

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Dr. Alvin Poussaint

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Poussaint, Alvin F.
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Dr. Alvin Poussaint,
Dates:	February 13, 2001 and March 25, 2005
Bulk Dates:	2001 and 2005
Physical Description:	9 Betacame SP videocassettes (4:24:05).
Abstract:	Psychiatrist Dr. Alvin Poussaint (1934 -) joined Harvard Medical School's faculty as a professor of psychiatry, and remains one of the nation's preeminent psychiatrists and experts on race relations. Poussaint was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on February 13, 2001 and March 25, 2005, in Boston, Massachusetts. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2001_058
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Dr. Alvin Poussaint was born in East Harlem, New York, on May 15, 1934. When he was nine years old he became ill with rheumatic fever and was hospitalized for three months and spent two months in a convalescent home. Poussaint could do little but read while recovering, and it became a passion. After leaving the convalescent home, Poussaint's physical activities were restricted and so he took up quiet activities, like playing the clarinet. Poussaint began his background in science when he was admitted to New York City's competitive science-focused magnet school, Stuyvesant. After high school, he attended Columbia University

and, in 1960, received his M.D. from Cornell University. Dr. Poussaint completed his residency at the UCLA Neuropsychiatric Institute and in 1964, received a M.A. degree from that same institution.

After completing his training in psychiatry, Poussaint chose to join the Civil Rights Movement as it was taking shape in the South. With the belief that racism was the core mental health problem for the African American community, Dr. Poussaint thought overcoming segregation would be more effective for the community than individual counseling. He joined a team of healthcare professionals as the Southern Field Director of the Medical Committee for Human Rights in Jackson, Mississippi, in 1965. In this position, he and his team provided medical care to civil rights workers and helped to desegregate health care facilities across the South. His commitment to civil rights did not end when he left Mississippi to join the Tufts Medical School faculty in 1967. At Tufts, Poussaint served as director of the psychiatry program in a low-income housing project, and he continues to focus on increasing public awareness on the need for improved race relations in America.

In 1969, he joined Harvard Medical School's faculty, where he remains today as a professor of psychiatry and Faculty Associate Dean for Student Affairs. Poussaint is also presently director of the Media Center at the Judge Baker Children's Center in Boston.

As one of the nation's preeminent psychiatrists and experts on race relations, Dr. Poussaint has written many articles and the books: *Why Blacks Kill Blacks* (1972), *Raising Black Children* (1992), co-authored with Dr. J.P. Comer; and *Lay My Burden Down* (2000), co-authored with Amy Alexander. He is most well known, however, for his regular contributions to *Ebony* magazine and his work consulting for numerous television projects including *The Cosby Show* and *A Different World*.

For his outstanding contributions to the medical field, he has been honored with numerous awards and honorary degrees. Poussaint was one of the founding members of Operation PUSH, and today lends support to the SCLC, NAACP, Urban League, and many community organizations.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Dr. Alvin Poussaint was conducted by Julieanna L. Richardson and Robert Hayden on February 13, 2001 and March 25, 2005, in Boston, Massachusetts, and was recorded on 9 Betacame SP

videocassettes. Psychiatrist Dr. Alvin Poussaint (1934 -) joined Harvard Medical School's faculty as a professor of psychiatry, and remains one of the nation's preeminent psychiatrists and experts on race relations.

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:

Poussaint, Alvin F.

Hayden, Robert (Interviewer)

Richardson, Julieanna L. (Interviewer)

Bieschke, Paul (Videographer)

Vall, Luke Bernard (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Poussaint, Alvin F.--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Psychiatrist

HistoryMakers® Category:

MedicalMakers

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 Dr. Alvin Poussaint, February 13, 2001 and March 25, 2005. The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

Processing Information

This interview collection was processed and encoded on 2/5/2020 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 Dr. Alvin Poussaint, Section A2001_058_001_001, TRT: 0:30:36 2001/02/13

Dr. Alvin F. Poussaint discusses his childhood in East Harlem, New York during the 1930s and 1940s. His paternal grandfather, believed to have been biracial, came to New York from the island of Guadeloupe in the late 1800s. Poussaint's mother was also racially mixed: her father was white and her mother was Native American/Mexican, but she identified as African American. Poussaint's father was a printer and typographer and subsequently worked for the Young Men's Christian Association, YMCA, while his mother took care of the house and children. The Poussaint family lived in tenement housing and resources were often stretched to accommodate their large family. Poussaint was raised as a Catholic; as a child he was religious, following his parents' examples. Poussaint remembers

crime and street gang violence in the neighborhood and domestic violence in other people's home. At age nine he became very ill. He was taken to the hospital where he was diagnosed and became a case study of acute rheumatic fever.

Video Oral History Interview with Dr. Alvin Poussaint, Section A2001_058_001_002, TRT: 0:28:51 2001/02/13

Dr. Alvin F. Poussaint discusses his experience with rheumatic fever, a rare disease that many doctors at Mount Sinai hospital in New York, New York had never seen in a patient before. While Poussaint experienced good medical treatment and bedside manner at Mount Sinai, he was mistreated by the young white patients and nurses at a Long Island convalescent home. His experience at the hospital inspired him to become a medical doctor; he was intrigued by the authority that the doctors held and the respect they received. Poussaint describes the rampant drug use amongst his peers in East Harlem, New York. His brother, Kenny, as well as Alvin F. Poussaint's childhood best friend became drug addicts. Poussaint describes trying drugs, but ultimately feeling unaffected and guilty about his experimenting. He describes that weekly confession in his Catholic church deterred his usage. Poussaint describes that his illness led him to take on less physical activities; instead, he began to read more energetically. A junior high school mentor suggested that he apply to specialized high schools in New York that required entrance exams. He was accepted to Stuyvesant High School, an academically rigorous and prestigious institution. He describes that he felt misplaced socially. His East Harlem dialect and socioeconomic status seemed to set him apart from his well off and accomplished peers. His response to the difference was to study harder.

Video Oral History Interview with Dr. Alvin Poussaint, Section A2001_058_001_003, TRT: 0:30:32 2001/02/13

Dr. Alvin F. Poussaint describes that the death of his mother from cervical cancer was traumatic for his large family. Their family traditions died with their mother. Sixteen year old Alvin F. Poussaint became withdrawn at school. His brother began to spiral out of control; his drug abuse and mental illness saw him moving between mental

hospitals and jail. Despite the family difficulties, Alvin F. Poussaint got encouragement from his sister-in-law, a college graduate who instilled in him that he was capable of reaching his highest aspirations. She also gave him books on African American history. Poussaint describes that his father became very interested in his son attending Columbia University. He discouraged Alvin from leaving New York City. The family further influenced Poussaint's college life. His troubled brother, also his roommate, often distracted Alvin from his studying. And in tribute to his mother, Alvin F. Poussaint targeted Cornell Medical School and subsequently attended the New York City program. He describes that his mother had given birth to him in that very hospital.

Video Oral History Interview with Dr. Alvin Poussaint, Section A2001_058_001_004, TRT: 0:31:16 2001/02/13

Dr. Alvin F. Poussaint describes that after spending his undergraduate career living at home with his drug-addicted brother, he considered leaving the city of New York for a medical school elsewhere. He then received a scholarship that allowed him to stay in school housing at Cornell University in New York City. At the beginning of his residency, he was expected to choose a medical focus. Though he had an interest in pediatrics, witnessing an autopsy on a baby proved to be too emotional for him. Both in medical school and during his residency at the University of California, Los Angeles, Poussaint encountered racism from his colleagues and his superiors. He describes that he often openly-challenged ideas about racism and homosexuality that were widely accepted in psychiatric circles. Following his residency, he spent time in Alabama, providing medical care for those participating in the various activities of the Civil Rights Movement. It was there that he observed the various strains of African African thought directed at effecting change.

Video Oral History Interview with Dr. Alvin Poussaint, Section A2001_058_001_005, TRT: 0:30:18 2001/02/13

Alvin F. Poussaint gives his analysis of how the rise of black consciousness as well as differences in working styles between the southern black students and the white students from elite schools contributed to racial divisions

within the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, and to the eventual ejection of the white members.

Video Oral History Interview with Dr. Alvin Poussaint, Section A2001_058_001_006, TRT: 0:26:41 2001/02/13

Alvin F. Poussaint discusses his work as an advisor on 'The Cosby Show' television series, his plans for retirement and his dedication to education. The rest of the tape consists of photographs belonging to Dr. Poussaint, showing him from childhood up to the 1990s, and including pictures of family, friends and colleagues.

Video Oral History Interview with Dr. Alvin Poussaint, Section A2001_058_002_007, TRT: 0:28:27 2005/03/25

Psychiatrist Dr. Alvin F. Poussaint talks about his wife, Dr. Tina Young Poussaint, and his young daughter, Alison. He looks back on the political influence of his father, Christopher and recalls his father's pride in his becoming a doctor. He remembers being recruited in 1965 to join the Medical Committee for Human Rights and discusses his work with the Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi, which led to his being labelled a subversive by the government.

Video Oral History Interview with Dr. Alvin Poussaint, Section A2001_058_002_008, TRT: 0:28:07 2005/03/25

Psychiatrist Dr. Alvin F. Poussaint discusses racism in Boston from the late 1960s through the 1980s, issues of black consciousness and black political empowerment in Boston, and the tension between hip hop culture and education of black youth.

Video Oral History Interview with Dr. Alvin Poussaint, Section A2001_058_002_009, TRT: 0:29:17 2005/03/25

Psychiatrist Dr. Alvin F. Poussaint discusses his current work in 2005 and his plans for the future, efforts to maintain a diverse student population at Harvard Medical School, challenges for African Americans in employment and leadership. He tells about the events held in his honor at Harvard in February, 2005, and he considers how he hopes to be remembered.