

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Eric Johnson

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Johnson, Eric, 1951-
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Eric Johnson,
Dates:	March 15, 2000
Bulk Dates:	2000
Physical Description:	5 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:34:23).
Abstract:	Corporate chief executive Eric Johnson (1951 -) is the son of George Johnson and the owner of Johnson Hair Products and Baldwin/Richardson Foods. Johnson is active in civic activities and serves on numerous boards including the Boy Scouts of America, the Rochester Institute of Technology and Chicago State University. Johnson was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on March 15, 2000, in Chicago, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2000_027
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

A native of Chicago, Illinois, Eric Johnson, who was born on March 29, 1951, grew up learning about the business world. As the son of groundbreaking entrepreneur George Johnson, founder of Johnson Hair Products, Eric Johnson was part of Chicago's black elite. Johnson got his first business experience working in his father's hair product factory at the age of eight.

After graduating from Chicago's Laboratory School, Johnson attended Babson College in Boston before obtaining an M.B.A. from the University of Chicago. Johnson began his career in business at Procter & Gamble before joining the management team of his family's company. He then effectively used this experience when he took over management of Johnson Hair Products.

As president, he increased sales and Johnson's Hair Products stock was the seventh best-performing stock on the American Stock Exchange in 1991. Later, Johnson acquired Baldwin Ice Cream Company, which he merged with Richardson Foods to become Baldwin/Richardson Foods. In 2000, Baldwin/Richardson Foods' annual profits were around \$62 million. The company is also one the largest African American owned businesses in the food industry. Johnson is active in civic activities and serves on numerous boards including the Boy Scouts of America, the Rochester Institute of Technology and Chicago State University. In 1998, Johnson was elected to the board of directors of Lincoln National Corporation.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Eric Johnson was conducted by Julieanna L. Richardson on March 15, 2000, in Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on 5 Betacame SP videocassettes. Corporate chief executive Eric Johnson (1951

-) is the son of George Johnson and the owner of Johnson Hair Products and Baldwin/Richardson Foods. Johnson is active in civic activities and serves on numerous boards including the Boy Scouts of America, the Rochester Institute of Technology and Chicago State University.

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:

Johnson, Eric, 1951-

Richardson, Julieanna L. (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews
Johnson, Eric, 1951---Interviews

African American businesspeople--Illinois--Chicago--Interviews.

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Johnson Products Co. C.H. James & Co. C.H. James Restaurant Holdings

Occupations:

Corporate Chief Executive

HistoryMakers® Category:

BusinessMakers

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 Eric Johnson, March 15, 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 Eric Johnson, Section A2000_027_001_001, TRT: 0:30:50 ?

Eric Johnson describes his life as a child of the entrepreneur George Johnson. Johnson recalls that he became fascinated with business at a very early age, thanks to his father's dinner table discussions about the business. Johnson talks about the origins of the family business, and outlines some of George Johnson's business strategies. Eric Johnson recalls early childhood memories, which mostly revolve around recreation in his childhood neighborhood of Chatham in Chicago, Illinois. Johnson then describes Chatham as being a close-knit and

successful African American community even to this day. Johnson describes his positive experience in school, detailing his time at the University of Chicago Laboratory High School. Johnson says that although his high school was mostly white, there was a high level of activism, thanks to the efforts of the Civil Rights Movement. Johnson then describes his father and other prominent African American entrepreneurs as being integral to supporting the Movement in Chicago.

Childhood and youth--Illinois--Chicago.

Family-owned business enterprises.

Neighborhoods--Illinois--Chicago.

Civil rights movements--Illinois--Chicago.

University of Chicago. Laboratory Schools.

Video Oral History Interview with Eric Johnson, Section A2000_027_001_002, TRT: 0:30:20 ?

Eric Johnson details the role of black Chicago businesses in funding and supporting the Civil Rights Movement, and calls on current businesses to be equally participatory. Johnson then reflects on Chicago, explaining why such a large number of black businesses succeed there. He believes that Chicago will leave a lasting legacy of opportunity for black entrepreneurs. Johnson then moves into a discussion about Johnson Products Company, which he took over from his father, George Johnson. Eric Johnson describes the peak years of the company's success, and details the strategies behind the success, including the decision to make the company publicly-owned and traded. He talks about Johnson Products Company's symbiotic relationship with the television show 'Soul Train.' Johnson also describes the negative aspects of going public, particularly having to deal with increased and sometimes unfair competition.

Civil rights movements--United States.

African American business enterprises.

Johnson Products Co.

Corporations--United States.

Going public (Securities)--United States.

Soul train (Television program).

Video Oral History Interview with Eric Johnson, Section A2000_027_001_003, TRT: 0:31:05 ?

Eric Johnson details the expansion of Johnson Products Company into Nigeria. He discusses the positives and negatives of operating in an international market, and explains his eventual decision to sell the Nigerian division to local entrepreneurs. He then reflects on the overall success of Johnson Products Company. Johnson describes his undergraduate education at Babson College in the Boston, Massachusetts area, saying that while he received a valuable education, he did not feel at home in Boston's black community. Johnson then talks about his success at Procter & Gamble Corporation, where he worked for two years following his graduation. He says he was motivated to succeed after being passed up for a promotion at Procter & Gamble. Johnson then discusses his experience at the University of Chicago's business school, where he integrated quantitative analysis with his natural ability in sales and marketing. Johnson then describes his return to Johnson Products Company after receiving his MBA, detailing his quick promotion to president and CEO, and his subsequent overhaul of the company.

Johnson Products Co.

International business enterprises.

Nigeria.

Babson College.

University of Chicago.

Video Oral History Interview with Eric Johnson, Section A2000_027_001_004, TRT: 0:31:05 ?

Eric Johnson details the resurgence of Johnson Products Company under his leadership, explaining the strategies he implemented in order to increase sales and productivity. He explains that in spite of his success, he felt the need to explore other career options, and describes his difficult decision to step down as head of the company his father started. He then describes the new direction his career took, when he acquired the Baldwin Ice Cream Company, which he quickly transformed into a success. Johnson explains the differences between the food industry and the personal care industry, and says that these differences enabled him to maintain a larger customer base. Johnson then discusses Baldwin's merger with the Richardson Foods Company, which led to even greater success. Johnson reflects on his career as a businessman, stating that his greatest strength was his ability to improve the prospects of an already established business, exemplified by his success with Baldwin Ice Cream. Johnson briefly considers his personal legacy, and then describes his wife's critical role in the success of his business endeavors.

Johnson Products Co.

Ice cream industry--United States.

Food industry and trade.

African American business people.

African American executives.

Video Oral History Interview with Eric Johnson, Section A2000_027_001_005, TRT: 0:31:03 ?

This tape contains several photos of Eric Johnson during various stages of his life and career, though they are not narrated. There is also a small section of the interview on this tape, in which Eric Johnson reflects on his family and the African American community. Johnson reiterates his wife's critical role in his businesses, and explains how they are able to have a harmonious relationship at work and at home. He shares the hopes and expectations he has for his children, particularly that they succeed in something they enjoy. Johnson then explains in depth the importance of business ownership and equity in the African American community. He believes that raising wealth in non-liquid assets will have a permanent positive influence in the lives of black Americans. Johnson then shares his concerns for the black community, highlighting the need for improving the education system and making sure young African Americans are properly qualified to thrive in an increasingly technical world. He stresses to young people that education should be top priority, and advises to always look to the future, not just to the present.

Photographs.

African American families.

Marriage.

African Americans--Economic conditions.

Education.

Video Oral History Interview with Eric Johnson, Section A2000_027_Johnson_Eric_06_MED_001, TRT: 0:04:49 ?

In honor of BusinessMakers: Breakout Leaders, we salute Eric Johnson, Chief Executive Officer of Baldwin Richardson Foods, one of the largest African American owned businesses in the food industry. Johnson speaks about how his father, George Johnson, inspired his passion for business from an early age his

experience as Founder and President of Johnson Products Co., and how he left the family business to purchase Baldwin Ice Cream in 1992, a black owned company originally established in 1921. In 1997 Johnson purchased Richardson Foods from the Quaker Oats Company and formed Baldwin Richardson Foods, where he currently serves as Chief Executive Officer.

Video Oral History Interview with Eric Johnson, Section A2000_027_Johnson_Eric_06_MED_002, TRT: 0:06:41 ?