

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Merri Dee

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Dee, Merri, 1936-
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Merri Dee,
Dates:	July 25, 2000
Bulk Dates:	2000
Physical Description:	6 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:58:21).
Abstract:	Media personality Merri Dee (1936 - 2022) started as a staff announcer and talk show host, then became director of community relations at Chicago's WGN-TV. Dee garnered an exceptional amount of attention for the issue of orphans through telethons and fundraisers. In 1998, Illinois Governor Jim Edgar commended Dee and WGN for increasing the number of adoptions in the state by more than 50 percent. Dee was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on July 25, 2000, in Chicago, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2000_019
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Media personality Merri Dee was born in Chicago, Illinois, on October 30, 1934. Dee was raised in Chicago and New Orleans, Louisiana, where she developed a passion for journalism during school. She began her long relationship with broadcast media in 1966 as a radio personality. Based upon the strength of her reputation, Dee moved to WGN-TV in 1972, where she gained experience in newscasting as a staff announcer and talk show host.

At the height of her very promising career, Dee was confronted with a personal tragedy when she and a talk show guest were kidnapped from the television station and nearly killed by the attackers. Not one to remain a victim, however, Dee looked upon that incident – which changed the course of her career and life – as a challenge to grow. Lobbying state and city politicians, Dee assisted in the passage of Illinois' first Victims Bill of Rights law, in 1992, legislation that has served as a model for other states.

Following the tragic event, Dee became more involved in the administrative aspect of television production and was appointed director of community relations at WGN-TV. In this capacity, Dee served as liaison between WGN-TV and the many social organizations that compose Chicago's civic community. She received direct feedback from the audience and ensured that the station served the needs of Chicago's diverse populations. Dee also oversaw WGN's public service campaigns. Dee retired as WGN-TV's director of community relations in the fall of 2008.

Dee was also committed to extensive charitable work, including fundraising on behalf of the homeless and victims of domestic violence. Her most passionate endeavor, however, is on behalf of Illinois orphans. Dee garnered an exceptional amount of attention for the issues of orphans through telethons and fundraisers. Through her efforts, she sought to increase the number of children who get adopted each year. In 1998, Illinois Governor Jim Edgar commended Dee and WGN for increasing the number of adoptions in the state by more than 50 percent. Also a

strong advocate for education, Dee hosted the United Negro College Fund Telethon for several years. She also hosted the prestigious Easterseals Telethon. She was one of the founders of a Chicago-based organization called Athletes for a Better Education.

Dee was the recipient of numerous awards, including the AT&T Outstanding Community Role Model award, the North American Council on Adoptable Children Outstanding Leadership Award, the YWCA of Metropolitan Chicago Woman of the Year Award, and the Chicago Academy of TV Arts and Sciences Lifetime Achievement Award.

Merri Dee was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on July 25, 2000.

Dee passed away on March 16, 2022, at the age of 85.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Merri Dee was conducted by Julieanna L. Richardson on July 25, 2000, in Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on 6 Betacame SP videocassettes. Media personality Merri Dee (1936 - 2022) started as a staff announcer and talk show host, then became director of community relations at Chicago's WGN-TV. Dee garnered an exceptional amount of attention for the issue of orphans through telethons and fundraisers. In 1998, Illinois Governor Jim Edgar commended Dee and WGN for increasing the number of adoptions in the state by more than 50 percent.

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:

Dee, Merri, 1936-

Richardson, Julieanna L. (Interviewer)

Bieschke, Paul (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews
Dee, Merri, 1936---Interviews

African American television personalities--Illinois--Chicago--Interviews.

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

WGN (Television station : Chicago, Ill.)

Occupations:

Television Personality

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 Merri Dee, July 25, 2000. 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 Merri Dee, Section A2000_019_001_001, TRT: 0:30:55 ?

Merri Dee recounts an upbringing worthy of a Charles Dickens novel -- her mother dies at a young age, and her father remarried a cruel woman who sent her away to an orphanage, changed her name so her other family members could have no contact with her, separated her from her entire family, and then refused to pay for any schooling after the age of fourteen. Dee managed to survive the cruelty and find her own way in her new hometown of Chicago, Illinois.

African American mothers--Death.

Stepmothers.

Orphans.

Child abuse--Psychological aspects.

Self-reliance.

Video Oral History Interview with Merri Dee, Section A2000_019_001_002, TRT: 0:29:28 ?

Merri Dee details her life as a teen raising herself in Chicago. She recalls the racism and sexism encountered while job hunting. Yet, with her strong sense of self-reliance, Dee either landed the job or kept searching. She also describes the important role her grandparents played in instilling her with a sense of dignity and purpose. Dee remembers her stepmother's death and the sense of freedom her passing left behind.

Self-reliance.

Sex discrimination in employment.

African American grandparents.

Stepmothers--Death.

Childhood and youth--Illinois--Chicago.

Video Oral History Interview with Merri Dee, Section A2000_019_001_003, TRT: 0:30:14 ?

Merri Dee shares the story of the breakup of her marriage to a profligate spending husband. The divorce caused her to reexamine her life and leave the comfort of working for IBM to enter broadcasting. Merri Dee recounts the harrowing kidnapping and shooting that happened in front of her job location. A visitor to the television station was kidnapped with her and later died from his gunshot wounds.

Divorce--Psychological aspects.

International Business Machines Corporation.

Kidnapping.

Murder.

Violent crime.

Video Oral History Interview with Merri Dee, Section A2000_019_001_004, TRT: 0:29:27 ?

Merri Dee describes her life as that of a survivor. Taking one year to recover from being shot point-blank in the head, Dee details the aftermath of the prosecution, incarceration and subsequent release, just twelve years later, of her assailant. Angered by his early release, Dee worked tirelessly to create victims' rights in the state of Illinois. Working with Jesse White and future mayor, Richard M. Daley, Dee helped create legislation to ensure the rights of crime victims. Dee also discusses her trials and travails as a black woman in broadcasting in the early 1970s. Encountering racism and sexism from both blacks and whites, she maintained her equilibrium and has been part of the WGN, Chicago television station, family for more than three decades.

Victims of crimes--Legal status, laws, etc.

Violent crimes.

Trials (Murder).

Sex discrimination in employment.

Broadcast journalism.

WGN (Television station : Chicago, Ill.).

Video Oral History Interview with Merri Dee, Section A2000_019_001_005, TRT: 0:29:57 ?

Merri Dee details her rather abrupt transition from regular on-air talent to the director of community relations for WGN television. She also describes her extracurricular broadcasting jobs. Dee takes on the roles and relationship of blacks in the media. She offers her admiration of black leaders like Rev. Jesse Jackson, Sr. and Illinois state senate president, Emil Jones. The segment closes with her thoughts on the importance of friendship and her decades-long friendship with singer Nancy Wilson.

WGN (Television station : Chicago, Ill.).

Broadcast journalism.

Mass media and race relations--United States.

Jackson, Jesse, 1941-

Jones, Emil, 1935-

Wilson, Nancy, 1937-

Video Oral History Interview with Merri Dee, Section A2000_019_001_006, TRT: 0:28:20 ?

Merri Dee reveals the importance of her relationship with her only daughter, Toya. It was vital to Dee to create the loving mother-daughter relationship she never had while growing up. Dee admires her daughter's and granddaughter's strength. Dee shares her thoughts on adoption and her involvement in organizations devoted to adoption, a cause dear to her as she was forced to live in an orphanage as a child by her cruel stepmother. The interview closes with 15 photos spanning Dee's broadcasting career.

Mothers and daughters.

African American families.

Adoption--United States.

Orphans.

Photographs.

Video Oral History Interview with Merri Dee, Section A2000_019_MERRI_DEE_06_MED_002, TRT: 0:02:55 ?

This tape contains footage of Nancy Wilson and Merri Dee wishing Clarence Walrdon a happy birthday.