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Bridges That Carried Us Over Project

Interview Summary

Interviewee:

Lois Carson

Interviewer:

Leah Cash

Interview Date:

April 12, 2016

Interview Location:

San Bernardino, CA

Length:

00:19:25

Interview Summary completed by:

Nadia Lathan, 2022.

Caroline Blanchard, 2024.

Description:

Lois Carson directed project Upward Bound at UCR where she recognized the need for a program focused on high-achieving Black youth. She helped found Black Future Leaders to encourage accomplished Black high school students to go to college. Black Future Leaders has since found a home at CSUSB after short stints at UCR and the University of Redlands. Carson oversaw an annual essay students must complete for the program. Essay topics range from Black or African scientists, the Negro National Anthem, and community officials. Because Carson traveled extensively to Africa, she encouraged her students to implore more about their ancestry and native continent.

Subject Topic:

- San Bernardino (Calif.)
- Riverside (Calif.)
- Africa
- Education
- Social participation

Temporal Coverage:

1985 - present

Key Organizations:

- Black Future Leaders, Inc.
- Upward Bound Program
- California State University, San Bernardino
- University of California, Riverside
- University of Redlands

Interview Index:

Media Format	Time (hh:mm:ss)	Topic Discussed
Digital Video	00:00:51– 00:01:55	How Black Future Leaders got started
Digital Video	00:02:35 – 00:03:32	Target demographic for Black Future Leaders were young adults who were doing well academically.
Digital Video	00:03:58 – 00:05:11	The success of Black Future Leaders.
Digital Video	00:05:22 – 00:06:40	Carson's role within with Black Future Leaders.
Digital Video	00:06:41 – 00:08:39	The impact of Black Future Leaders and how the legacy should continue.
Digital Video	00:09:03 – 00:10:07	Influential figures in Lois' life and being rewarded the United Negro Scholarship while applying to college.
Digital Video	00:10:50 – 00:11:44	The legacy left behind as a key member of the San Bernardino community and her role as a volunteer.
Digital Video	00:11:44 – 00:13:20	Support from Cal State San Bernardino for Black Future Leaders.
Digital Video	00:13:36 – 00:16:30	Presenting to the youth on traveling to Africa and encouragement for every Black American to visit.
Digital Video	00:16:37 – 00:17:24	Mutualistic relationship between Black Future Leaders and the Universities that supported the program.

Digital Video	00:18:01 – 00:18:51	Occupations of Black Future Leaders alumni, and the strong legacy it has created for itself with the hard work of key figures in the community.
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Related Materials:

Additional oral history interviews are available from the Wilmer Amina Carter Foundation's "Bridges that Carries Us Over Project" on CSUSB ScholarWorks,
<https://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/bridges/>

Full interview transcript can be found below.

Interview Transcript

Start of Interview:

[00:00:00]

Leah Cash [00:00:01] OK, today's date is April 12th. My name is Leah Michelle Cash, and I'm interviewing Mrs. Lois Carson for the archive in Black History in the Inland Empire Project. Her name is spelled Lois Carson.

Lois Carson [00:00:20] I am.

Leah Cash [00:00:21] OK, thank you. We are interviewing you here at the home of Miss Lois Carson in the city of San Bernardino. And we thank you, Mrs. Carson, for this interview, for taking the time to conduct this interview with us.

Lois Carson [00:00:36] Your welcome.

Leah Cash [00:00:36] So give me a little bit of background with you being one of the founding members of the Black Future Leaders, how it all got started and what is one of the reasons why the organization was started

Lois Carson [00:00:51] Well it got started at the request of Dr Jane Peacock, who was a professor and still is a professor at Cal State. There had been a model for Hispanic students and she thought it was a pretty good model and told us about it and thought that we should look at something like that, but modify it to meet the needs of our community. And there were several of us who that she talked to in the beginning, and we agreed that it was worth a try, that our young people certainly needed something like that, so that they valued achievement, understood the difference between getting good grades by chance versus by choice. And so we did start that. The only difference in our model and the original model is that we decided to take our children on a college campus. I think that that model took them into the mountains for a camp out. We thought it would be better to take them on a college campus.

Leah Cash [00:01:56] In the interview with Danny Tillman and with Miss Peacock, one of the things that they brought up was the fact that you were very adamant because of the fact there are many programs that were dealing with at-risk youth. But there weren't that many programs that are dealing with scholars.

Lois Carson [00:02:17] Achievers.

Leah Cash [00:02:18] Or young people who were achieving things. So she said that you were one of those ones that thought it would be excellent in regards to doing something for achievers. So can you tell us a little bit about why you felt that way?

Lois Carson [00:02:35] Well, at the time I was directing Project Upward Bound at the University of California, Riverside. I had been a secondary English teacher prior to that. And we didn't focus enough on those students who were trying to do the right thing, who were

getting good grades. And there was there were many programs that looked at at-risk students and so successfully I argued for that. And that's it still is today.

Leah Cash [00:03:03] Yes, it has not changed.

Lois Carson [00:03:05] We're not into helping pregnant teens or teens in drugs or non achievers. They have to have something. And the only thing a young person in high school can show for achievement is good grades. They don't work at all. So that's what we've insisted on. And I'm happy to say that today we have as many young males getting good grades as we did as we do females.

Leah Cash [00:03:33] So and looking at the history of Black Future Leaders, how.

Lois Carson [00:03:39] 31 years old, a long life for black youth program.

Leah Cash [00:03:45] Yes, it has. So looking at that history, what has influenced you or inspired you the most in this area regarding those students who have gone through the program?

Lois Carson [00:03:58] A number of things. We have about at least 95 to 99 percent college going rate. Pretty much they go to college and the alumni and the kinds of things that the alumni has done and the fact that we do have some alumni that come back and help us, not enough because we don't have a strong alumni, organized alumni program. And that's something I regret that we haven't been able to do. And at the 30th anniversary, I wanted to have a big hoopla, but we just did not have the resources so that we could organize an alumni association. The parent involvement, I think that's one of the successes of the program because you can't really guide and direct children without their own families involved. So when we have them in a residence program, we don't bring college students to be the counselor. We bring on parents to stay overnight with the students. And we know that other parents feel comfortable knowing that parents are there. So those are some of the successes of it all and why it's been a success.

Leah Cash [00:05:12] So in those really early years of Black future Leaders and then down to the day, what has been your role in the organization?

Lois Carson [00:05:22] Well, aside from being the president of the board of directors for a long time until I got Danny to take it. I'm in charge of the essay. They have to write an essay every year. They have to bring the essay written in its first draft to the campus. And they don't get a key to their room until they hand me that essay. And every year they write on different things, such as it may be -- the thing it may be Africa or black scientists. Now that we have Stem in it may be. One year we had them write on the Negro national anthem and what it meant. You know, they had to critique the whole thing. So it's just different things. This year we're looking at community assessment. It's an election year. They should know their mayor, the city councilman, population, the infrastructure of the city and then analyze all that. So we're working on that for this year. So my role now is choosing that essay topic, presenting it to the board. And we have two former BFL students who are now teachers who read the essays and critique them according to our rules.

Leah Cash [00:06:41] Yes. We interviewed a former Black Future Leader, Portia. Oh, yes. And she was saying that she finds it very hard to run into other achievers who have not gone through the Black Future Leader program. And she says they stand there and they have conversations in the grocery store and other places they go wherever they wherever she runs into them because of the fact that it made a huge a huge difference in their life. So one of the things that is

Lois Carson [00:07:21] (Telephone ringing) Excuse me, is that going to sound over that?

Leah Cash [00:07:22] One of the things that's important that Ms Carter speaks about is the passing of the torch. And we know that that passing of the torch did happen with Danny Tilman. And he has his story and how you, you know, he just he just bowed his head and said, yes, ma'am. And what you saw in him because you saw the potential in him to do great things. And so he honors you with that as well. So now watching Black Future Leaders and how it has evolved over the 30 something years, how do you feel that the legacy of Black Future Leaders should continue?

Lois Carson [00:08:10] Well, that's one of the things that worries me. It doesn't get any easier, you know, finding the resources to bring the young people on campus and to keep the program going and having activities that really are beneficial. I worry about that because Danny's been president now for a long time and we got to follow some find someone who will also follow him. I am ready to retire from the whole thing.

Leah Cash [00:08:41] How many times have you retired from your job ?

Lois Carson [00:08:47] From my job and a few things..

Leah Cash [00:08:48] It seems like when you retire, you get more jobs, you find more.

Lois Carson [00:08:53] I don't want to do nothing, I got to keep doing something. I don't want my mind to atrophy.

Leah Cash [00:09:00] So who has inspired you?

Lois Carson [00:09:03] Hmm. I have to go a long way back. My mother, a woman my mother sewed for who was a teacher, and she was everything I ever wanted to be. And she told me what sorority to join when I went to college. She told me along with my mother that I was going to college even though I didn't see any money around for me to go to college. But they said, you're going. And I finally asked a nun at the Catholic school where I attended, what did I have to do to go to college? And did it cost money? And she said, you can apply for a scholarship and I won a United Negro scholarship. Wow. You are one of two Memphians who won it in 1949. Got my name in the newspaper. Well, so she was one, the nun I remembered she was someone who influenced my life. And then a teacher in college and Dr. Dorothy Height of the NCNW

Leah Cash [00:10:10] So in our area, you are a legend

Lois Carson [00:10:15] when you grow old in an area, you know that happens

Leah Cash [00:10:22] And you are an icon in our community. So therefore, when you say and I got my name in the newspaper at that time, I don't, as a newspaper reporter, I can't think of any time I haven't seen your name in the newspaper over the over almost two decades. So therefore, what legacy do you think you will leave to our community?

Lois Carson [00:10:50] Well, that's really for the community to decide, really. I just did what I did because I, my mother was a volunteer. I always like that adage of to whom much is given, much is expected. And I sort of took that to mean that I had something to offer. And so I will let the community decide what the legacy is all about. But I do enjoy being a role model to younger women. When I worked at my last job for which I retired, I used to get many students from UC Riverside coming to visit me just to ask me.

Leah Cash [00:11:35] A question, just to get knowledge.

Lois Carson [00:11:36] Things, what they might what do.

Leah Cash [00:11:40] So now with the black future leaders and it being on college campuses, were there any challenges or any successes that you can remember in regards to the people that helped, you know, you be on the college campuses?

Lois Carson [00:12:01] Yes, we were on four different, well, three different campuses. We started out at Cal State, then went to Redlands, and it was Harold Duffy who helped us get there. So he was on the board and he was a graduate of the University of Redlands. And the the kids really like the University of Redlands. So we got to see the difference between being on a private college campus as opposed to a public college campus. Then we went to UC Riverside and that's when we were able to successfully negotiate funding from the university to have us on campus. And once they were challenged by state funding, we came back to Cal State, and we've been there,

Leah Cash [00:12:43] came on home.

Lois Carson [00:12:45] And thank goodness Cal State does support us now on campus. Funding is always the challenge of course, you know. We do charge each family 62 dollars, but it costs way more than that to have them there on a weekend. But we wanted all parents to be able to afford it. We didn't want to have to say any parent. We didn't want any family to feel that they had to accept charity. We do help, but everybody pays a minimum amount.

Leah Cash [00:13:19] Did you ever do a speaking engagement to the kids and went on to college campuses so you would

Lois Carson [00:13:25] You mean how do we recruit them?

Leah Cash [00:13:27] No, no. When they're the college campus for that week. Guest speakers with.

Lois Carson [00:13:32] Oh, yeah, we bring in outside people'

Leah Cash [00:13:35] Were you ever one of the guest speakers?

Lois Carson [00:13:36] Last year for the first time in 30 years, because they we did Africa. And, you know, I've been to Africa nine times, nine times. So I do in my presentation. Yeah. All that and took itn artifacts and talked about some of the areas that I had gone to.

Leah Cash [00:13:55] I've only been to Africa one time. I went to Kenya and that two day plane ride was enough for me. And so to hear you've been there nine times, that means you took that plane ride nine times. That's incredible.

Lois Carson [00:14:10] And South Africa is even farther than Kenya. Amina, were you with us when we went to South Africa?

Amina Carter [00:14:19] Yes. Yeah.

Lois Carson [00:14:20] When we flew eight hours from Johannesburg to Nairobi or not to Nairobi, then another eight hours from Nairobi to Frankfurt, Germany, then another eight hours to New York City. I said, that's a long time. That's a long plane ride

Leah Cash [00:14:39] And people and people these days, you know, when they say they're going to the motherland or they say they're going to Africa, and I look at them and I go, where? Where is Africa?

Lois Carson [00:14:51] You know, they have fifty six countries on the continent.

Leah Cash [00:14:55] Yeah, they have no idea. All they know is they're going to Africa.

Lois Carson [00:14:59] But actually Senegal is only six hours away from New York City, so that's a short ride, Dakar, Senegal, and six hours from New York City

Leah Cash [00:15:10] It's still.

Lois Carson [00:15:13] It's not long. It's 5 hours to New York

Leah Cash [00:15:15] Even if it's six hours, it's still straight ocean flying over ocean, you can't see nothing.

Lois Carson [00:15:24] Well, every black American should go to if they can't go to any other place, go to West Africa or someplace in West Africa. Because most of our ancestors come from West Africa.

Leah Cash [00:15:34] They should go. So when you spoke about Africa to the young people this year, for the first time in 30 years, how did they feel and what was it that you that you tried to get across to these young hearts?

Lois Carson [00:15:49] Well, they all were writing on Africa, so it was just complementary to what they were writing about as well. And they were assigned different countries. And we gave them a little quiz along with their essay about others. But all of the countries that I had visited were included in the ones they were focusing on. They were very interested, very interested in the artifacts and in the photos that I had to show them. And I thought it went very well. And of course, I enjoyed speaking with them about it. Danny had to talk me into doing it. But it went well,

Lois Carson [00:16:31] I'm sure very, very well. So what is your proudest moment with the Black Future Leaders?

Lois Carson [00:16:37] Oh, it would be hard to pick out one. Getting the universities to support it was a proud moment and to understand that what we did serve the needs of the university as well. It's an early outreach program and bringing them on campus exposes them to a campus. And we always have some of them pick Cal State or whatever college we were at to attend. So it does pay off to bring them on and, you know, making sure that the powers that be understand that this serves your need as well as ours. And this is a partnership.

Leah Cash [00:17:24] Well, Mrs. Carson, this was a very short interview, and we are really honored to have you speak about Black Future Leaders. We know that it's something that you, Mrs. Peacock and Danny and some of the other members who were there the beginning, like Miss Georgia Morris, and the alumni and and everyone, because it has been an outstanding organization that has empowered many young people in the Inland Empire to give back and to understand their heritage and to know who they are.

Lois Carson [00:18:01] Our alumni today include three PhDs, one, two doctors and one architect, one writer who does poetry, she was at Amina's deal at the Orange Show, she was on the program there, Fiona Wright. And Kiana Charles is doing very well on the program. We have a young man teaching English in Japan to Japanese students. So we've got some really outstanding alumni. And my vision is to get a whole bunch of them back and share that with the community that we serve, both Riverside and San Bernardino counties.

Leah Cash [00:18:53] And sharing the fact that this empowerment was not done in vain.

Lois Carson [00:18:59] No, not at all. It's been well deserved

Leah Cash [00:19:04] Well deserved. Those are fine words to close on. So thank you Ms Lois Carson so much for this interview.

Lois Carson [00:19:13] Thank you. Thanks, everybody.

Leah Cash [00:19:19] Done, that was. Did I get everything?

Amina Carter [00:19:22] I think I think you did a good job.

End of Interview:

[00:19:25]