

CHEMICAL HERITAGE FOUNDATION

JAMES L. SHERLEY

The Pew Scholars Program in the Biomedical Sciences

Transcript of an Interview
Conducted by

Andrea R. Maestrejuan

at

Massachusetts Institute of Technology
Cambridge, Massachusetts

on

20, 23, 24 November 1998

From the Original Collection of the University of California, Los Angeles



James A. Sherley

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This oral history is part of a series supported by a grant from the Pew Charitable Trusts based on the Pew Scholars Program in the Biomedical Sciences. This collection is an important resource for the history of biomedicine, recording the life and careers of young, distinguished biomedical scientists and of the Pew Scholars Program in the Biomedical Sciences Advisory Committee members.

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Interviewee agrees to participate in a series of University-conducted tape-recorded interviews, commencing on or about November 20, 1998, and tentatively entitled "Interview with James L. Sherley". This Agreement relates to any and all materials originating from the interviews, namely the tape recordings of the interviews and a written manuscript prepared from the tapes, hereinafter collectively called "the Work."

In consideration of the mutual covenants, conditions, and terms set forth below, the parties hereto hereby agree as follows:

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6. All notices and other official correspondence concerning this Agreement will be sent to the following:

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University and Interviewee have executed this Agreement on the date first written above.

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James L. Sherley
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JAMES L. SHERLEY

1958 Born in Memphis, Tennessee on 19 January

Education

1980 B.A., Harvard University
1988 MD/PhD, Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine

Professional Experience

1988-1991 Princeton University
Postdoctoral Fellow

1991-1998 Fox Chase Cancer Center, Department of Molecular Oncology,
Division of Medical Science
Associate Member

1993-present Meharry Medical College, Department of Biochemistry
Adjunct Assistant Professor

1998-present Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Division of Bioengineering and
Environmental Health and Center for Environmental Health Sciences
Assistant Professor

Honors

1988 National Cancer Institute, National Research Service Award
1988 Paul Ehrlich Award in Basic Science Investigation
1993-1997 Pew Scholar in the Biomedical Sciences

Selected Publications

Loeblich, A.R., III and J.L. Sherley, 1979. Observations on the theca of the motile phase of free-living and symbiotic isolates of *zooxanthella microadriatica* (Freudenthal) comb. nov. *Journal of Marine Biology Association, U.K.* 59:195-205.

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ABSTRACT

James L. Sherley was born in Memphis, Tennessee, one of five children. His parents had been sharecroppers in a small town in Mississippi, but they moved to the Memphis area so that Sherley's father could become a worker in concrete; he worked his way up to supervisor and is now safety officer for Du Pont. He also became a Baptist minister at about the time James was leaving for college. Sherley's mother's family gradually settled in the neighborhood, too, but Sherley's father's family stayed in Mississippi. As far back as he can remember, Sherley wanted to be a scientist; and he and one of his brothers were always performing experiments (making gunpowder, for example) in the backyard. In junior high school he decided he wanted to be a microbiologist. He attended a high school for college-bound students, to which he had to be bused; there an AP biology class solidified his desire to be a microbiologist and to go to Harvard. Some of his teachers encouraged him to apply elsewhere as well, but he was determined to go to Harvard. He had always done well in school, too; but though he was valedictorian of his high school, the administration thought it inappropriate that he give the commencement address (he is African-American) and asked the salutatorian (she is Caucasian) to do so instead.

At Harvard Sherley joined Alfred Loeblich's laboratory, working at first with algae. He went to Mark Ptashne's lab when Loeblich moved to the University of Houston. There he learned microbiology, worked on lambda phage, and took a course in tumor repression that pushed him into the study of cancer. He was advised that fully to realize his ambition to study cancer he should get an MD/PhD, so, although it was late in his undergraduate career, he became pre-med and eventually was accepted for the MD/PhD program at Johns Hopkins University, where he began his study of thymidine kinase in Thomas J. Kelly's lab. After receiving his MD and PhD, he took a postdoc at Princeton University, working in Arnold Levine's lab. His studies included T antigen and p53 antioncogene. His association with Levine's lab was not harmonious, and he accepted an associate membership in the Department of Molecular Oncology at the Fox Chase Cancer Center, where he stayed for seven years before running out of funding. From there he moved to Massachusetts Institute of Technology, where he is an assistant professor in the Division of Bioengineering and Environmental Health today.

Sherley is married to Marion Cunningham and has two young daughters. He continues to publish his work; to balance family life and work; and to worship God.

UCLA INTERVIEW HISTORY

INTERVIEWER:

Andrea R. Maestrejuan, Interviewer, UCLA Oral History Program; B.S., Biological Sciences, University of California, Irvine, 1986; M.A., History, University of California, Riverside, 1991; C.Phil., History, University of California, Riverside.

TIME AND SETTING OF INTERVIEW:

Place: Sherley's office, Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Dates, length of sessions: November 20, 1998 (119 minutes); November 23, 1998 (127); November 24, 1998 (150).

Total number of recorded hours: 6.6

Persons present during interview: Sherley and Maestrejuan.

CONDUCT OF INTERVIEW:

This interview is one in a series with Pew Scholars in the Biomedical Sciences conducted by the UCLA Oral History Program in conjunction with the Pew Charitable Trusts's Pew Scholars in the Biomedical Sciences Oral History and Archives Project. The project has been designed to document the backgrounds, education, and research of biomedical scientists awarded four-year Pew scholarships since 1988.

To provide an overall framework for project interviews, the director of the UCLA Oral History Program and three UCLA faculty project consultants developed a topic outline. In preparing for this interview, Maestrejuan held a telephone preinterview conversation with Sherley to obtain written background information (curriculum vitae, copies of published articles, etc.) and agree on an interviewing schedule. She also reviewed prior Pew scholars' interviews and the documentation in Sherley's file at the Pew Scholars Program office in San Francisco, including his proposal application, letters of recommendation, and reviews by Pew Scholars Program national advisory committee members. For technical background, Maestrejuan consulted J.D. Watson et al., *Molecular Biology of the Gene*. 4th ed. Menlo Park, CA: Benjamin/Cummings, 1987; Bruce Alberts et al., *Molecular Biology of the Cell*. 3rd ed. New York: Garland,

The interview is organized chronologically, beginning with Sherley's childhood in Memphis, Tennessee, and continuing through his undergraduate work at Harvard University, his graduate work at Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, his postdoc at Princeton University, and the establishment of his own lab at Fox Chase Cancer Center. Major topics discussed include influential teachers, racism, Sherley's work on thymidine kinase and the p53 antioncogene, and his acceptance of a position at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

ORIGINAL EDITING:

Ji Young Kwon, editorial assistant, edited the interview. She checked the verbatim transcript of the interview against the original tape recordings, edited for punctuation, paragraphing, and spelling, and verified proper names. Words and phrases inserted by the editor have been bracketed.

Sherley reviewed the transcript. He verified proper names and made minor corrections and additions.

William Van Benschoten, editor, prepared the table of contents. Ji Young Kwon assembled the biographical summary and interview history. Kathleen McAlister, editorial assistant, compiled the index.

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