

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Derrick Pitts

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Pitts, Derrick
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Derrick Pitts,
Dates:	March 25, 2013 and May 23, 2012
Bulk Dates:	2012 and 2013
Physical Description:	13 uncompressed MOV digital video files (6:21:28).
Abstract:	Atmospheric scientist Derrick Pitts (1955 -) was the chief astronomer and planetarium director for Philadelphia's The Franklin Institute. As a noted scientist, he also appeared on national television programs. Pitts was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on March 25, 2013 and May 23, 2012, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2012_119
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Astronomer Derrick Pitts was born on January 22, 1955 in the Tioga-Nicetown section of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. As a child, Pitts was fascinated by outer space and rockets. After graduating from Germantown Academy, he received his B.S. degree in geology from St. Lawrence University in 1978.

Pitts began working at The Franklin Institute as a young college student. He was hired as The Franklin Institute's chief astronomer and planetarium director after completing his degree. In these roles, he developed and oversaw all of the Institute's astronomy and space-related programs and exhibits, frequently hosted the live "Sky Tonight" planetarium show and interviewed John Glenn and Carl Sagan. Pitts also served as the original director of Tuttleman OMNIMAX Theater and as museum vice president. In 2002, he oversaw the renovation of The Franklin Institute's Fels Planetarium and played an integral role in the design of the new astronomy exhibit, 'Space Command.' Pitts became the host of "SkyTalk" on WHYY Radio in 2008. One year later, he served as the United States spokesperson for the International Year of Astronomy. In 2011, Pitts was named a National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) Solar System Ambassador. He has appeared on many national television shows as a science expert including the Comedy Channel's "Colbert Report" and "The Late, Late Show with Craig Ferguson." Pitts served as a regular contributor on Current TV's Countdown with Keith Olberman as well as programs on CNN International and MSNBC.

Pitts has held numerous positions in academic and community organizations including serving as president of the Greater Philadelphia Chapter of Tuskegee Airmen, Inc. and on the Board of Trustees for his alma mater St. Lawrence University and Widener University. He is the recipient of numerous awards including the Mayor's Liberty Bell, the St. Lawrence University Distinguished Alumni Award, the G. W. Carver Medal and Please Touch Museum's "Great Friend To Kids" Award. Pitts was inducted into the Germantown Historical Society Hall of Fame and selected as one of the "50 Most Important Blacks in Research Science" by *Science Spectrum Magazine* in 2004. He received the 2010 David Rittenhouse Award and an honorary Doctor of Science degree from LaSalle

University in 2011. Pitts lives with his wife Linda in the Wynnefield Heights section of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Derrick Pitts was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on May 23, 2012.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Derrick Pitts was conducted by Larry Crowe on March 25, 2013 and May 23, 2012, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and was recorded on 13 uncompressed MOV digital video files. Atmospheric scientist Derrick Pitts (1955 -) was the chief astronomer and planetarium director for Philadelphia's The Franklin Institute. As a noted scientist, he also appeared on national television programs.

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:

Pitts, Derrick

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Pitts, Derrick--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Franklin Institute (Philadelphia, Pa.)

Occupations:

Atmospheric Scientist

HistoryMakers® Category:

ScienceMakers

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 Derrick Pitts, March 25, 2013 and May 23, 2012.
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 Derrick Pitts, Section A2012_119_001_001, TRT: 1:30:00 ?

Derrick Pitts talks discusses his family history. His mother, Shirley Mae DuPree Pitts, was born in September of 1916 in Sumter, South Carolina. Although she was an only child, she was raised with her cousins as sisters. After taking business courses in high school, she pursued a career doing secretarial and bookkeeping work. Pitts' father, Cornelius Ruben Pitts, was born in January of 1912 in Milledgeville, Georgia. Cornelius served in the military during World War II and left with the rank of Staff Sergeant. Although Pitts grew up living with his mother and grandmother, he developed a close relationship with his father.

Video Oral History Interview with Derrick Pitts, Section A2012_119_001_002, TRT: 2:29:23 ?

Derrick Pitts describes his father's experience serving in the United States Navy. His father also had impressive technical skills and enjoyed farming. Although he did not live with his father, they share much in common. Pitts describes his childhood neighborhood in Nice Town, Pennsylvania, as well as the sights, sounds and smells of growing up. He attended Cleveland Elementary School up until the sixth grade. Pitts realized he loved science when he was four years old. His favorite subjects in school were always science and he was mainly influenced by his innate curiosity.

Video Oral History Interview with Derrick Pitts, Section A2012_119_001_003, TRT: 3:29:00 ?

Derrick Pitts discusses his intrinsic scientific curiosity. He was fascinated with disassembling or deconstructing devices to achieve an understanding about its components and how it was constructed. He talks about the role that church had in his life and also reflects on the conflicts between science and religion. Some members of his church assumed that his scientific fervor implied that he was an atheist, but Pitts rejects the label and asserts that he has the ability to distinguish between faith and science.

Video Oral History Interview with Derrick Pitts, Section A2012_119_001_004, TRT: 4:33:17 ?

Derrick Pitts talks about his favorite television show, 'Star Trek', and how he was able to identify with one of the characters, Spock. Although the show had black characters, Pitts was more drawn to Spock's character. He attended Gillespie Junior High School, where he met one of his first mentors. While at Gillespie, he conducted science demonstrations and his favorite demonstrations involved fire. By this time, he realized that he enjoyed sharing what he knew about science. After he graduated from Gillespie in 1969, he attended a private high school called Germantown Academy.

Video Oral History Interview with Derrick Pitts, Section A2012_119_001_005, TRT: 5:29:24 ?

Derrick Pitts describes his high school experience at Germantown Academy in Fort Washington, Pennsylvania. While he had always been an excellent student, he struggled academically and had to repeat the tenth grade. Despite his academic struggles, he adapted to the social atmosphere. He joined the choir while at Georgetown Academy and was afforded the opportunity to travel internationally. After graduating from Germantown Academy in 1973, he attended St. Lawrence University.

Video Oral History Interview with Derrick Pitts, Section A2012_119_001_006, TRT: 6:29:10 ?

Derrick Pitts describes his experience at St. Lawrence University. He struggled to adjust to the demands of college when he first entered college. After a year of poor coursework, Pitts decided to leave St. Lawrence for a semester. He returned in January of 1974 with a refocused attitude and he did better from that point on. During the summers, he worked at the Franklin Institute Science Museum and was offered a full time position as a science explainer when he graduated, in

1978. He talks about the trajectory of his career.

Video Oral History Interview with Derrick Pitts, Section A2012_119_002_007, TRT: 7:31:47 ?

Derrick Pitts studied geology at St. Lawrence University in Canton, New York. During the summer, he completed field work in geology, and worked at The Franklin Institute Science Museum in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. In his final year of study, he was offered a full-time position as a demonstrator by the then assistant director of education Charles F. Penniman. Upon graduating in 1978, Pitts accepted the position, and worked in the observatory. During his early years at the museum, Pitts secured funding for new equipment, and began writing and producing science programs. After two years, Pitts was promoted to museum educator. In this role, he developed astronomy workshops, and began changing how instruments were being utilized at the facility. In addition, Pitts collaborated with Fels Planetarium, which operated within The Franklin Institute, for astronomy programming and educational workshops. Pitts concludes this portion of the interview by describing the leading planetarium directors in the 1970s.

Video Oral History Interview with Derrick Pitts, Section A2012_119_002_008, TRT: 8:28:05 ?

Derrick Pitts served as the show producer for the Fels Planetarium at The Franklin Institute in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. In this capacity, he worked under the supervision of director H. George Hamilton. By 1983, Pitts' duties were fully centered on the planetarium, where he learned the new automated system, developed programs and produced shows. He also had the opportunity to interview astronomer and co-creator of 'Cosmos: A Personal Voyage' Carl Sagan for his program, 'Sky Talk' on the National Public Radio affiliate WHYR Radio in Philadelphia. On January 28, 1986, the Space Shuttle Challenger exploded minutes after take-off. Pitts explained the scientific and technical difficulties that led to the explosion during an appearance at a news press conference that broadcasted to the City of Philadelphia. Pitts also talks about Benjamin Franklin and his interest in science. To conclude this portion of the interview, Pitts describes the factors that contributed to the Space Shuttle Challenger disaster.

Video Oral History Interview with Derrick Pitts, Section A2012_119_002_009, TRT: 9:28:52 ?

Derrick Pitts arranged to upgrade the Fels Planetarium's classic star projector to the Digistar system, the first computerized video planetarium projector, with the help and support of planetarium director H. George Hamilton. During this period, Pitts also assumed the responsibility of lead content developer for an earth science exhibit called 'Changing Earth.' After two years of development, Pitts was tasked with organizing another exhibit for the Futures Center of Philadelphia at The Franklin Institute. He continued to operate the observatory, and produce shows at the Fels Planetarium. In 1988, H. George Hamilton announced his retirement, at which time Pitts assumed responsibility for completing the construction of the IMAX Theater at The Franklin Institute. In April of 1990, Pitts was promoted to director of the IMAX Theater, and months later he was elevated to the position of museum vice president for the IMAX and Fels Planetarium theaters. He also talks about his early influences in astronomy.

Video Oral History Interview with Derrick Pitts, Section A2012_119_002_010, TRT: 10:29:44 ?

Derrick Pitts became the first African American director of the Fels Planetarium and vice president at The Franklin Institute Science Museum in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. As vice president of the flagship IMAX theater, Pitts organized the management and operational structure for the content component of The Franklin Institute. He also brought in actors Leonard Nimoy and Avery Brooks to do the narration for the programs. Between 1994 and 1995, Pitts' returned to

his role as director of the Fels Planetarium and exhibit developer, and he was relieved of his other IMAX related responsibilities. Pitts continued his work of developing programming and workshops for the planetarium. He also hosted radio shows and frequently acted as a science spokesperson. During this period, Pitts created the television program 'Neptune All Night' for WHYY-TV. He also talks about the impact of the internet on astronomy and his regular invitations to attend space shuttle launches at the National Aeronautics and Space Administration.

Video Oral History Interview with Derrick Pitts, Section A2012_119_002_011, TRT: 11:28:05 ?

Derrick Pitts developed an exhibit focused on the science of Benjamin Franklin and The Franklin Institute Science Museum itself called the 'Wonderland of Science.' He also had the opportunity to give presentations as part of a lecture series aboard a Cunard Line cruise ship. In this capacity, Pitts was also tasked with commanding the ship during a solar eclipse. He mapped out a course, and provided everyone with viewing equipment. When Dennis Wint became the president and CEO of The Franklin Institute Science Museum in 2001, Pitts was placed in charge of the complete overhaul of the Fels Planetarium's theater. Pitts also began to appear on national television, becoming a frequent guest on 'Countdown with Keith Olbermann.' In 2006, Pitts supervised the renovations at the Joel N. Bloom Observatory at The Franklin Institute Science Museum. As a part of The Color of Science program, Pitts interviewed and held panel discussions with scientists of color like Odest Jenkins, Edward Tunstel and James West.

Video Oral History Interview with Derrick Pitts, Section A2012_119_002_012, TRT: 12:28:39 ?

Derrick Pitts served on the board of trustees at Widener University in Chester, Pennsylvania and at St. Lawrence University in Canton, New York. In 2010, Pitts organized a star party at the White House. He provided viewing instruments for all the attendants, and set up a telescope for President Barack Obama and the First Family. At this point in the interview, Pitts talks about his work on national television as a science communicator with appearances on 'The Colbert Report,' 'Countdown with Keith Olbermann' and 'The Late Late Night Show with Craig Ferguson.' He also talks about African American representation in the sciences and his involvement with Philadelphia's local chapter of Tuskegee Airmen, Inc. In addition, Pitts secured a grant funded by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration to bring astronomy education to community centers in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Pitts concludes this portion of the interview by describing his hopes and concerns for the African American community.

Video Oral History Interview with Derrick Pitts, Section A2012_119_002_013, TRT: 13:26:02 ?

Derrick Pitts reflects upon his life and legacy, and talks about his family. Pitts also reflects upon the importance of African American representation in astronomy, highlighting the prominence of astrophysicist Neil deGrasse Tyson. He goes on to talk about the state of STEM education, and the importance of encouraging children to develop their interest in science and technology. At this point in the interview, Pitts recalls the Chelyabinsk Event in Chelyabinsk, Russia in 2013. Pitts concludes the interview by describing how he would like to be remembered.