Universities and colleges--Faculty.

Work and family.

Industrial hygiene--United States.

Science--Study and teaching.

Thesis and dissertation.

Video Oral History Interview with Sondra Akins, Section A2012\_108\_001\_007, TRT: 7:31:07 ?

In 1993, Sondra Akins received her Ed.D. degree in science education from Columbia University. She describes her doctoral dissertation on restructuring the mathematics and science curriculum from elementary teachers' perspectives. She talks about the importance of teaching students to think scientifically as part of their early childhood education. From 1983 to 2001, Akins served in the Englewood School District in New Jersey, where she describes her roles as a teacher and administrator. She talks about her involvement in facilitating inquiry-based learning through professional development programs that linked Englewood schools to local colleges and universities. Since 2001, Akins has served as a professor of science education at The William Patterson University of New Jersey, where she continues to work on collaborative professional developmental opportunities that promote scientific inquiry amongst school students. In this tape, Akins also discusses the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001.

Mathematics--education--United States.

Science--education--United States.

Curriculum planning--United States.

Science teachers--Training of--United States.

United States.--No Child Left Behind Act of 2001.

Video Oral History Interview with Sondra Akins, Section A2012\_108\_001\_008, TRT: 8:28:28 ?

Sondra Akins was a teacher and administrator in the Englewood School District from 1983 until 2001, when she became a professor of science education at The William Patterson University of New Jersey. Her article, entitled, 'Exemplary Science: Best Practices in Professional Development', highlights her interest in inquiry-based science education as a standard, and was recognized by the National Science Educational Leadership Association. Akins discusses the balance between inquiry and discipline as part of the learning process. In 2009, Akins became involved with the New York African Burial Project at Howard University. She describes the history of the project, the interdisciplinary approach to the collection of information, and its application in teaching scientific inquiry in the classroom. Akins also describes her hopes and concerns for the African American community, reflects upon her life, and talks about her plans to write a book about her experience with learning and teaching science.

Teacher-administrator relationships.

Universities and colleges--Faculty.

Science teachers--In-service training--United States.

Inquiry-based learning--United States.

African Burial Ground (New York, N.Y.).

Video Oral History Interview with Sondra Akins, Section A2012\_108\_001\_009, TRT: 9:22:09 ?

Sondra Akins reflects upon her legacy, describes how she would like to be remembered, and discusses the significance of teaching and science. She also talks about her family, and her daughters, Dana Lamar Akins-Adeyemi and Meredith Ivy Akins. Lastly, she describes her photographs.

Science--Study and teaching--United States.

African American families.

Mothers and daughters--United States.  
Photographs.