

O U R R O O T S

HistoryMakers video archive features a variety of haircare legends

By Rose Walsh

URBAN CALL WRITER

Three haircare legends are among notable African-Americans whose stories are being told by The HistoryMakers, a national video archive which, when completed, will include

5,000 first-person narratives. Among them are John Atchison, leading international hairstylist and founder of the John

Atchison salons in New York and Los Angeles; Edward Gardner, who with his wife, Bettian,

founded Soft Sheen Products; and Cornell McBride, founder of McBride Research Laboratories in Atlanta.



Portrait by Leo Rucker

Julianna Richardson is founder of The HistoryMakers.

Julianna Richardson is the founder and executive director of The HistoryMakers. As an undergraduate student at Brandeis University, she conducted research on members of the Harlem Renaissance and later graduated from Harvard Law School. Her love of history and broadcast expertise came together in the year 2000 when she established the nonprofit HistoryMakers. The video oral history archive, which covers black leaders in 15 fields — from haircare to religion to politics and science — is headquartered in Chicago and can be viewed on the Internet at www.thehistorymakers.com. The phone number is (312) 674-1900.

Atchison sets up shop

John Atchison's story is that of a cosmetology graduate who worked his way into becoming an assistant stylist at the prestigious Vidal Sassoon salons in New York City. Eventually Atchison branched out with his own salon, where his methods and techniques advanced to the

forefront of style. He implemented apprenticeship and training programs and founded a training center for hair-care professionals that has trained thousands of stylists in the United States and in the Caribbean.

The Gardners launch Soft Sheen products

While working as an instructor and school administrator for the Chicago public schools and working a part-time job as a haircare sales representative, Ed Gardner learned of the dissatisfaction that many African-American consumers and hair-care professionals had with hair-care products. In 1964, he and his wife, Bettian, launched Soft Sheen Products from their basement. With brands such as Optimum and Care Free Curl, Soft Sheen Products became a multimillion-dollar enterprise employing more than 400 Chicagoans. It became a global force, exporting products to Canada, the Caribbean and West Africa. In 1998, Gardner sold his family-run business to L'Oréal of Paris.

Cornell McBride develops laboratory

Cornell McBride was raised in the poor sugar refinery community surrounding Savannah, Ga. He migrated north and worked briefly for a pharmaceutical company, later returning to Mercer University in Macon, Ga., to earn a pharmacy degree. With fellow classmate Thurman McKenzie, McBride established M&M Products Co., developing the famous Sta-Sof-Fro, a product made to soften hair. After M&M Products was sold to Johnson Products, McBride established his research lab and developed more lines including Wave by Design and Design Essentials. McBride is one of the founders of the American Health and Beauty Aids Institute (AHBAI), an association representing black health and beauty-care manufacturers. Contact him at (770) 981-8722; www.designessentials.com.