

Camille Cosby leads effort to create black oral history...

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Eight years ago, Camille Cosby used the Broadway stage to give two African-American centenarian sisters a chance to share their stories. The play, *Having Our Say*, based on the best-selling 1991 book about Sadie and Bessie Delaney, was a virtual oral history.

Now, Cosby, a coproducer of the play and the wife of Bill Cosby, has established a videotaped oral history archive that is gathering the reminiscences of other older, distinguished African Americans.

The National Visionary Leadership Project, a nonprofit organization, was established last spring by Cosby and Renee Poussaint, a former correspondent for ABC News, to record and videotape the experiences of blacks in their 70s and 80s. The interviews will be made available through a digital database accessible through the project's website, www.visionaryproject.com, with the hope that it will ultimately reach a broader audience through television and CD-ROM.

Cosby provided all of the funds for the project and hopes to raise additional money through corporate, foundation and individual contributions. The project has an annual budget of \$1.5 million.

Cosby, who has a doctorate in education, said her organization aspires to do for black Americans what Steven Spielberg's Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation has done in recording the memories of aging Holocaust survivors, although it will be far more modest in size. Since its establishment in 1994, Spielberg's organization has collected and preserved videotaped testimony of more than 50,000 people. Cosby's project plans to begin by completing 60 interviews a year for five years.

COMMON THREAD

While the Holocaust is the common thread for Spielberg's subjects, racism runs through the lives in Cosby's project, she said. In the interviews, Cosby and Poussaint asked the subjects to talk about race and racism in America. Each said in the interviews that racism had been a fact of life, but none said it had been an insurmountable obstacle.

"We have decided to record oral histories and present them just the way the elders have said it," said Cosby, who holds the title of president and cofounder. "It is the only way to protect these histories, for people all over the world to use these oral histories as resources to know the truth."

Most oral history projects are at the state or local level or are collected as parts of larger historical archives, like those for labor or politics. Cosby's project is the first solely devoted to the history of black Americans and that is aimed at a national audience.

Among the 30 subjects already interviewed are the former mayor of New York City, David N. Dinkins; the poet Maya Angelou; former Rep. Shirley Chisholm; Gordon Parks, the noted photographer and filmmaker; and Dr. Dorothy I. Height, president of the National Council of Negro Women.

Their lives may seem well documented, but Cosby and Poussaint have managed to coax their subjects to speak their minds in ways seldom heard before.

INTERVIEW MOMENTS

When asked to describe the biggest obstacle that she faced during her bid for the Democratic presidential nomination in 1972, Chisholm smiles at the camera and says without missing a beat: "Men."

"All kinds of men," said Chisholm, the first black woman to run for the presidency. "Black men, Latino men. Men."

Angelou, looking regal in an Afrocentric head wrap, says she has married and left many men in her life, but at 73, she is "still looking."

"Oh, the 70s are delicious," she said of aging. "I'm having a wonderful time."

The visionaries, as the project calls them, also share poignant anecdotes about personal triumphs and struggles, regrets and hopes, and other dramatic events of private and public life.

Dinkins said, half-jokingly, that his newspaper obituary will probably lead with the racial riots that took place in the Crown Heights section of Brooklyn in 1991 during his tenure in office. He said that one of his "strongest regrets" was not telling his police commissioner sooner to change the department's tactics in handling the riots.

Cosby said she hoped that the interviews would also serve as a teaching tool. The project has established 30 student fellowships at institutions including Howard, Georgetown, Fisk, Oberlin, Spelman and Berkeley, for independent course study on researching and collecting oral histories of older people who have been community leaders. "We not only want the young people to learn from the elders, but have the elders learn from the young," Cosby said.

Nota: www.visionaryproject.com

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