

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Donzell Starks

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Starks, Donzell, 1960-2016
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Donzell Starks,
Dates:	August 27, 2003
Bulk Dates:	2003
Physical Description:	4 Betacame SP videocassettes (1:51:45).
Abstract:	Leisure entrepreneur Donzell Starks (1960 - 2016) started Inner-City Entertainment, the country's first African American-owned movie theater chain. Starks was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on August 27, 2003, in Chicago, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2003_207
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Chicago businessman and movie theater owner Donzell Starks was born on Chicago's South Side in 1960. His parents divorced when he was an infant. Raised by his grandmother, Starks exhibited a talent for basketball. His skills led to a scholarship at Western Illinois University, where Starks received a dual degree in finance and business administration. He later earned an M.B.A. from the Illinois Institute of Technology. After working in corporate America in banking and finance, Starks and his wife decided to take the entrepreneurial plunge. They formed Inner-City Entertainment in an effort to develop the large, untapped market of African American moviegoers. In 1991, Starks and his wife, Alicia, decided to focus on inner-city Chicago and they began to explore partnerships to build new theater complexes in minority neighborhoods - areas that major movie chains had historically neglected.

In 1997, Starks beat out Magic Johnson to win financial support from the city of Chicago to build three multiplexes on Chicago's South and West sides. The new theaters were hailed for their aesthetic beauty and their ability to bring jobs to otherwise neglected and rundown areas. By 1999, Starks expanded his theater empire, building a new cinema in Charlotte, North Carolina, and setting his sights on other inner-city neighborhoods around the country. The same year, the company partnered to create the Meridian Entertainment Group, which began by opening a chain of Meridian Theaters and then acquired eight existing Chicago movie theaters. In just two years, Starks had gone from just three multiplexes to controlling 20 percent of Chicago's movie screens. A downturn in the market and other problems forced Starks to cut back to their original investments, which he operates with his wife today. They see their movie theaters as community centers.

Donzell Starks married his high school sweetheart, Alisa, in 1988. They were both life and business partners and lived with their son, Ahmad, in Chicago.

Starks passed away on October 2, 2016.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Donzell Starks was conducted by Larry Crowe on August 27, 2003, in Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on 4 Betacame SP videocassettes. Leisure entrepreneur Donzell Starks (1960 - 2016) started Inner-City Entertainment, the country's first African American-owned movie theater chain.

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:

Starks, Donzell, 1960-2016

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Starks, Donzell, 1960-2016--Interviews

African American businesspeople--Illinois--Chicago--Interviews

African American executives--Illinois--Chicago--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Leisure Entrepreneur

HistoryMakers® Category:

MediaMakers

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 Donzell Starks, August 27, 2003. 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 Donzell Starks, Section A2003_207_001_001, TRT: 0:29:05 ?
Donzell Starks was born on January 7, 1960 in Chicago, Illinois. After his birth, he was adopted by his maternal grandmother, Mazola Robinson who worked for the Oscar Mayer Company for forty years. Her father, Curtis Robinson, was a sharecropper in Pine Bluff, Arkansas. Starks had limited relationships with his

biological mother and father, and with his stepdad. Starks describes his birth mother and adoptive mother's migration from Arkansas to Chicago. He also talks about his earliest childhood memory and the sights, sounds, and smells of his childhood in Chicago. As a child, Starks attended Burnside Elementary School and enjoyed playing baseball and basketball. His academic performance and test scores allowed him to attend Hales Franciscan High School, a private school. Starks remembers looking up to professional basketball stars like "Dr. J" (Julius Erving), Earl "The Pearl" (Earl Monroe), and Nate "Tiny" Archibald. He also talks about his religious upbringing in the Baptist church.

African American businesspeople--Illinois--Chicago--Interviews.

African American executives--Illinois--Chicago--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with Donzell Starks, Section A2003_207_001_002, TRT: 0:30:15 ?

Donzell Starks describes his experience at Hales Franciscan High School in Chicago, Illinois where he played basketball. Starks met his future wife, HistoryMaker Alisa Starks as an eighth grader. Alisa's father, Levert Paul King, Jr. became a mentor to Starks, and her family taught him the value of education. After graduating from high school, Starks enrolled at Western Illinois University in Macomb, Illinois. During his freshman year, Starks' love of basketball waned, while his interest in business grew and he was mentored by David Patterson (also known as Dr. Matavanah). He decided to become an investment banker during a party at the Playboy Club in Lake Geneva, Wisconsin. After graduating in 1982, Starks worked for MetLife and Highland Community Bank in Chicago before enrolling at the Illinois Institute of Technology where he received his M.B.A. degree in 1987. He then worked for the Bank of Montreal in Los Angeles, California where Stark and his wife began to think about opening their own movie theater.

Video Oral History Interview with Donzell Starks, Section A2003_207_001_003, TRT: 0:30:15 ?

Donzell Starks founded Inner City Entertainment (ICE) with his wife, HistoryMaker Alisa Starks in 1992 to bring movie theaters to minority neighborhoods. Unable to raise money from black banks, Starks used his business school training to conduct a forty million dollar deal with GE Capital. Starks describes selecting the location of ICE's first theater on East 87th Street in Chicago, Illinois. In 1997, Starks won a real estate battle against basketball star Magic Johnson to build ICE's first multiplex. In the theater's development, Starks worked closely with Alderman Jesse Evans, gang members, and other community members to establish a safe, welcoming theater. Starks talks about the theater's positive impact on the community and an unpopular hats-off policy at the theater. Stark's foundation, Fundamentally Sound, provides basketball coaching and scholarships to students from Chicago area high schools. Starks talks about his desire to build a large indoor sports complex.

Video Oral History Interview with Donzell Starks, Section A2003_207_001_004, TRT: 0:22:10 ?

Donzell Starks and his wife, HistoryMaker Alisa Starks, owned Water Tower Theater and Hyde Park Theater in addition to developing Inner City Entertainment Theaters. He remembers the challenge of securing a loan for Inner City Entertainment as a young, black male. Starks shares his thoughts on the relationship between professional athletes and money. He also describes his hopes and concerns for the black community. Starks reflects upon his legacy and describes how he would like to be remembered.