

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Olive Lee Benson

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Benson, Olive Lee, 1932-2005
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Olive Lee Benson,
Dates:	January 26, 2005
Bulk Dates:	2005
Physical Description:	5 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:20:29).
Abstract:	Personal care entrepreneur and salon owner Olive Lee Benson (1932 - 2005) opened many Olive's Beauty Salons in the Boston area including her largest enterprise in Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts, a Boston suburb. Benson also developed her own line of hair care products, Universal Textures, after researching at Soft Sheen, Johnson Products and other hair care companies. Benson was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on January 26, 2005, in Boston, Massachusetts. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2005_025
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Olive Lee Benson of Boston, Massachusetts, was recognized as a premier hair stylist and an expert in relaxing and straightening hair. Benson was born in Cambridge, Massachusetts, on September 11, 1932, the ninth of ten children. She attended Cambridge public schools, graduating from Cambridge High and Latin School in 1949. After high school, Benson studied at the Wilfred Academy in Boston, where she received her diploma and certification to practice hairdressing and styling. In later years she continued her professional training and education at Pivot Point (Chicago), Vidal Sasson and Jingles (London, England), Clairol (New York) and Wella (Massachusetts).

In 1959, Benson opened a small storefront beauty shop in north Cambridge, in the neighborhood where she grew up. Her clients, mostly African Americans, were women with extremely curly hair. She offered the most advanced styling and hair treatment techniques. Benson moved her Cambridge salon business to Boston in the 1960s. With the success of her first Boston salon, she moved to two larger locations in Boston's upscale downtown retail districts, before opening up her largest enterprise in 1997 in Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts, a nearby suburb. Women from a variety of ethnic and racial backgrounds came to Olive's Beauty Salon to have their curly hair straightened and styled with the most up-to-date fashion.

Following the successful completion of her Hair America examination in 1976, Benson became the designer and coordinator for several industry publications that set seasonal trends for both ethnic and non-ethnic styling. She also became an editorial columnist for Shoptalk Magazine, a national publication for salon professionals. After researching at Soft Sheen, Johnson Products, and other hair care companies, one of Benson's lifelong dreams was realized in 1996, with the creation and marketing of her own line of hair products. The line known as Universal Textures, included a relaxer for all types of hair texture—which she called a “universal relaxer,” a protein hair

conditioner, a shampoo and a leave-in conditioner. Her products were marketed under Universal Textures at her Chestnut Hill salon.

A holder of numerous awards, she received a citation and honor as the first black inducted into the Hall of Renown of the National Cosmetology Association in 1991 and awards from the International Beauty Show from 1991 to 1994. In 1996, she was the first African American to receive a North American Hairstyle Award.

Benson passed away on June 27, 2005 at age 72.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Olive Lee Benson was conducted by Robert Hayden on January 26, 2005, in Boston, Massachusetts, and was recorded on 5 Betacame SP videocassettes. Personal care entrepreneur and salon owner Olive Lee Benson (1932 - 2005) opened many Olive's Beauty Salons in the Boston area including her largest enterprise in Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts, a Boston suburb. Benson also developed her own line of hair care products, Universal Textures, after researching at Soft Sheen, Johnson Products and other hair care companies.

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:

Benson, Olive Lee, 1932-2005

Hayden, Robert (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews
Benson, Olive Lee, 1932-2005--Interviews

African American beauty operators--Interviews.

Hair preparations.

Hair--Care and hygiene.

African American families--Massachusetts--Cambridge.

Mothers--Death--Psychological aspects.

Cambridge (Mass.)--Social life and customs--20th Century.

Race awareness.

Women-owned business enterprises--Massachusetts.

Discrimination in employment--Massachusetts.

African American businesspeople--Massachusetts--Interviews.

Hair--Relaxing.

Democratic National Convention (2004: Boston, Mass.).

African American business enterprises--Massachusetts.

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Personal Care Entrepreneur

Salon Owner

HistoryMakers® Category:

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 Olive Lee Benson, January 26, 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 Olive Lee Benson, Section A2005_025_001_001, TRT: 0:27:39
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Olive Benson recalls her family background and her parents' personalities. Benson's mother died when she was three and her father struggled to raise a large family in Cambridge, Massachusetts on his salary as a postal worker. Benson says that her father was very strict, but fair. Benson describes her childhood in Cambridge, naming her siblings, and talking about the close-knit African American community in the north part of town.

African American beauty operators--Interviews.

Hair preparations.

Hair--Care and hygiene.

African American families--Massachusetts--Cambridge.

Mothers--Death--Psychological aspects.

Cambridge (Mass.)--Social life and customs--20th century.

Race awareness.

Women-owned business enterprises--Massachusetts.

Discrimination in employment--Massachusetts.

African American businesspeople--Massachusetts--Interviews.

Hair--Relaxing.

Democratic National Convention (2004: Boston, Mass.).

African American business enterprises--Massachusetts.

Video Oral History Interview with Olive Lee Benson, Section A2005_025_001_002, TRT: 0:30:00
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Olive Benson continues to describe her childhood, recalling her favorite recreations and sights, smells, and sounds of her neighborhood. Benson recounts her formal education, from elementary school to beauty school. Benson says that she first became aware of race differences while in school, and that she did not immediately have career aspirations. She explains how her first job at a department store and her interest in hairdressing at home led her to attend beauty school at the Wilford Academy of Cosmetology in Boston. After losing her first jobs as a hairdresser, Benson decided to open her own salon.

Video Oral History Interview with Olive Lee Benson, Section A2005_025_001_003, TRT: 0:30:20
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Olive Benson details her meteoric rise from a small salon owner in Cambridge, Massachusetts, to an internationally-known winner of several hair styling competitions. She explains how she overcame discrimination from real estate agents to buy new spaces and expand her business. Benson explains how her success with several different hair textures led to her work developing her own hair care products for L'Oreal, Soft Sheen, and Revlon.

Video Oral History Interview with Olive Lee Benson, Section A2005_025_001_004, TRT: 0:30:20
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Olive Benson recalls the discrimination and legal problems she overcame as an independent businesswoman, and offers her advice to young stylists on how to avoid such problems. She reflects on her success in running several salons and developing her own line of hair products, and discusses the people who inspired her, including Madam C. J. Walker. Benson also shares one of her favorite hairstyling assignments, the Democratic National Convention of 2004.

Video Oral History Interview with Olive Lee Benson, Section A2005_025_001_005, TRT: 0:22:10
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Olive Benson reflects on her life and career, and shares her hopes and concerns for the African American community, focusing on the need for successful black-owned businesses.