

Atlanta Welcomes "The History Makers" Intimate Interview with Renowned Della Reese Marks Launch of Southeast Region

By Alonia Jernigan



Julianna Richardson, founder of History Makers

The adage, "You can't know your destiny without knowing your history," could very well be the motto for The History Makers. A Chicago-based, nonprofit, 501c3 organization that enlightens, entertains and educates the public in an effort to refashion a more inclusive record of American history, The HistoryMakers is in a class all by itself. Only once in the history of the United States has there been a massive attempt to record the African American experience as told in first person, and that was with the WPA Slave Narratives, resulting in the recording of 2300 former slaves between the years of 1936 and 1938. The organization is the brainchild of Julieanna Richardson, and its mission is to capture America's history one person at a time, creating a priceless video collection and giving those involved their special place in history to educate the world about the struggles, determination and achievements of the African American experience.

On Friday, June 18, 2004, The HistoryMakers launched its Atlanta/Southeast Region with the interviewing of the legendary Della Reese. The event marked the first of 200 recording interviews (time permitting) in the Region. The Della Reese interview was conducted by actress Lorraine Toussaint of the Lifetime Television drama "Any Day Now," and was filmed live at Georgia Public Broadcasting's Studio C. The Honorary Co-Chairs for the evening were Walter and Shirley Massey (Morehouse College), Ingrid Saunders Jones (The Coca-Cola Company), and Richard O. Groves (Hilton Atlanta). The Co-Chairs were Brooke Jackson Edmond and Rod Jackson (Jackmont Hospitality and Edmond and Jones, PC, respectively.) Sponsors included Sodexo, Hilton Atlanta, The Coca-Cola Company, UPS, McDonalds, Georgia Public Broadcasting, WSB-TV, America's Favorite Chicken, Bank of America, Jackmont Hospitality, Thrifty Car Rental and H. J. Russell & Co. An elegant reception was held prior to the taping, and entertainment was provided by Faye Raye and Friends.

Witnessing an intimate interview with Della Reese could be compared to enjoying an evening with a family elder while sitting on the front porch on a cool summer night. Della Reese is full of wisdom and wit, and she candidly shared some of her life's most cherished moments. The tone for the evening was set by the presentation of video clips of a young, singing Della. Captions of her life were shown throughout the evening. Lorraine Toussaint did a phenomenal job as she verbally chronicled the life of one of America's most sensational living legends.

Born in Detroit in 1931 as Deloreese Patricia Early, Della Reese sprang from humble beginnings. Her father worked as a steel worker for 37 years. "The year after he retired, they made a machine; they said that kind of work was not meant for a human being." Her mother scrubbed floors, cleaned houses and sewed. "We didn't know we were poor," Ms. Reese reflects, "because we had just as much as everyone around us."

As a child, she overcame rheumatic fever, despite the fact that she was sent home from the hospital to die. "I was three then, now I'm almost 73." She attributed her survival to her mom's use of home remedies of cold packs. As she continued to grow, Della proved to be a talented child. She began singing at age six, and by the time she was 13 years old, she had gotten the attention of the famous gospel singer, Mahalia Jackson. "I was so happy when my mother allowed me to go with her because I thought I was going to have a chance to act as most kids my age would when away from their parents. I thought, 'This is heaven. I'm going to help this old lady out!'" But her expectations yielded great disappointment. Mahalia guarded young Della very carefully, just as Della's mom expected her to. "Everybody would get to go to the restaurants and eat. Not me. They'd bring my food back to the hotel," she quipped.

Her travels with Mahalia spanned ten years of summer breaks. At age 16, she became the first in her family to finish high school. Due to changes in her family, she found herself working a number of jobs to help her family. They included secretary, dental assistant, taxi cab driver and even truck driver. After some time, her professional scenario shifted from gospel to secular, wherein she worked in clubs and show bars. "What happened," asked Toussaint. Della replied in a matter-of-fact tone, "I got hungry," and explained how people didn't have a lot of money to go see gospel. "There were five of us, and we'd be blessed if we had gas to get home. I'd take a job after every tour."

Della's career did progress, and she eventually received her big break when Lee Maggett helped her get signed with Jubilee Records. Her recording career took off in the 1950s, and she appeared on the Ed Sullivan show more than 20 times. But it wasn't long before she lost her father. On top of that, she found herself becoming a mother to one of her brother's children as a result of there being too many children for the family to afford to feed. She told her sister-in-law, "If you have the baby, I'll be there for you." She (her sister in law) kept the baby for 2 1/2 years, and things got worse. "One night as I was about to perform, the baby was left in the dressing room. When I returned from performing, she was still there. She called me 'Mama' from that time on." Her daughter transitioned two years ago, but she left her spirit in her son, who is now a Morehouse man.

As the interview progressed, Della shared many other nuggets from her life. On the success of the series, "Touched by an Angel," she responded, "People need to know about God. We've tried everything else---money, sex, greed---and nothing worked. It's time to go back to basics." Today, she is an ordained minister, and she pastors the Understanding Principles for Better Living Church. She shares that she never intended to be a preacher, and how bringing comfort to people in their time of spiritual need brought fulfillment to her.

She reflected on her experiences with co-laborers Redd Foxx and Freddie Prince. Perhaps one of the greatest highlights of her life is her husband, Franklin Lett. Together for 25 years, she informed that he is, "absolutely my everything. We've been together 25 years, and I don't have anything to complain about."

When asked how she'd like to be remembered, she stated simply, "I would just like to be remembered." Then she reflected that she's been blessed to touch more than one generation. One generation may remember her as a singer; another as the first African American female to host her own talk show; another as an actress. With a life well lived that has caused many to feel as if they really have been touched by an angel, Della Reese has earned a place not only in history but in the hearts of many.

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