

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Nelson Davis

Overview of the Collection

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| Repository: | The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com |
| Creator: | Davis, Nelson, 1942- |
| Title: | The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Nelson Davis, |
| Dates: | September 18, 2008 |
| Bulk Dates: | 2008 |
| Physical Description: | 5 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:12:30). |
| Abstract: | Television producer Nelson Davis (1942 -) started his own production company, Nelson Davis Television Productions. He created and co-produced 'Campus All-Star Challenge,' and produced the pilot episode of Jeopardy! Davis also served as director of daytime programming for NBC. Davis was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on September 18, 2008, in Los Angeles, California. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview. |
| Identification: | A2008_114 |
| Language: | The interview and records are in English. |

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Production executive Nelson Davis was born Nelson Lee-Earnest Davis, Jr. on October 6, 1942, in Andalusia, Alabama, and grew up in Niagara Falls, New York. At the age of fourteen, Davis knew he wanted to pursue a career in radio broadcasting. His career began with a high school internship program and part-time announcing job at a local radio station. From Niagara Falls, he moved to a larger station in Ottawa, Ontario, where he took courses in business, worked as a program director and hosted various television shows.

After becoming a freelance host and producer, Davis worked on a series for PBS, commercials for presidential candidate Ronald Reagan, and a film in Africa. In 1980, Davis joined the NBC-TV network as manager of mini-series, eventually becoming director of daytime programming. His first weekly series was *MAKING IT! Minority Success Stories*, a show that was on the air from March of 1989 and received over twenty-five awards and citations, including two local Emmy Awards as Best Public Affairs series. In 1984, Davis was named the executive producer of *Name That Tune* for the show's rebirth. He was hired by Merv Griffin to produce the pilot episode of *Jeopardy!*, and he helped launch the Fashion Channel. He started his own production company in 1988, Nelson Davis Television Productions. The following year, his production company created and co-produced *Campus All-Star Challenge*, a quiz series for historically black colleges. Nelson Davis Television Productions also produced children's specials built around oral storytelling, and *Black History Notes*.

Davis serves as the Los Angeles Area Vice President of the Academy of Television Arts & Sciences. He is a member of the Board of Advisors for the National Association of Women Business Owners and is on the Board of Directors of the Pacific Coast Regional Small Business Development Corporation. Davis is a member of the Santa Monica College Associates and has also been active with Big Brothers. He is the recipient of numerous awards, including the Media Advocate of the Year Award and the Minority Advocate of the Year Award from the U.S. Small Business Administration, the Supplier of the Year Award from the Southern California Regional Purchasing

Council, and the Entrepreneurial Dream Maker Award from the Women's Enterprise Development Corporation. Davis also received the Entertainment Award from the Los Angeles Mayor's Minority Business Committee.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Nelson Davis was conducted by Larry Crowe on September 18, 2008, in Los Angeles, California, and was recorded on 5 Betacame SP videocassettes. Television producer Nelson Davis (1942 -) started his own production company, Nelson Davis Television Productions. He created and co-produced 'Campus All-Star Challenge,' and produced the pilot episode of Jeopardy! Davis also served as director of daytime programming for NBC.

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:

Davis, Nelson, 1942-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Davis, Nelson, 1942- --Interviews

African American television producers and directors--Interviews

African American businesspeople--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Television Producer

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 Nelson Davis, September 18, 2008. 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 Nelson Davis, Section A2008_114_001_001, TRT: 0:29:00 ?

Nelson Davis was born on October 6, 1942 in Andalusia, Alabama to Lorean Spears Davis and Nelson Davis, Sr. Davis' mother was born in 1907 in Florida, and moved with her family to Andalusia when she was a child. There, she completed seven years of schooling, and later worked as a domestic. Davis' maternal grandmother eventually moved from Andalusia to Montgomery, Alabama for her domestic work. Davis' paternal grandmother, Camille Davis, was part Seminole Native American and part African American, and her father was freed before slavery ended. Davis' father was born in 1904 in Andalusia, where he dropped out of school to farm cotton, and worked at a saw mill. He met Davis' mother while walking past her home on his way to work. Davis grew up poor in Center Court, a public housing development in Niagara Falls, New York. The only boy, he had two older sisters, and one younger sister. He and his mother regularly collected discarded batteries from a nearby factory, and sold the scrap metal to a junk dealer.

African American television producers and directors--Interviews.

African American businesspeople--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with Nelson Davis, Section A2008_114_001_002, TRT: 0:28:20 ?

Nelson Davis moved with his family from Andalusia, Alabama to Niagara Falls, New York at the end of World War II. In Niagara Falls, they lived in Center Court, a public housing development. Davis' father worked for the Vanadium Corporation of America, while his mother stayed at home. Davis began his formal education at Center Avenue School in Niagara Falls. There, he was mentored by his fifth grade teacher. In addition to social studies and the sciences, Davis developed an interest in science fiction from watching television programs like 'Tom Corbett, Space Cadet' and 'Flash Gordon.' During this time, Davis also listened to radio broadcasts and the New York Yankees games. At fifteen years old, he saw James Brown and The Flames perform at the Buffalo Memorial Auditorium. Davis attended North Junior High School, where he was elected seventh grade class president. At Niagara Falls High School, he was placed in an accelerated program, which hosted guest speakers, including astronomers and nuclear physicists.

Video Oral History Interview with Nelson Davis, Section A2008_114_001_003, TRT: 0:29:30 ?

Nelson Davis' older sister took him to see live performances of musicians like Chuck Berry and James Brown in Buffalo, New York. At Niagara Falls High School, he aspired to become a disc jockey, and practiced on a wire recorder. During his senior year, Davis participated in a radio broadcasting internship program. Upon graduating, he sent demos to local radio stations, securing his first job at CHVC Radio in Niagara Falls, Canada. Davis then moved to Ottawa, Canada to work as a late-night deejay at CKOY Radio. At this time, he took courses at Carleton University in Ottawa, and hosted a travel program for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. To pursue his dream of being a game show host, Davis moved to Los Angeles, California in 1976. There, Davis transitioned from radio to television, and hosted 'Vox Populi,' a public affairs show at KCOP-TV. He also produced television spots for Ronald Wilson Reagan's presidential campaign, and created his first documentary about the history of African Americans in film.

Video Oral History Interview with Nelson Davis, Section A2008_114_001_004, TRT: 0:28:20 ?

Nelson Davis began producing television documentaries in the late 1970s. In 1980, he joined the mini-series department at NBC network. Eventually, he was

promoted to director of daytime programming. In this role, he developed ten pilots in one year, and became involved in game show development. Davis helped revive popular shows, such as 'Jeopardy!' and 'Name That Tune,' which had become inactive. He also served as the censor for 'The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson,' where he worked with singer Lena Horne, and comedians Eddie Murphy and Joan Rivers. In 1988, Davis founded his own company, Nelson Davis Productions. Through this venture, Davis produced 'Campus All-Star Challenge,' which was inspired by the 'The General Electric College Bowl'; and 'Making It! Minority Success Stories,' a show that acknowledged the successes of small business owners who overcame setbacks. Davis describes his production philosophy, his hopes for the African American community; and reflects upon his life and legacy.

Video Oral History Interview with Nelson Davis, Section A2008_114_001_005, TRT: 0:17:20 ?

Nelson Davis, at the time of the interview, had been married for twenty-two years. Although he does not have children, he has eight nieces and nephews. In addition, he talks about his extended family, composed of individuals from his community outreach activities, and from his professional life, such as his former employee, Kimberly Holmes-Lamar, and her children. Davis shares his advice for aspiring media professionals; and describes how he would like to be remembered. He concludes the interview by narrating his photographs.