

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Donna Britt

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Britt, Donna
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Donna Britt,
Dates:	August 9, 2013 and March 20, 2014
Bulk Dates:	2013 and 2014
Physical Description:	10 uncompressed MOV digital video files (4:16:41).
Abstract:	Newspaper columnist Donna Britt (1954 -) was an award-winning columnist and the author of 'Brothers (& Me): A Memoir of Loving and Giving.' Britt was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on August 9, 2013 and March 20, 2014, in Silver Spring, Maryland. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2013_212
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Journalist and author Donna Britt was born in Gary, Indiana, to Thomas and Geraldine Britt. The sole daughter among four children, Britt grew up in a tight-knit, achievement-focused household. She graduated from Gary West Side High School in 1972, and attended Hampton University, where she graduated in 1976 with her B.A. degree in Mass Media Arts. The following year, Britt began working on her M.A. degree in journalism from the University of Michigan. In 1977, her older brother Darrell was shot and killed by a pair of Gary policemen. After internships with the Charlotte Observer and the Ann Arbor News, Britt graduated with her M.A. degree from the University of Michigan in 1979.

After graduation, Britt was hired as a staff writer for the *Detroit Free Press*, working for six years as a general assignment reporter, feature writer and fashion columnist. While in Detroit, Britt married a local public relations executive, a union that lasted three years and produced two sons. In 1985, she was hired as an editor at *USA Today*, eventually becoming the newspaper's Los Angeles bureau chief and co-movie critic, positions she held until 1989. That year, Britt attained her "dream job" as a writer for the Style section of the *Washington Post*. After three years in Style, Britt was promoted to Metro columnist. Her opinion pieces covered a range of subjects, including gender and race relations, pop culture, books, film, and personal recollections. Syndicated by The Washington Post Writer's Group, Britt's column eventually appeared in sixty-two newspapers. From 2009 to 2010, Britt served as a columnist for the Politics Daily online news website.

In 2011, Britt published the critically-acclaimed book *Brothers (& Me): A Memoir of Loving and Giving*, which was excerpted by Essence magazine and listed as one of "10 Titles to Pick Up Now" by *O Magazine*. Winner of numerous local and national awards, Britt was nominated by the Washington Post for the Pulitzer Prize in journalism in 1990. That same year, she won Best Commentary from the National Association of Black Journalists. Britt's columns won numerous local and national awards, including the Distinguished Writing Award for commentary and column writing by the American Society of Newspaper Editors, and honors from the American Association of Sunday and Feature Editors. Britt is married to Washington Post Managing Editor Kevin Merida.

They have three sons: Justin Britt-Gibson, Darrell Britt-Gibson and Skye Merida.

Donna Britt was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on August 6, 2013.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Donna Britt was conducted by Larry Crowe on August 9, 2013 and March 20, 2014, in Silver Spring, Maryland, and was recorded on 10 uncompressed MOV digital video files. Newspaper columnist Donna Britt (1954 -) was an award-winning columnist and the author of 'Brothers (& Me): A Memoir of Loving and Giving.'

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:

Britt, Donna

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Britt, Donna--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Newspaper Columnist

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 Donna Britt, August 9, 2013 and March 20, 2014. 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 Donna Britt, Section A2013_212_001_001, TRT: 1:28:28 ?
Donna Britt slates the interview and lists her favorites. She talks about her mother's family background and how she was raised in a boarding house in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. She discusses her family's history in medical

practice and her maternal grandparents' occupations. She discusses her mother's college education. Britt also talks about her father's family background, how they got from Manakin, Virginia to Gary, Indiana, and her father's talent for basketball in high school. Britt's father also played basketball in the Navy. She talks about how her parents met and her likeness to her parents.

Video Oral History Interview with Donna Britt, Section A2013_212_001_002, TRT: 2:28:31 ?

Donna Britt talks about her siblings, elementary school in Gary, Indiana, and the city's de facto segregation. She describes the sights, sounds, and smells of her childhood, and her personality in elementary school. She talks about her favorite books, TV shows, and movies as a child, and the role of church. She remembers family trips to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and Chicago, Illinois, and being bussed across Gary, Indiana to attend junior high school as a result of desegregation. She describes her impressions of the first African American mayor of Gary, Indiana, Richard G. Hatcher.

Video Oral History Interview with Donna Britt, Section A2013_212_001_003, TRT: 3:29:31 ?

Donna Britt talks about the periodicals that she read in her childhood home, the historical events surrounding her high school years, such as the election of Richard G. Hatcher as Mayor of Gary, Indiana, and the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. She talks about the racial makeup of her high school and her social life there. Britt remembers seeing the Jackson Five in Gary, Indiana, and the first time she saw Michael Jackson. She remembers her early drive to go to college and her entry into Hampton University in Hampton, Virginia, and selling popcorn at the National Black Political Convention in Gary, Indiana. She discusses the Black Power Movement and its impact on her empowered attitude as a teenager, and her experiences at Hampton University. She talks about graduating from college and moving on to graduate school at The University of Michigan-Ann Arbor.

Video Oral History Interview with Donna Britt, Section A2013_212_001_004, TRT: 4:31:01 ?

Donna Britt talks about activism at The University of Michigan-Ann Arbor, why she loves feature writing, and the death of her brother, Darrell Britt. She reflects upon her grief over the loss of her brother, the suspicious circumstances surrounding his shooting, and the lack of closure that many African American families face due to police shootings. She talks about writing an article about Ebonics for the Detroit Free Press, and the role of language in her upbringing and in race and power politics. She discusses the Black Arts Movement, not being able to identify with Blaxploitation, and leaving the Detroit Free Press to write for USA Today.

Video Oral History Interview with Donna Britt, Section A2013_212_001_005, TRT: 5:31:49 ?

Donna Britt talks about working as an editor for USA Today, her favorite interviews, and her approach of "finding common ground" when interviewing celebrities such as Barry Manilow, Denzel Washington, and Paul Reubens. She talks about leaving USA Today for the Washington Post to write the style section, and her eventual offer to write an opinion column, in which she wrote about Mike Tyson, the O.J. Simpson trial, Nelson Mandela, and race and class issues. Britt also discusses her compassionate approach to writing about race.

Video Oral History Interview with Donna Britt, Section A2013_212_001_006, TRT: 6:08:23 ?

Donna Britt and Geraldine Britt describe their photographs.

Video Oral History Interview with Donna Britt, Section A2013_212_002_007, TRT: 7:29:24 ?

Donna Britt worked as a columnist for The Washington Post from 1989 to 2008. During that time, she covered major historical events including the murder trial of O.J. Simpson. At this point in the interview, Britt talks about the nation's

fixation on the trial, how it permeated everyday life and the shock of many when he was found not guilty in 1995. In 1998, Britt covered the President Bill Clinton and Monica Lewinsky scandal for The Washington Post. Then, in 2000, Britt covered the presidential election of President George Walker Bush and Vice President Al Gore. Britt was living in Washington, D.C. when the World Trade Center in New York City was hit on September 11, 2001. Following the attacks, the United States entered into the Iraq War in 2003. Although she was still a columnist with The Washington Post, Britt did not write many columns on the war because of the immense confusion surrounding it. Britt also talks about the perception of print media within the black community.

Video Oral History Interview with Donna Britt, Section A2013_212_002_008, TRT: 8:28:42 ?

Donna Britt covered some of the Iraq War while working as a columnist for The Washington Post. During that time, many in the black community were distrustful of print media and its coverage of the war. While writing for The Washington Post, Britt also covered the political aspects of Bill Cosby's career including the Pound Cake speech he gave before the NAACP on the fiftieth anniversary of the Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka decision. In this speech, Cosby criticized those within the black community who failed to take advantage of certain opportunities. He gave a similar speech to the Crips and the Bloods in Newark, New Jersey, which Britt also covered in the article 'Cosby Becomes the Grandpa of Tough Love.' In 2008, Britt followed and wrote several columns on the presidential nomination and election of President Barack Obama. At this point in the interview, Britt talks about the black community's concerns during Obama's tenure, and how his public perception was influenced by color bias and his family.

Video Oral History Interview with Donna Britt, Section A2013_212_002_009, TRT: 9:28:40 ?

Donna Britt left her position as a columnist at The Washington Post in 2008, but she continued to write freelance pieces for the paper. After leaving, Britt wrote a number of articles on the administration of President Barack Obama and the roadblocks he faced from the U.S. Congress. At this point, Britt talks about the implications of Obama's presidency and how it will affect the diversity of presidential candidates in the future. She also describes her journalistic philosophy. In 2011, Britt published her first book, 'Brothers (and Me): A Memoir of Loving and Giving.' It focused on how death affects families within the black community by specifically looking at the murder of her brother, Darrell Britt. A previous guest on 'The Oprah Winfrey Show,' Britt was interviewed by O Magazine following the publication of her book, which was placed on its top ten list of titles to read. In 2012, Britt wrote several columns on the shooting of Trayvon Martin and the exoneration of George Zimmerman.

Video Oral History Interview with Donna Britt, Section A2013_212_002_010, TRT: 10:12:12 ?

Donna Britt and her husband, managing editor of The Washington Post Kevin Merida, have one son together, Skye Merida. Britt also has two sons, Justin Britt-Gibson and Darrell Britt-Gibson, from a previous relationship. Britt talks about her plans for the future, and describes her hopes and concerns for the African American community. She then talks about the role of women within the family as well as women's struggles within abusive relationships. Britt reflects upon her life and legacy, and concludes the interview by describing how she would like to be remembered.