

CHEMICAL HERITAGE FOUNDATION

**REATHA CLARK KING**

Transcript of an Interview  
Conducted by

Jeannette E. Brown

at

Minneapolis, Minnesota

on

1 May 2005

(With Subsequent Corrections and Additions)

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## REATHA CLARK KING

1938 Born in Pavo, Georgia, on 11 April

### Education

1958 B.S., Clark College  
1960 M.S., University of Chicago  
1963 Ph.D., Thermochemistry, University of Chicago

### Professional Experience

1963-1968 National Bureau of Standards, Washington, D.C.  
Research Chemist

1968-1977 York College, City University of New York, Queens, New York  
Chemistry Faculty

1970-1974 Associate Dean for the Division of Natural Sciences and  
Mathematics

1974-1977 Associate Dean for Academic Affairs

1977-1988 Metropolitan State University, St. Paul and Minneapolis, Minnesota  
President

1988-2002 General Mills, Inc., Minneapolis, Minnesota  
Vice President

1988-2002 President and Executive Director, General Mills Foundation

2002-2003 Chairperson of the Board of Directors

2004 University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, Minnesota  
Louis W. Hill, Jr. Fellow in Philanthropy, Hubert H. Humphrey  
Institute of Public Affairs

### Honors

1958-1960 Woodrow Wilson Fellow

1960-1961 National Medical Fellow

1968 Meritorious Publication Award, National Bureau of Standards

1976 Builder of Brotherhood Award, National Conference of Christians and  
Jews, Queens-Long Island Chapter

1976-1977 Rockefeller Foundation Fellowship for Higher Administration

1979 Leader Award in Education, Minneapolis YWCA

1979 Merit Award for Consumer Rights and Advocacy in Education,  
Minneapolis-St. Paul Alumnae Chapter, Delta Sigma Theta Sorority

1982 Honorary Degree, Carleton College

1983 Distinguished Alumnus Award, Clark College

1983 Paul Harris Fellow Award, St. Paul Rotary Club

1984 Communication and Leadership Award, Toastmaster's International  
District VI, Twin Cities

1984 Exceptional Black Scientist Award, CIBA-GEIGY Corporation

1984 Leader Award in Education, St. Paul YWCA

1985 Honorary Degree, SUNY Empire State College

1985 Minds in Motion Award, Science Skills Center Inc., Brooklyn, New York

1985 Spurgeon Leadership Award for Community Service, Indianhead Council  
of Boy Scouts of America

1986 Drum Major for Justice Award, Southern Christian Leadership  
Conference

1986 Educational Excellence Award, National Association of Black Women in  
Higher Education

1987 Reatha Clark King Scholarship Fund, 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Recognition of  
Presidency, Metropolitan State University

1988 Honorary Degree, Alverno College

1988 Honorary Degree, Rhode Island College

1988 Honorary Degree, Seattle University

1988 Minnesota Public Administrator of the Year Award

1988 Professional Achievement Award, University of Chicago Alumni  
Association

1988 Twin Citian of the Year Award

1989 Honorary Degree, Clark-Atlanta University

1989 Honorary Degree, Marymount Manhattan College

1990 Honorary Degree, William Mitchell College of Law

1993 Honorary Degree, Monmouth College

1993 Honorary Degree, Nazareth College

1993 Honorary Degree, Smith College

1993 Sisterhood Award for Distinguished Humanitarian Service, National  
Conference of Christians and Jews, MN Dakota Region

1994 Minneapolis NAACP Community Service Award in Education

1995 Honorary Degree, South Carolina State University

1995 Woman of Distinction Award, St. Croix Valley Girl Scouts, St. Paul,  
Minnesota

1996 Inducted into Hall of Fame, International Adult & Continuing Education

1996 Director's Choice Award for Leadership as Outstanding Corporate  
Director, National Women's Economic Alliance Foundation

1997 Community Builder Award, Boy Scouts of America, Indianhead Council

1998 Honorary Degree, Metropolitan State University

- 1999 100 Most Influential Minnesotans of the Century, *Minneapolis Star Tribune*
- 2001 Honorary Degree, Bennett College
- 2001 2001 Odyssey Award, Big Brothers and Big Sisters, Minneapolis Chapter
- 2001 National Black College Hall of Fame Award
- 2002 Phyllis Wheatley Community Center Community Services Award
- 2002 Community Leadership Award, Hennepin County Office of the County Attorney
- 2003 Humanitarian Award, Minneapolis Community and Technical College
- 2003 Special Distinction Award, General Mills Sales Division
- 2003 Pioneer Award, Women Venture Inc., Minneapolis, Minnesota
- 2003 Community Service Award, The Cookie Cart Learning Center
- 2004 Louis J. Hill, Jr. Fellowship in Philanthropy, Hubert H. Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs, University of Minnesota
- 2004 Corporate Director of the Year Award, National Association of Corporate Directors
- 2005 Inducted in Midwest Junior Achievement Business Hall of Fame
- 2005 Co-Recipient of the 2005 Lifetime Achievement in Philanthropy Award by the National Center for Black Philanthropy, Inc.
- 2008 Meritorious Service Award, Association of Occupational Therapy Foundation Board
- 2010 Winds of Change Award, Multicultural Forum, University of St. Thomas, Minneapolis, Minnesota

## ABSTRACT

**Reatha Clark King** was born in Pavo, Georgia, the second of three daughters. Her father was a sharecropper who never learned to read or write, and her mother, who went to school only through third grade, worked as a maid. There King began elementary school in the Colored church, Mt. Zion Baptist, in which one teacher taught all seven grades in one room. Her parents divorced when King was young; before the divorce, King was sent to live with her widowed maternal grandmother who lived alone. During that time, King attended elementary school in nearby Coolidge, Georgia. Later she re-joined her mother and sisters. Then her mother moved the family to Moultrie, Georgia, where King attended high school. She says she and her sisters always did well in school, and her teachers and family were always proud and supportive of her scholarship. When she was in high school King discovered science.

King had always thought she would attend Hampton University, which she had learned about in Black History Week programs. But Clark College sent a recruiter to her high school who offered her a full tuition scholarship to enroll at Clark. Chemistry was a required course for a home economics major, and King was immediately smitten with it. She resolved to become a research chemist, an ambition encouraged by Alfred Spriggs, head of the department, in whose lab she worked on gas chromatography. He and several other professors at Clark and at Morehouse College influenced King to apply for a Woodrow Wilson Fellowship and to seek admission to the best universities in the country. She won the fellowship and was admitted to the University of Chicago, where she obtained her PhD in thermochemistry. At Chicago, O.J. Kleppa was her mentor, and his wife became her friend. During these years she also met and married another chemist, N. Judge King.

Reatha King's first job was as research chemist at the National Bureau of Standards in Washington, D.C., where she remained for five years. While there she worked on a project for ARPA, the Advanced Research Projects Agency, and published several papers. She also bore two children. When her husband accepted a position at Nassau Community College in Garden City, Long Island, New York, King took an assistant professorship at York College of the City University of New York, progressing to associate dean of the college. From there she was chosen president of Metropolitan State University in Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minnesota, and the family moved to its most permanent location; King's husband became a research chemist at Minnesota Mining and Manufacturing Company (3M). After eleven years as president of Metropolitan, King joined General Mills, Inc., as a vice president, and as president of the General Mills Foundation, a philanthropic organization, where she served for fourteen years as president, and one additional year as chair of the Foundation's Board of Trustees. King has received numerous awards, including fourteen honorary degrees; and she has served on the boards of directors of many nonprofit organizations as well as of for-profit companies.

During the interview King talks about having worked hard, both in school and during summer employment as a maid; the various transitions in her life: from rural to urban; from South to North; from research lab to academia to business and then to philanthropy. She discusses the challenges posed to women and African Americans, especially in her young years; the difficulties of balancing home life with work; two-career families; her church; and the importance of attitude and communication.



## INTERVIEWER

**Jeannette E. Brown** has a research MS degree from the University of Minnesota and a BS degree in the Field of Chemistry from Hunter College. She started her industrial career at CIBA Pharmaceutical Co. as a junior chemist, working there for eleven years, and she held the position of Research Chemist at Merck & Co. Inc. for twenty-five years. Brown is a former Faculty Associate in the department of Pre-College Programs at the New Jersey Institute of Technology, holding the title of New Jersey Statewide Systemic Initiative (NJSSI) Regional Director. She was appointed to the National Science Foundation Committee on Equal Opportunities for Women Minorities and Persons with Disabilities (CEOSE) and served on that committee for six years. She is the 2005 recipient of the American Chemical Society Dreyfus Award for mentoring minorities in science and she is currently working on a book about the history of African-American women chemists.

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