

Biographical Description for The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Bennetta Nelson West

PERSON

Nelson West, Bennetta, 1944-

Alternative Names: Bennetta Nelson West;

Life Dates: October 19, 1944-

Place of Birth: Memphis, Tennessee, USA

Residence: Memphis, TN

Work: Memphis, TN

Occupations: Academic Administrator; Nonprofit
Chief Executive

Biographical Note

Bennetta "Bennie" Nelson West has used her business acumen and passion about the value of African American arts and culture to help celebrate and nurture the arts in her community. Born on October 19, 1944 in Memphis, Tennessee, to Benjamin H. Nelson, letter carrier and entrepreneur and Jeannette Brown Nelson, an educator, Nelson West is the founding executive

director of the Memphis Black Arts Alliance, Inc.

Nelson West earned her bachelor's degree from Tuskegee Institute (now, Tuskegee University) in Tuskegee, Alabama in 1962. She later received her M.S. degree from Columbia University in New York City in 1979 and pursued both a doctorate in higher education and an executive masters in business administration from the University of Memphis between 1986 and 1988. While living in New York City between 1968 and 1978, Nelson West became active in the black arts movement where she studied and participated in the theatre, dance, and visual arts industry, settling on a part-time career as a potter operating ClaySpirits Studio in Manhattan. Seeking to merge her arts and business interests, Nelson West received additional training in Arts Management from the New School of Social Research in New York City and the Arts Management in Community Institute through the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund and the National Guild of Community Schools of the Arts.

Upon return to her hometown in 1978, Nelson West joined the Continuing Education Department of Shelby State Community College, where she organized the First National African American Crafts Conference & Jubilee and edited a companion book with noted African American artist and scholar Dr. David Driskell. This conference became a precursor to the National Black Arts Festival. In 1982, while continuing as a college administrator, Nelson West organized artists and arts groups to found the Memphis Black Arts Alliance, Inc., the city's first regional arts and cultural organization which celebrates and nurtures artistic excellence and black heritage, headquartered in the historic 1912 fire station restored as the FireHouse Community Arts Center.

Under Nelson West's leadership, the organization introduced the Greater Memphis region to nationally recognized black artists in touring theater and dance companies, writers and art exhibitions as well as

supporting the development of local talent with the FireHouse Community Arts Academy, the FireHouse Little Theater and the FireHouse Gallery. Additionally, in 1999, she conceived and organized the annual FireHouse Community Arts Festival at Soulsville, USA in Memphis.

Nelson West is the widow of visual artist Leonard D. West and the mother of three.

Related Entries

Luther Cooperative School [STUDENTOF]
[from ? to ?]

Melrose High School [STUDENTOF]
[from ? to ?]

Hamilton High School [STUDENTOF]
[from ? to ?]

Tuskegee University [STUDENTOF]
[from ? to ?]

B.S.

Teachers College, Columbia University [STUDENTOF]
[from ? to ?]

M.S.

ClaySpirits Studio [EMPLOYEEOF]
[from 1995 to ?]

Shelby State Community College [EMPLOYEEOF]
[from 1978 to ?]

Memphis Black Arts Alliance [EMPLOYEEOF]
[from 1982 to ?]

Founder

Firehouse Community Arts Festival [EMPLOYEEOF]
[from 1999 to ?]

Founder