

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Bennetta Nelson West

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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>	West, Bennetta Nelson, 1944-
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Bennetta Nelson West,
<b>Dates:</b>	June 25, 2003
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2003
<b>Physical Description:</b>	5 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:27:33).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Nonprofit chief executive and academic administrator Bennetta Nelson West (1944 - ) organized artists and arts groups to found the Memphis Black Arts Alliance, Inc., the city's first regional arts and cultural organization to celebrate and nurture artistic excellence and black heritage. Nelson West was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on June 25, 2003, in Memphis, Tennessee. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2003_143
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

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.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Bennetta Nelson West was conducted by Larry Crowe on June 25, 2003, in Memphis, Tennessee, and was recorded on 5 Betacame SP videocassettes. Nonprofit chief executive and academic administrator Bennetta Nelson West (1944 - ) organized artists and arts groups to found the Memphis Black Arts Alliance, Inc., the city's first regional arts and cultural organization to celebrate and nurture artistic excellence and black heritage.

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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:

West, Bennetta Nelson, 1944-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

### Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews  
West, Bennetta Nelson, 1944---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:

Arts Administrator

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## HistoryMakers® Category:

ArtMakers

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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 Bennetta Nelson West, June 25, 2003. 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 Bennetta Nelson West, Section A2003\_143\_001\_001, TRT: 0:28:01 ?

Bennetta Nelson West was born on October 19, 1944 in Memphis Tennessee to Benjamin Howard Nelson and Jeannette Laurette Brown Nelson. Benjamin Nelson was born on May 5, 1892 in Durhamville, Tennessee to farmer and minister George Washington Nelson and Mary Frances Fitzpatrick Nelson. Benjamin Nelson was a “race man” who served in World War I and worked as a farmer, bank porter, letter carrier, and umbrella maker. Jeannette Laurette Brown Nelson was born on February 21, 1903 in Kerrville, Tennessee to Lois Ophelia Boyd Brown and farmer Martin Van Buren Brown. Jeannette Nelson caught tuberculosis when she was sixteen and lived in a sanitarium for three years. She attended LeMoyne Normal College in Memphis and Tennessee State University in Nashville. When Nelson West was four years old, her mother founded Nelson’s Kindergarten for her to attend. Nelson West grew up in the Orange Mound neighborhood of Memphis and attended Lutheran Cooperative School, Melrose High School, and Hamilton High School.

Video Oral History Interview with Bennetta Nelson West, Section A2003\_143\_001\_002, TRT: 0:29:05 ?

Bennetta Nelson West attended Melrose High School in Memphis, Tennessee, where she graduated in 1962. In high school, she was in the National Honors Society, Psyche Bi Five science club, cheerleading, and the band. She also edited the school yearbook and the newspaper. Outside of school, Nelson West was active in ballet class, church plays, Girl Scouts, and the NAACP Youth Council. Her mentor and scout leader was Arvon Thigpen, a cousin of NAACP executive director Walter White. With the NAACP Youth Council, Nelson West boycotted Esso stations for refusing to sell oil to John McFerren of Tent City in Fayette County, Tennessee. On August 4, 1960, Nelson West was arrested for attending a zoo on the wrong day and HistoryMaker Russell Sugarmon was one of the lawyers who represented her. In 1962, she enrolled at Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, where she graduated with a B.S. degree in food service administration in 1966. She later received a fellowship to attend Columbia University in New York City, New York.

Video Oral History Interview with Bennetta Nelson West, Section A2003\_143\_001\_003, TRT: 0:30:00 ?

Bennetta Nelson West was involved in the Civil Rights Movement in Tuskegee Alabama, joining the Black Panther Party, and protesting the murder of Sammy Younge. After receiving her B.S. degree in food service administration in 1966, Nelson West became regional assistant administrator for the Head Start training program where she worked until 1967. She was living in Tuskegee when Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated in 1968. That summer, she moved to California to work at Disneyland, and left due to racism and became a consultant for the Civic Homes Corporation in southern California. That fall, she moved to New York City and enrolled at the Teachers College of Columbia University to study public health nutrition. While living in Newark, New Jersey, she worked at a Maternal Infant Care and Model Cities programs and became involved in black arts programs like the Negro Ensemble Company and the Henry Street Settlement. Nelson West also reflects on the existence of an African American aesthetic.

Video Oral History Interview with Bennetta Nelson West, Section A2003\_143\_001\_004, TRT: 0:29:20 ?

Bennetta Nelson West describes the political influence of the black arts

movement, the aesthetics of the African American arts community in Memphis, Tennessee, and lists her favorite black artists. After her father died in 1974, Nelson West decided to study arts administration at the New School for Social Research in New York City and became a consultant for the National Black Theater Alliance. She moved back to Memphis, Tennessee in 1978 to take care of her mother and to organize the First National African American Crafts Conference and Jubilee with the Brooks Museum of Art and Shelby State Community College. After the success of the symposium, Nelson West founded the Memphis Black Arts Alliance on May 7, 1982 with the help of HistoryMakers Ossie Davis and Ruby Dee. They leased a historic firehouse and renovated it as a space to nurture local artists. In 1987, Nelson West left the Alliance due to a change in its mission, but rejoined it in 1996 to help revive it.

Video Oral History Interview with Bennetta Nelson West, Section A2003\_143\_001\_005, TRT: 0:31:07 ?

Bennetta Nelson West describes her hopes for the future of the Memphis Black Arts Alliance and its FireHouse Community Arts Academy. She reflects on other black arts organizations that no longer exist in Memphis, Tennessee, and the other African American organizations such as the National Civil Rights Museum and the Stax Music Academy. She reflects upon her hopes and concerns for the African American community and on the focus that African American churches give to their communities. Nelson West describes her own practice as a clay artist, and talks about some of the artists who are on faculty at the FireHouse Community Arts Academy. She ends the interview by reflecting upon her legacy and narrating her photographs.