

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Susan L. Taylor

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## Overview of the Collection

<b>Repository:</b>	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
<b>Creator:</b>	Taylor, Susan L
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Susan L. Taylor,
<b>Dates:</b>	March 8, 2001
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2001
<b>Physical Description:</b>	5 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:04:59).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Magazine editor Susan Taylor (1946 - ) started Nequai Cosmetics in her early twenties, one of the first companies to create beauty products for African American women. Taylor was hired in 1970 as the beauty editor for Essence magazine, and in 1981, was promoted to editor-in-chief, a post which she held until July 2000. Taylor also wrote a column, "In the Spirit," which addressed themes such as family, faith, self-esteem and health. Taylor was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on March 8, 2001, in New York, New York. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2001_072
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Susan Taylor was born in New York in 1946. In her early twenties, the young entrepreneur started Nequai Cosmetics, one of the first companies to create beauty products for African American women. Although her product line was well received in African American communities and in the Caribbean, Taylor was interested in expanding her career. She heard that Essence Magazine, a fledgling publication catering to African American women, was looking for a beauty editor. Taylor approached the then editor-in-chief Ed Lewis for the position and, in 1970 at the age of twenty-three, was hired. Although Susan Taylor had never attended college, she was a licensed cosmetologist who understood the specific needs and concerns of black women. Her monthly articles were popular with African American females who were historically undervalued and underrepresented by media companies. Taylor soon became responsible for fashion as well as beauty and, in 1981, was promoted to editor-in-chief, a post which she held until July 2000.

Under Susan's expert guidance, Essence Magazine experienced phenomenal growth. Their monthly readership soared to over five million people, reaching black women all over the world. Capturing the hearts of Essence readers was Susan's monthly column "In the Spirit," which addressed themes such as family, faith, self-esteem and health. Her motivational features culminated in the popular books, "In the Spirit: The Inspirational Writings of Susan L. Taylor" and "Lessons In Living." She also became a popular speaker on the lecture circuit.

In March 1986, Taylor was elected vice president of Essence Communication, Inc. and senior vice president in 1993. She was the host and executive producer of "Essence," the country's first nationally syndicated African-oriented magazine television show, the Essence Awards show and the Essence Music Festival.

Although she recently stepped down from her duties as editor-in-chief, Susan Taylor will remain as the chief

editorial executive responsible for the overall vision, articles and images of the publication. She also maintains a high profile in the community, where she is a staunch advocate for the nation's poor. Taylor is an avid supporter of Edwin Gould Services for Children, a foster-care agency, and serves on the advisory board for Aid to Imprisoned Mothers. Many recognize her tireless work and charitable contributions. In 1988, Taylor received an honorary doctorate of humane letters from the nation's first black college, Lincoln University and a second honorary doctorate for the University of Delaware in 1993. She is a recipient of the 1992 First Person award from the New York City Mission Society.

Mother to Shanna Nequai, Susan currently lives in New York with her husband Khephra Burns.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Susan L. Taylor was conducted by Julieanna L. Richardson on March 8, 2001, in New York, New York, and was recorded on 5 Betacame SP videocassettes. Magazine editor Susan Taylor (1946 - ) started Nequai Cosmetics in her early twenties, one of the first companies to create beauty products for African American women. Taylor was hired in 1970 as the beauty editor for Essence magazine, and in 1981, was promoted to editor-in-chief, a post which she held until July 2000. Taylor also wrote a column, "In the Spirit," which addressed themes such as family, faith, self-esteem and health.

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## 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®.

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## 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.

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## Controlled Access Terms

This interview collection is indexed under the following controlled access subject terms.

### Persons:

Taylor, Susan L

Richardson, Julieanna L. (Interviewer)

Bieschke, Paul (Videographer)

## Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews  
Taylor, Susan L--Interviews

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## Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

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The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

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## Occupations:

Magazine Editor

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## HistoryMakers® Category:

MediaMakers

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## 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 Susan L. Taylor, March 8, 2001. 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).

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## 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.

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## Detailed Description of the Collection

### Series I: Original Interview Footage

- Video Oral History Interview with Susan L. Taylor, Section A2001\_072\_001\_001, TRT: 0:29:52 ?  
Susan L. Taylor discusses her family background and its origins in the Caribbean. She speaks of the profound sense of alienation she felt from her parents and how she often sought interaction and intimacy outside the home. A strong sense of family pride kept her from engaging in early sexual intercourse, but she moved away from home at age 17 and soon fell in love. Taylor also discusses how her moving away from home affected family finances after her father's business failed and her mother expected her to help with the foster children whose presence provided additional family income.
- Video Oral History Interview with Susan L. Taylor, Section A2001\_072\_001\_002, TRT: 0:29:54 ?  
Susan L. Taylor describes the birth and subsequent explosive growth of Essence Magazine. She details the hurdles and blatant discrimination from advertisers the magazine faced and still encounters. Taylor also describes the difficulties she faced when asked to take over the position as editor-in chief, despite her lack of a college education and publishing background.
- Video Oral History Interview with Susan L. Taylor, Section A2001\_072\_001\_003, TRT: 0:30:50 ?  
Susan L. Taylor details the changes Essence Magazine has seen and the events like the Essence Music Festival and Essence Spirit Awards spawned from the publication. Taylor notes the strength of black women and their ability to create change in the publishing industry. As of 2005, Time Warner became the majority owner of Essence Communications. But in 2001, Taylor lauded the black ownership of the magazine.
- Video Oral History Interview with Susan L. Taylor, Section A2001\_072\_001\_004, TRT: 0:29:24 ?  
Susan L. Taylor shares stories of loss and triumph. She describes the intense mother-daughter bond forged during her mother's prolonged illness and her courtship and second marriage to Khepra Burns. Taylor also conjectures on the philosophical question, would she change anything in the civil rights movement if she could.
- Video Oral History Interview with Susan L. Taylor, Section A2001\_072\_001\_005, TRT: 0:04:59 ?  
This tape contains photos of Susan L. Taylor with noted figures such as Nelson Mandela, Dr. Betty Shabazz and Rosa Parks.