

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with The Honorable Les Brown

---

## Overview of the Collection

<b>Repository:</b>	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
<b>Creator:</b>	Brown, Les, 1945-
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Les Brown,
<b>Dates:</b>	October 17, 2007
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2007
<b>Physical Description:</b>	6 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:58:00).
<b>Abstract:</b>	State representative The Honorable Les Brown (1945 - ) formed Les Brown Enterprises, Inc. in 1986. In the late 1960s through the 1970s, Brown served as an Ohio state representative. As a motivational speaker, he was a featured guest on many radio broadcasting stations and in corporate venues. Brown was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on October 17, 2007, in Chicago, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2007_292
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

---

## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Motivational speaker Les Brown was born Leslie Calvin Brown on February 17, 1945, in Miami, Florida. After giving birth to Brown and his twin brother, Wes, on the floor of an abandoned building, Brown's biological mother gave her sons up for adoption when they were six weeks old to Mrs. Mamie Brown. When he was in fifth grade, Brown was forced back a grade by the school's principal after being disruptive in class. Brown's demotion subsequently led him to being placed in special education classes and labeled as mentally retarded. As an adolescent, Brown attended Booker T. Washington High School where he was influenced by a speech and drama instructor who encouraged him to pursue a career in radio broadcasting.

After graduating from high school and briefly working for the Department of Sanitation, Brown worked as an errand boy for a Miami Beach radio station. At the station, Brown observed the disc jockeys with hopes of one day becoming an on-air personality. His break came when one of the disc jockeys became inebriated. Brown stood in for him and then was hired as a disc jockey. In the late 1960s, Brown moved to Columbus, Ohio, to work for WVKO Radio, where he became active in the community. Brown's political activism in Columbus won him a seat with the 29th House District of the Ohio State Legislature. In his first year, Brown passed more legislature than any other freshman representative in Ohio State legislative history. In his third term, Brown served as chair of the Human Resources Committee.

In 1981, Brown left the Ohio State House of Representatives to care for his ailing mother back in Florida. While in Miami, he continued to focus on social issues by developing a youth center training program. In 1986, Brown entered the public speaking arena on a full time basis and formed Les Brown Enterprises, Inc. In 1989, Brown received the National Speakers Association's highest award, the Council of Peers Award of Excellence (CPAE). In 1990, Brown recorded the Emmy Award-winning series of speeches entitled *You Deserve*, which became the lead fundraising program of its kind for pledges to PBS stations nationwide. In 1991, Toastmasters International

selected Brown as one of the world's best speakers and awarded him the Golden Gavel Award.

Brown ranks amongst the nation's leading authorities in understanding and stimulating human potential; he is a featured guest on many radio broadcasting stations and is often hired by professional corporations to teach and inspire new levels of achievement.

---

## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with The Honorable Les Brown was conducted by Julieanna L. Richardson on October 17, 2007, in Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on 6 Betacame SP videocassettes. State representative The Honorable Les Brown (1945 - ) formed Les Brown Enterprises, Inc. in 1986. In the late 1960s through the 1970s, Brown served as an Ohio state representative. As a motivational speaker, he was a featured guest on many radio broadcasting stations and in corporate venues.

---

## 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:

Brown, Les, 1945-

Richardson, Julieanna L. (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

### Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Brown, Les, 1945- --Interviews

---

Motivational speakers--Interviews

---

State governments--Officials and employees--Interviews

---

## Organizations:

---

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

---

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

---

Ohio. General Assembly. House of Representatives

---

## Occupations:

---

State Representative

---

## HistoryMakers® Category:

---

PoliticalMakers

---

## 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 Les Brown, October 17, 2007. 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 Les Brown, Section A2007\_292\_001\_001, TRT: 0:29:42 ?

The Honorable Les Brown was born on February 17, 1945 in Miami, Florida. His adoptive mother, Mamie Brown, left her home in Stewart, Florida at thirteen years old, and found work as a nightclub singer in Miami. Brown and his twin brother, Wesley Brown, were adopted as infants, and raised in Miami's all-black Overtown community. Brown never knew his birth parents, but suspected that his white godmother, Marge Dale, was his biological mother. From an early age, he was influenced by LeRoy Washington, a teacher and oratorical coach at Booker T. Washington High School. Brown began his education at Frederick Douglass Elementary School, where he took special education classes, as he struggled with writing. He helped his mother with her work as a domestic, and often heard motivational tapes playing at one of the homes she cleaned. His mother worked long hours until developing arthritis, when she began selling moonshine, which led to her arrest. In her absence, Brown sold scrap metal to feed his six adopted siblings.

Motivational speakers--Interviews

State governments--Officials and employees--Interviews

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Les Brown, Section A2007\_292\_001\_002, TRT: 0:29:42 ?

The Honorable Les Brown was ten years old when his mother, Mamie Brown, was jailed for selling moonshine. He sold scrap metal to support his six siblings, and was often fed by his neighbors in the Overtown community of Miami, Florida. While a student at Frederick Douglass Elementary School, Brown took special education classes, and was mentored by high school teacher LeRoy Washington. At fourteen years old, Brown struck a white boy who accosted him with racial slurs, and was forced to flee to Tallahassee, Florida for the summer. Upon graduating from Booker T. Washington High School, Brown and his twin brother, Wesley Brown, planned to join the U.S. Army, but Brown failed the admissions test. Instead, he became a door-to-door salesman, and later obtained a position at WMBM Radio. In 1966, when a disk jockey became intoxicated at work, Brown was asked to finish the show, thus launching his radio career. In 1974, he was hired as a disk jockey at WVKO Radio in Columbus, Ohio.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Les Brown, Section A2007\_292\_001\_003, TRT: 0:31:14 ?

The Honorable Les Brown was a disk jockey on WVKO Radio in Columbus, Ohio, where he was influenced by news director and community activist Mike Williams. In his capacity as a radio host, Brown mobilized the African American community to protest police brutality and discrimination. In 1975, he rallied unprecedented voter participation on behalf of John Rosemond, Columbus' first black mayoral candidate. Eventually, Brown was fired for his activism, although he was later rehired as program director. In 1986, Brown launched a campaign for state representative; and, despite minimal funding, won a seat in the Ohio House of Representatives. There, he was mentored by state representative C.J. McLin, who taught him to ally with prominent figures in Columbus like the Taft family. Brown served three terms; and, during recesses, studied the oratory of

Reverend Dr. Johnnie Coleman at the Christ Universal Temple in Chicago, Illinois. He retired in his third term, when his mother was diagnosed with breast cancer.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Les Brown, Section A2007\_292\_001\_004, TRT: 0:30:21 ?

The Honorable Les Brown spoke out on WVKO Radio after a young mother was beaten by police officers in Columbus, Ohio, and was terminated from his disk jockey position as a result. Later, he ran a grassroots campaign for state representative, securing many votes because of his popularity on the radio, and winning white supporters by responding with grace after a racial slur was used against him. When his mother, Mamie Brown, was diagnosed with cancer, Brown resigned his legislative post, and returned to his hometown of Miami, Florida, where he joined WEDR Radio. Following the uprisings in Miami's Liberty City, Brown secured federal funding to create the Les Brown Youth Enrichment Seminar. The program was targeted for investigation by State Attorney Janet Reno; and, although Brown was never charged, he was taken off the air during the inquiry. The following year, Brown transitioned to a full time career in public speaking with the encouragement of his mentor, community activist Mike Williams.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Les Brown, Section A2007\_292\_001\_005, TRT: 0:28:30 ?

The Honorable Les Brown met community activist Mike Williams in Columbus, Ohio, and sought his advice while serving as a state representative in Ohio, although he never formally joined Brown's staff. Later, Brown returned to his hometown of Miami, Florida; where, in the mid-1980s, he conducted youth training programs to improve relations between the African American and Haitian communities, and joined Reverend Jesse L. Jackson in speaking against the mistreatment of Miami's immigrants. Brown later worked with youth trainer Clarence King to design a similar program in Washington, D.C. Then, while listening to an ineffective motivational speaker, Brown resolved to become a professional speaker himself. He joined the National Speakers Association; and, one year later, was invited to give the organization's keynote address. In 1989, Brown became the first African American to receive the Council of Peers Award for Excellence, and was named one of the top five motivational speakers in the world.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Les Brown, Section A2007\_292\_001\_006, TRT: 0:28:31 ?

The Honorable Les Brown began his motivational speaking career in the 1980s. He researched the organizations that hired speakers, and made cold calls to secure his early bookings. At a conference in Detroit, Michigan, orthodontist Talmadge McKinney was impressed by Brown's oratory, and loaned him \$95,000 to fund his career. After three years, Brown repaid the loan, having earned over \$1 million through motivational speaking. While professional speakers often reused their speeches, Brown developed his oratory extemporaneously after conducting detailed interviews of his clients and audiences. He also appealed to audiences by talking about his challenges and shortcomings, including his divorce. There were very few African American motivational speakers when Brown began his career as a speaker, but he experienced little discrimination, and saw the industry's diversity increase over the years. Brown won the Council of Peers Award for Excellence in 1989, and was featured in a number of specials on PBS.