Overview of the Collection

Repository: The HistoryMakers® 1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com

Creator: Bates, Barbara, 1955-

Title: The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Barbara Bates,

Dates: August 28, 2002

Bulk Dates: 2002

Physical Description: 4 Betacam SP videocassettes (1:53:50).

Abstract: Fashion designer Barbara Bates (1955 - ) designs for celebrity clients and is the founder of the Bates Foundation, which provides custom-made prom dresses to underprivileged or hard-to-fit young women from inner-city schools in Chicago. Exotic fabrics and the use of leather trim are among the hallmarks of her designs. Bates was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on August 28, 2002, in Chicago, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.

Identification: A2002_150

Language: The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Self-taught fashion designer Barbara Bates was born on June 27, 1955, in Chicago, Illinois. Her father, Elvin Hicks, was a school teacher and her mother, Vera, was a housewife. Bates went through Chicago's public school system and graduated from Marshall High School in 1962.

Bates worked a variety of jobs after graduating from high school, where she frequently designed the clothes she wore. In 1984, while working as a secretary
for the First National Bank of Chicago, Bates began selling her clothing out of the bathroom during lunchtime. This experience led Bates to design clothes full-time and, two years later, she opened a 700 square-foot showroom, which is located in Chicago's South Loop.

In 1999, Bates founded the Bates Foundation to provide custom-made prom dresses to underprivileged or hard-to-fit young women from inner-city schools in Chicago. Bates' desire to make dresses for these women comes primarily from her own trials as a teen mother. Bates remembers the alternative school she attended as a pregnant fifteen-year-old and promised to make prom dresses for the girls that returned to high school and graduated. Bates has two sons, Eugene and Kristopher.

Bates Designs continues to be a leader in the world of fashion. Exotic fabrics and the use of leather trim are among the hallmarks of her designs. Bates has outfitted numerous celebrities including: Sinbad, Michael Jordan, Whitney Houston and Mike Tyson.

**Scope and Content**

This life oral history interview with Barbara Bates was conducted by Adele Hodge on August 28, 2002, in Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on 4 Betacame SP videocassettes. Fashion designer Barbara Bates (1955 - ) designs for celebrity clients and is the founder of the Bates Foundation, which provides custom-made prom dresses to underprivileged or hard-to-fit young women from inner-city schools in Chicago. Exotic fabrics and the use of leather trim are among the hallmarks of her designs.

**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
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:

Bates, Barbara, 1955-

Hodge, Adele (Interviewer)

Bieschke, Paul (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews
Bates, Barbara, 1955---Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:
HistoryMakers® Category:

StyleMakers

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


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
Bates talks about her family; being raised in two different worlds by her single, housewife mother in Chicago and her married, businesswoman aunt in Pittsburgh, her distaste for her grandparents’ farm in Mississippi, her longing to meet her father. She did well in school, she says out of innate ability because she was more interested in being done with school. When she was in 3rd grade she told her classmates that John F. Kennedy was her uncle and her classmates mourned for her when he was assassinated. She mentions her 4th grade teacher, who is still a friend, and her high school social studies teacher, who recently sent her some of his students. She recounts her interest in fashion – she liked Barbie dolls but liked the clothing more, cut clothes out of catalogues and wrote a book in 4th grade where she said she wanted to become a fashion designer. Bates won science fairs from 4th – 8th grade by dissecting animals. In 8th grade she won the city science fair by dissecting a cat. She was never interested in drugs, since she saw the bad effect on some of her cousins, but she did like going to parties. Really liked bop/stepping out. Talks about trying to meet her father senior year and then trying again at age 21. Ahmad Jamal was playing in Chicago so she came back from Detroit for the weekend, called him at his hotel and gave him her address for her father to contact her. After two days with no response, went to his hotel with a letter. Begins crying on camera, since it is the one-year anniversary of father’s death.

Bates tells how she met Jamal in his hotel room, that he confirms she is her father’s daughter, and puts her in touch with her father who comes to meet her in her mother. Describes their close relationship and how she was accepted into his family. Talks about her life in Detroit – how she followed a boyfriend there and landed a good job at General Motors but wanted to come back to Chicago.
Then interviewer backtracks to Bates' high school experience. Bates found out she was pregnant in the October of her sophomore year at Marshall. Her mother was the “best mother during pregnancy,” even though she cried and fainted a lot. Vera Bates later was the “backbone” for raising Bates' son. Bates stayed in school – she went to an alternative school, the Family Living Center, then had a son in June and went to summer school. When she returned to Marshall as a Junior, she found out that she had accumulated so many credits through these classes and through a work-study program where she got credit for working at Sears in the morning that she was able to graduate with honors and a baby in three years. Bates really wanted to finish high school and begin supporting herself. She quit her job at Sears and went to secretarial school, where she learned to type. Bates began working as an administrative assistant, although she hated it. Her mother warned her that there were “no black people” in the fashion industry. Bates also went to night school at Luke Junior College, which is now Harold Washington. She first began designing fashion while still in Detroit. Bates bought fabric and designed clothing, but hired a husband-wife couple to sew them. Although she knows fabric well, Bates still can’t sew. The clothing was initially for herself, but when her co-workers began complimenting her she began a side business of designing clothing for them while still working at the secretarial jobs she hated. At age 31 she decided to quit her job and start her own business. A friend agreed to front the money and be 50/50 partners with her, and fashion designer Reginald Thomas befriended her. She put an ad in the newspaper, but most of the advertising was through word-of-mouth. Although her friend dropped out of the partnership after three months, Bates is glad because a year later Michael Jordan was a client and the business was all her own. Talks about how her sister recruited Michael Jordan to be a client. Most of her publicity was about Michael Jordan being her client and about her having been a teen mom. Michael Jordan brought in customers and “gospel people” started coming – they were more excited about meeting her than she was about meeting them. Bates claims to be
“just kind of regular” and not what they were expecting. She had a second son just before starting her business and talks about the difficulties of balancing career and family and about the involvement of her son’s father – a former student of her father – in parenting. Bates also discusses the difficulties of starting a business and talks about her business managers, her cousin Diane and, as of four months, a third grade classmate. Bates talks about how she started going to church after Diane passed away two years ago and her two grandchildren. She mentions her 1999 marriage to Otis Wilson.

Video Oral History Interview with Barbara Bates, Section A2002_150_001_003, TRT: 0:31:00 2002/08/28

Bates recounts how she met her husband, football player Otis Wilson, their romance and their divorce proceedings. She talks about the role religion plays in her grappling with this situation. Bates talks about how she wants to help everyone and about her giving. She says she has not felt any affects of being a black woman and talks about strong women, such as her mother. Bates talks about her plans for her fashion line: moving away from custom clothing towards manufacturing and department stores, targeting clothing at teenagers. She talks about her relationship with young women in her church and about trying to understand young people. When asked about her clothing line, she says she doesn’t have one thing she focuses upon because she does custom work but that she likes textures, is known for her work with leathers, insists upon clean tailoring and cultivates a sense of style rather than current trends. She says that women tend to dress for other women. Thinks she will be remembered for her Foundation work and her association with entertainers and athletes. Bates also recounts how she first confronted her teen motherhood by talking to pregnant teens and started making prom dresses for those who successfully completed high school. She talks about suddenly becoming a speaker on this topic.

Video Oral History Interview with Barbara Bates, Section A2002_150_001_004, TRT: 0:24:00 2002/08/28

Bates talks about the evolution from that first talk in the summer of 1987 to a full-fledged foundation ten years
later when Kraft executive Paula Sneed donated $1,000 to support donations of prom dresses to pregnant and full-figured teenagers. Bates informally solicits the girls who unlikely and left-out in life to receive prom dresses if they complete high school. Initially Bates recruited a Board of women to sponsor girls by each paying for the materials and labor costs of one dress. On October 12th, 2001, The Barbara Bates Foundation had its first fashion show fundraiser, the Sweet Sixteen Anniversary Party, at the Museum of Contemporary Art. The invitations were designed by local artist Craig Rex Perry. Bates talks about the event and later shows pictures from the event. These pictures include model coordinator Debbie Dixon (sp?), model Winnetka Aaron (sp?), Liza Cruzat, Murel Hitchpat (sp?), Armelle Debird (sp?), Ben Lawson, Geretha Lawson (sp?), Crystal Sanders and Lisa Raye.