

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Jennifer Lawson

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Lawson, Jennifer, 1946-
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Jennifer Lawson,
Dates:	June 29, 2012 and May 2, 2012
Bulk Dates:	2012
Physical Description:	13 uncompressed MOV digital video files (6:13:50).
Abstract:	Television producer Jennifer Lawson (1946 -) Senior vice president, producer, and general manager, the highest ranking black woman to have served in public television. Lawson was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on June 29, 2012 and May 2, 2012, in Washington, District of Columbia. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2012_066
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Senior vice president, producer and general manager, Jennifer Karen Lawson was born on June 8, 1946 in Fairfield, Alabama. Her father Willie D. Lawson was the owner of a repair shop and her mother Velma Lawson, was a retired school teacher. She is the second of five children, Willie Dee, Frankie and James and Schuyler. Lawson attended Tuskegee University briefly before dropping out and dedicating her time to the civil rights movement. She has worked with the Student Nonviolent Coordination Committee (SNCC) and the National Council of Negro Women (NCNW) where she has worked on self-empowerment programs for rural women. She has also worked as deputy director for an adult education program in Mississippi's Quitman County. Lawson eventually relocated to Washington, D.C. where she worked as art director for, Drum and Spear, a bookstore and publishing company. In 1970, Lawson moved to Dar es Salaam, Tanzania as coordinator of a joint publishing project, it was here that she decided to study film.

In 1974, Lawson graduated with her M.F.A degree from Columbia University in New York City. After graduation, Lawson worked as publicity director on a fundraising campaign for the United Church of Christ. She also worked as assistant editor for a small film company, William Greaves Productions. Lawson taught film at Brooklyn College for three years and worked as the executive director for the Film Fund, a grant making organization. In 1980, she worked as program fund coordinator for the Corporation for Public Broadcasting in Washington, D.C. and attended Harvard University for an executive management program. She later became director of the Television Program Fund at the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. In 1989, Lawson was hired by PBS as their first chief programming executive, making her the highest ranking black woman to have served in public television. During her time at PBS she was responsible for the scheduling and promotional strategies that resulted in PBS' most successful series, Ken Burns', "The Civil War" and "Baseball". Lawson also developed children's series, "Barney and Friends", "Lamb Chop's Play-Along", and "Where in the World is Carmen Sandiego?"

In 1995, Lawson resigned from PBS and founded Magic Box Mediaworks. Her company produced the eight part

series “Africa”, in partnership with National Geographic and WNET, which was aired on PBS in 2001. In 2004, Lawson was hired by WHUT-TV at Howard University as general manager and co-produced, “Security vs. Liberty: The Other War”, for a PBS series, “American at the Crossroads”. She has been named one of “101 Most Influential People in Entertainment Today,” *Entertainment Weekly*, and was named to the Power 50 List by, *Hollywood Reporter*. Among her other awards are ones from the International Film and Video Festival, a Gold Camera Award and Cine Golden Eagle, for episodes of the “Africa” series. Lawson is married to Anthony Gittens, an arts administrator and film festival director. They have two sons, together Kai and Zac Gittens.

Jennifer Lawson was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on May 1, 2012.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Jennifer Lawson was conducted by Larry Crowe on June 29, 2012 and May 2, 2012, in Washington, District of Columbia, and was recorded on 13 uncompressed MOV digital video files. Television producer Jennifer Lawson (1946 -) Senior vice president, producer, and general manager, the highest ranking black woman to have served in public television.

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:

Lawson, Jennifer, 1946-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews
Lawson, Jennifer, 1946- --Interviews

African American television producers and directors--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 Jennifer Lawson, June 29, 2012 and May 2, 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 Jennifer Lawson, Section A2012_066_001_001, TRT: 1:29:16 ?

Jennifer Lawson slates the interview and lists her favorites. She talks about her mother, who was born in Louisville, Kentucky on December 28th, 1912, and grew up between Louisville, Kentucky and Birmingham, Alabama. Her father, who was born in Bullock County, Alabama on December 27th, 1899, left home when he was fifteen to work in the Birmingham coal mines. She remembers her paternal grandparents, who worked on a plantation. She also talks about her father's entrepreneurial spirit, which led him to start his own coal mine and eventually own a repair shop. She remembers her father's experiments in the repair shop, where he would rebuild motors and occasionally cause explosions. Lawson talks about her parents' civic activities, and the Alabama company towns, whose companies often printed their own currencies.

African American families.

African American mothers.

African American fathers--Alabama.

African American business enterprises--Alabama.

Company towns--Alabama.

Video Oral History Interview with Jennifer Lawson, Section A2012_066_001_002, TRT: 2:27:53 ?

Jennifer Lawson talks about Phenix city, Alabama, and Columbus, Georgia, which she describes as having mob-like characteristics in the 1950s. She describes herself as a mixture of both parents: Her mother was kindhearted, the "social worker" of her town, and her father was ambitious and entrepreneurial. She talks about her family's first television, which was the first in her neighborhood, and the demographics and segregation of her childhood communities. She also talks about her siblings, who came from previous marriages as well as her parents' marriage, and her family trips, where they would camp and stay with relatives because most hotels did not allow African Americans. Lawson describes the sights, sounds, and smells of growing up, and the Baptist sermons in her childhood church. She also discusses her father's beliefs about faith.

African American parents.

Segregation.

Brothers and sisters.

Discrimination against African Americans.

Childhood and youth.

African Americans--Religion.

Video Oral History Interview with Jennifer Lawson, Section A2012_066_001_003, TRT: 3:28:41 ?

Jennifer Lawson talks about the magazines that her parents kept in her childhood home, such as the Pittsburgh Courier and the Chicago Defender, which made her aware of the racial violence in her community and around the country. She discusses the Emmett Till case and how it caused greater schism within her peer group in grade school, and the ethnic make-up of Birmingham, Alabama, which included Italian, Syrian, and Jewish communities. Lawson talks about learning to read from her parents at an early age, starting elementary school, and her favorite subjects. She remembers her mother's death and her father's attempts to bring the family together, including his attempt to use an axle to build a merry-

go-round. She talks about her father's eccentricity and creative mind, his painting of the sides of their house and his metallic flowers in their front yard, and his lasting influence on her own creativity. Lawson also talks about her popularity and activities in high school.

African American press.

Till, Emmett, 1941-1955.

African Americans--Education.

African American mothers--Death.

African American fathers.

Childhood and youth--Activities.

Video Oral History Interview with Jennifer Lawson, Section A2012_066_001_004, TRT: 4:30:00 ?

Jennifer Lawson talks about her father's encouragement that she go to college despite his inability to pay, her participation in a science fair that won her a scholarship, and her decision to use that scholarship at Tuskegee University. She talks about Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s presence in Birmingham and her participation in the demonstrations of 1963, when her teachers threatened expulsion for demonstrating. She remembers her first connections to the Civil Rights Movements and a screening of *Imitation of Life* at Miles College, which inspired a dialogue about race and inequality. She discusses why she chose Tuskegee University, her teachers there, her various jobs that paid for school – including Sloan Kettering in New York – and her increasing involvement in the Civil Rights Movement, which eventually led her to discontinue her studies at Tuskegee. Lawson talks about an activist student at Tuskegee, Sammy Young, Jr., who was murdered by a white man who owned a gas station.

Tuskegee University.

King, Martin Luther Jr., 1929-1968.

Demonstrations--Alabama.

Civil rights movements.

Video Oral History Interview with Jennifer Lawson, Section A2012_066_001_005, TRT: 5:29:37 ?

Jennifer Lawson talks about how the death of a Tuskegee peer, Sammy Young, Jr., led her to quit her scholarship, and her move to work with SNCC in Gee's Bend, Wilcox County, Alabama. She discusses the role of Catholicism in activist martyrdom. She talks about canvassing for voter registration in the rural housing project in Gee's Bend, the residents' reluctance to speak with her for fear that their land would be taken away, and her eventual promotion within SNCC and move to Lowndes County, Alabama, where she began to design pamphlets and billboards. In March of 1965, Lawson was arrested for the first time in Montgomery, Alabama, where protestors had a near confrontation with the Klan. She talks about her promotion to the SNCC headquarters in Atlanta, Georgia in 1966, and their discussions of coordinating the Movement in more urban areas.

Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (U.S.).

African Americans--Religion.

Civil rights demonstrations--Alabama.

Promotion.

Canvassing--Law and legislation.

Arrest.

Video Oral History Interview with Jennifer Lawson, Section A2012_066_001_006, TRT: 6:31:47 ?

Jennifer Lawson talks about her second arrest, in which she and several SNCC

women were harassed by black police officers and taken to jail, the powerful role of women in SNCC, and her decision to leave SNCC due to its leaders' machismo and misogyny. In 1968, she began working in adult education with the Mississippi Action for Community Education in Clarksdale, Mississippi, where she taught literacy. In 1969, she left her job in education to travel in West Africa, where she saw Algeria, Nigeria, Liberia, and Guinea. Lawson talks about returning to the US and working in Washington, D.C. as a lecturer for the Museum of African Art, with Drum and Spear Press, and in radio. She also discusses the death of Ralph Featherstone, and the FBI's investigation of her involvement with SNCC.

Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (U.S.).

Sex discrimination against women.

Mississippi Action for Community Education.

National Museum of African Art (U.S.).

United States. Federal Bureau of Investigation.

Arrest.

Travel--Africa.

Video Oral History Interview with Jennifer Lawson, Section A2012_066_002_007, TRT: 7:28:35 ?

Jennifer Lawson slates session two of the interview. She talks about the FBI's investigation of SNCC, being labeled a "subversive," and how working to guarantee constitutional rights to all citizens is not a subversive act. She discusses the new demand for African American studies, and how in 1970, this demand led to the founding of Drum and Spear Press, where she worked as an illustrator, publisher, and radio host. As a result of her work with Drum and Spear, she was invited to Tanzania to organize the Sixth Pan African Congress. She talks about living in a Swahili-speaking neighborhood in Dar es Salaam, the writers and cultural figures that she met there, including Walter Rodney, and her return to the United States in 1972. Lawson also talks about how Tanzania, where she met many people who worked in print, helped her to realize the importance of audiovisual media to the illiterate, which inspired her to study film in the USA.

United States. Federal Bureau of Investigation.

Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (U.S.).

African American press.

Pan African Congress.

Rodney, Walter.

Video Oral History Interview with Jennifer Lawson, Section A2012_066_002_008, TRT: 8:30:24 ?

Jennifer Lawson talks about attending graduate school at Columbia University, where she earned her MFA in Film, her renowned professors there, such as Arthur Barron, and working as a film editor to support herself. After her graduation in 1974, while working as a film editor, she was offered a teaching job at Brooklyn College on Arthur Barron's recommendation. She remembers the community of artists, writers, and filmmakers in New York in the 1970s, such as Bill Gunn, Gordon Parks, and Amiri Baraka, some of whom she invited to her classroom. Lawson talks about being commissioned to write her first "B" movie and her admiration for that industry. After her film, "Teammates," was made, she was offered a job as the executive director of the Film Fund, which sought grants for independent filmmakers who focused on social issues. At the Film Fund, Lawson played a pivotal role in establishing the first independent film festival.

Columbia University.

Brooklyn College.

Women motion picture editors.

Film Fund.

Motion pictures.

Video Oral History Interview with Jennifer Lawson, Section A2012_066_002_009, TRT: 9:31:26 ?

Jennifer Lawson talks about accepting a job offer from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting in 1980, when she left the Film Fund. She discusses the various organizations in the early eighties that supported independent film, her colleagues, and her favorite programs at CPB, such as “American Playhouse.” While at CPB, she was asked to be a representative at international broadcast conferences, which led to her job as the vice president of the International Public Television conference, or INPUT. She discusses how this job aligned with her initial goals that she set in Tanzania, which was to make audiovisual media more accessible around the globe. Lawson also discusses the news restrictions in some countries around the globe, the sometimes conflation of public and state television, and the restructuring of PBS in 1989.

Corporation for Public Broadcasting.

Independent filmmakers.

Public Broadcasting Service (U.S.).

Video Oral History Interview with Jennifer Lawson, Section A2012_066_002_010, TRT: 10:29:22 ?

Jennifer Lawson discusses the restructuring of PBS and being hired in 1989 as the first Chief Program Executive of PBS. She describes the difference between the CPB and PBS, which is that CPB is a non-profit that receives funds from Congress and PBS is a membership organization that represents public television stations. She discusses why it was necessary to discontinue PBS’s annual conference of voters and instead appoint a sole executive, and Ken Burns’ “The Civil War” and her role in its broadcast. She talks about competing with the children’s programming of cable television and PBS’s solution to create low-budget children’s series besides Sesame Street, such as the successful “Barney And Friends,” “Lamb Chop’s Play Along,” and “Dragon Tales.” Lawson talks about some of the famous faces at PBS, such as Fred Rogers, Sherry Lewis, LeVar Burton, and Bill Moyers, and her awards and accolades, which included being named one of the fifty most influential women in entertainment by “The Hollywood Reporter.”

Public Broadcasting Service (U.S.).

Corporation for Public Broadcasting.

Children's television programs.

Awards.

Burns, Ken, 1953-

Video Oral History Interview with Jennifer Lawson, Section A2012_066_002_011, TRT: 11:31:02 ?

Jennifer Lawson talks about Bill Moyers and his famous interview with Joseph Campbell, and her controversial decision to air “Tongues Untied” by Marlon Riggs, a documentary about growing up as a gay male in the African American community. She talks about how the controversy was a result of the culture wars of 1990s, during which time television content was heavily regulated, and how her decision was based in her experiences in the Civil Rights Movement and her role as an activist. She also discusses a change in administration at PBS, which

prompted her to leave PBS in 1995 and to begin working on her documentary, “Africa,” which aired in 2001. She discusses the intensive research and preparation for the project and partnering with WNET in New York and National Geographic. Lawson talks about the success of the documentary and the media tour, which scheduled her to interview with Bryant Gumble in New York on September 11th, 2001, and her experience of the World Trade Center attacks.

Moyers, Bill D.

Civil rights movements.

Television--Censorship.

Public Broadcasting Service (U.S.).

Documentary films.

September 11 Terrorist Attacks, 2001.

Video Oral History Interview with Jennifer Lawson, Section A2012_066_002_012, TRT: 12:29:42
?

Jennifer Lawson talks about the success of “Africa” despite its interruption by 9/11, her appearance in “O Magazine,” the narration and music of the documentary, and her favorite moments from the series. She talks about some of the other projects of her production company, “Magic Box,” and her eventual decision to join Howard University’s WHUT, where she worked from 2004 to 2010 to raise funds to transition their studio to digital. She also talks about starting a summer camp through WHUT, the community support for the station, and their promotion of Howard University students’ work. Lawson also talks about going back to work for CPB on digital video content, and what is in store for CPB in the future.

WHUT-TV (Television station : Washington, D.C.).

Corporation for Public Broadcasting.

Magic Box (Firm).

Howard University--Students.

Documentary films.

Video Oral History Interview with Jennifer Lawson, Section A2012_066_002_013, TRT: 13:16:05
?

Jennifer Lawson describes personally reading all of the viewer mail at WHUT, which was how she learned of a group of African American men who based their weekly meetings around WHUT’s schedule. She talks about Henry Hampton and the diverse community that he created with Blackside Productions. Lawson talks about her hopes and concerns for the African American community, her legacy, and what she would have done differently. She also talks about her successful children and her husband, who was also active in the Civil Rights Movement, and whom she met at Drum and Spear Bookstore. Lawson closes the interview by saying that she would like to be remembered as a kind, generous, and helpful person.

Hampton, Henry, 1940-1998.

Blackside, Inc.

WHUT-TV (Television station : Washington, D.C.).

African American families.