

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with The Honorable Gregory Mathis

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers® 1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Mathis, Greg
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Gregory Mathis,
Dates:	December 15, 2006 and February 25, 2005
Bulk Dates:	2005 and 2006
Physical Description:	7 Betacame SP videocassettes (3:17:58).
Abstract:	Federal district court judge and television personality The Honorable Gregory Mathis (1960 -) was the youngest elected judge in Michigan's history, and the host of the Warner Brothers Television program, the Judge Mathis Show. Mathis was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on December 15, 2006 and February 25, 2005, in Chicago, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2005_055
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Judge Greg Mathis, the youngest elected judge in Michigan's history, was born on April 5, 1960, in Detroit, Michigan. Raised by his mother, Mathis's troubled upbringing and membership in the Errol Flynn's gang is documented in his 2002 autobiography *Inner City Miracle*. After attending Herman Gardens Elementary School, Peterson Seventh Day Adventist School, and Wayne Memorial High School, Mathis earned his GED through Operation PUSH while on juvenile probation in 1977. Mathis received his B.S. degree in public administration from Eastern Michigan University in 1982 and his J.D. degree from the University of Detroit Law School in 1987. Mathis led the Free South Africa and voter registration campaigns at Eastern Michigan University.

In 1983 Mathis joined the staff of Detroit City Councilman Clyde Cleveland, volunteered for Operation Push, and worked on Reverend Jesse Jackson's presidential campaign in 1984. In 1986, Mathis, his wife Linda, and some friends formed Young Adults Asserting Themselves (YAAT) and four preschools in Detroit. Chosen to head Reverend Jackson's 1988 presidential campaign in Michigan, Mathis later worked as the manager of Detroit's Neighborhood City Halls for the late Mayor Coleman A. Young. In 1995, Mathis was elected to Michigan's 36 District Court, and in 1998 Warner Brothers Television launched the *Judge Mathis Show*.

Featured prominently in both the print and electronic media, Mathis has been the recipient of many awards and honors. A chairman of Rainbow/PUSH-Excel board, a lifetime member of the NAACP, and a member the Southern Christian Leadership Conference board, Mathis and his wife and college sweetheart, Linda, have raised four children.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with The Honorable Gregory Mathis was conducted by Larry Crowe on December

15, 2006 and February 25, 2005, in Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on 7 Betacame SP videocassettes. Federal district court judge and television personality The Honorable Gregory Mathis (1960 -) was the youngest elected judge in Michigan's history, and the host of the Warner Brothers Television program, the Judge Mathis Show.

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:

Mathis, Greg

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Pancerer, Victor (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Mathis, Greg--Interviews

African American judges--Interviews

African American television personalities--Interviews

African American civic leaders--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Federal District Court Judge

Television Personality

HistoryMakers® Category:

LawMakers|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 The Honorable Gregory Mathis, December 15, 2006 and February 25, 2005. 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 The Honorable Gregory Mathis, Section A2005_055_001_001,
TRT: 0:28:57 ?

The Honorable Gregory Mathis was born on April 5, 1960 in Detroit, Michigan. His maternal great-great grandmother was enslaved in South Carolina and moved to Georgia after emancipation. His maternal grandfather, Walter Lee, grew up in a sharecropping family. He was married first to Mathis' great-aunt. When she died, he remarried Mathis' grandmother, Amanda Griffin Lee, and later worked for the president of Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University in Tallahassee, Florida. One of Mathis' cousins eventually became president of the university. Mathis' mother, Alice Lee Mathis, was born in 1929 in Amsterdam, Georgia. She married young and had Mathis' three older brothers. After they divorced, she moved to Detroit, Michigan, where she met Mathis' father, Charles Mathis. They divorced when Mathis was two, and she raised Mathis and his brothers alone. Growing up in West Detroit, he frequently attended City Temple Seventh-day Adventist Church and smelled the stench from nearby factories.

African American judges--Interviews.

African American television personalities--Interviews.

African American civic leaders--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Gregory Mathis, Section A2005_055_001_002,
TRT: 0:29:33 ?

The Honorable Gregory Mathis grew up surrounded by the sounds of Motown and funk in the S. James Herman Gardens Housing Projects. When Mathis' family first moved there in 1965, the area was majority white, and they faced racial antagonism. Mathis remembers Black Panther patrols to protect black residents from their white neighbors. With his mother working two jobs, Mathis spent most of his time with his much older brothers. He was a smart child, but constantly in trouble. Mathis attended Herman Gardens Elementary School until first grade, when his mother sent him to the Seventh-day Adventist school Peterson-Warren Academy in Inkster, Michigan. After he was caught stealing in fifth grade, he attended Southfield Academy for a year before being allowed to return to Peterson-Warren. By 1972, drugs, crime and aggressive policing were prominent in the housing projects, and Mathis' mother was attacked on her way to work. As a young teen, Mathis started smoking cigarettes and marijuana and getting into fights.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Gregory Mathis, Section A2005_055_002_003,
TRT: 0:29:22 ?

The Honorable Gregory Mathis grew up around the sounds of Motown and the industry in Detroit. His mother, Alice Lee Mathis, worked two jobs while raising Mathis and his three older brothers. After one of Mathis' teachers smacked him in school, his mother hit her back and transferred him to Peterson-Warren Academy, a Seventh-day Adventist school in Inkster, Michigan. Despite frequently breaking the rules, Mathis enjoyed showing his intelligence in class and in front of his brother's friends. Church and school gave Mathis a critical foundation that helped him later in life when he was in jail. He sank further into crime as a teenager, and his mother once caught him stealing from the neighbors. She sent him to live with his father in East Detroit for a summer. While there, he discovered that his father fenced stolen goods for a gang called the Errol Flynns. Mathis then became a member of the gang.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Gregory Mathis, Section A2005_055_002_004,
TRT: 0:28:36 ?

The Honorable Gregory Mathis joined a gang as a young man, and at age seventeen was sentenced to jail. He was inspired when HistoryMaker Reverend Jesse L. Jackson spoke to the inmates. When his mother was diagnosed with cancer, she begged Mathis to turn his life around. She appealed to the judge, who ordered Mathis to complete his GED in six months or be sent to prison. After Mathis earned his GED, his cousin encouraged him to pursue college. With help from a university administrator, he enrolled at Eastern Michigan University in Ypsilanti, Michigan before his mother passed away. After her death, he slipped back into some illegal activity, but never returned completely to his previous crimes. He was ostracized by his old friends in the housing projects. Mathis' involvement with student activism, particularly anti-apartheid work, helped him realize his passion for helping his community. Mathis graduated from Eastern Michigan University in 1982 hoping to enroll in law school or enter local politics.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Gregory Mathis, Section A2005_055_002_005, TRT: 0:28:12 ?

The Honorable Gregory Mathis graduated from Eastern Michigan University in 1983 and interned with the Detroit City Council as he applied to law schools. At one of HistoryMaker Reverend Jesse L. Jackson's organizing meetings in Detroit, Mathis was able to thank him in person for speaking at the jail and inspiring him to reform. Jackson appointed Mathis youth director for Michigan. Annette Rainwater, a city council employee, recognized Mathis' potential and helped him land a position working for City Councilman Clyde Cleveland. Mathis graduated from the law school at the University of Detroit in 1988, but his criminal record barred him from receiving his license immediately. After appealing to the state bar ethics committee and finally, the Michigan State Supreme Court, Mathis was granted his license. Detroit Mayor Coleman Young noticed Mathis' work in helping Jackson win the primary in Michigan and recruited him as director of the neighborhood city hall, where he was able to help his community.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Gregory Mathis, Section A2005_055_002_006, TRT: 0:29:10 ?

The Honorable Gregory Mathis founded Young Adults Asserting Themselves in 1986. The program helps at-risk youth with job training and education. Mathis was a political campaign operative and a criminal defense attorney after Mayor Coleman Young retired from office. His commitment to community youth drove him to run for district court judge in 1994. He sought to emphasize rehabilitation and restoration, despite mandatory minimum sentencing laws. During his campaign, Mathis was criticized by the media for his criminal record and, once elected, was ostracized by other judges who were unhappy that he had beat an incumbent. Mathis enjoyed aiding people who faced the challenges he had, and was able to guide old friends seeking help. He also hosted a weekly community-oriented radio show. His success as a judge led a film crew to contact Mathis about making a movie based on his story. Warner Brothers Entertainment, Inc. instead suggested that he star as a new TV court judge and approved 'Judge Mathis' for production.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Gregory Mathis, Section A2005_055_002_007, TRT: 0:24:08 ?

The Honorable Gregory Mathis was heavily involved with Rainbow/PUSH and supporting HistoryMaker Reverend Jesse L. Jackson when he was offered his own TV show. Although he had assumed a larger role in the organization in preparation for Jackson's presidential run, he decided to take the television role

instead in hopes of inspiring a larger audience. 'Judge Mathis,' which first aired in 1999, invites small claims cases to be tried on the show. Mathis reflects on his show's impact and the appeal of courtroom shows in general. In sharing his hopes and concerns for the African American community, he stresses supporting and encouraging young black men. He regrets the criminal choices he made as a youth. Mathis believes his legacy is the opportunities he gave to marginalized and impoverished communities. He hopes to be remembered as someone who fought for social justice. Mathis and his wife, Linda Mathis, have two daughters and two sons, and he keeps in touch with friends and family from his home neighborhood.