

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Alisa Starks

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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>	Starks, Alisa, 1960-
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Alisa Starks,
<b>Dates:</b>	August 27, 2003
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2003
<b>Physical Description:</b>	5 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:05:30).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Leisure entrepreneur Alisa Starks (1960 - ) is co-owner of the country's first African American owned chain of movie theaters, Inner-City Entertainment. She later founded Meridian Entertainment Group, and gained control of twenty percent of Chicago's movie screens. Starks was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on August 27, 2003, in Chicago, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2003_208
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Leisure entrepreneur Alisa A. Starks helped launch the country's first African American-owned chain of movie theaters. Born in Chicago on September 14, 1960, Starks grew up on Chicago's South Side.

Starks graduated from Aquinas Dominican High School in 1978, enrolling at Northwestern University. She received her B.S. in journalism in 1982 and her M.S. in 1983 from Northwestern University's Medill School of Journalism. From

1984 to 1989, Starks worked in advertising for Burrell Communications Group in Chicago. She and her husband, Donzell, lived in Los Angeles for two years before returning to Chicago. Starks returned to Burrell, where she became a vice president.

Deciding to take the entrepreneurial plunge, the Starkses began to explore partnerships to build new theater complexes in minority neighborhoods—areas that major movie chains had been historically neglected. In 1997, they beat out Magic Johnson to win financial support from the city of Chicago to build three multiplexes on Chicago's South and West sides. The new theaters were hailed for their aesthetic beauty and their ability to bring jobs to otherwise neglected and rundown areas. By 1999, the Starkses expanded their theater empire, building a new cinema in Charlotte, North Carolina, and setting their sights on other inner-city neighborhoods around the country. The same year, their company partnered to create the Meridian Entertainment Group, which began by opening a chain of Meridian Theaters and by acquiring eight existing Chicago movie theaters. In just two years, the Starkses had gone from just three multiplexes to controlling 20 percent of Chicago's movie screens. A downturn in the market and other problems forced the Starks to cut back to their original investments, which they operate today. They see their movie theaters as community centers.

Alisa Starks has been an active leader in several community and civic organizations. She has served on the boards of the Muntu Dance Theatre, the Metropolitan Pier of Exposition Authority, the Ancona School and the Chicago International Film Festival. Starks and her high school sweetheart, Donzell, married in 1988. They have one child, Ahmad, and live on Chicago's South Side.

Alisa Starks was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on August 27, 2003.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Alisa Starks was conducted by Larry Crowe on August 27, 2003, in Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on 5 Betacame SP videocassettes. Leisure entrepreneur Alisa Starks (1960 - ) is co-owner of the country's first African American owned chain of movie theaters, Inner-City Entertainment. She later founded Meridian Entertainment Group, and gained control of twenty percent of Chicago's movie screens.

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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:**

Starks, Alisa, 1960-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

### **Subjects:**

African Americans--Interviews

Starks, Alisa, 1960---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:**

Leisure Entrepreneur

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## **HistoryMakers® Category:**

BusinessMakers

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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 Alisa Starks, August 27, 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 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).

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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 Alisa Starks, Section  
A2003\_208\_001\_001, TRT: 0:30:10 2003/08/27

Alisa Starks was born on September 15, 1960 in Chicago, Illinois to Mary Ann Davis and Levert Paul King Jr. Her mother was born on May 25, 1935 in Chicago and was always the caretaker of the family. She had a large family and even when Starks was younger, she remembers her house always being the place to be: full of food and family. Starks' best memories of her father are when he worked as a social worker. Both her parents strove to instill a strong cultural background in their two daughters, Alisa and Deborah, always encouraging them to achieve their goals. Starks recalls her parents fighting for her right to enter kindergarten at a Catholic school on Chicago's South Side, where she witnessed a great wave of white flight. She was labeled a "militant activist" early on. One time, at age eight, she organized a group of black girls at her school to wear two-tone socks (red and green) to celebrate black history. She was called into the office for her behavior. Her father found it very amusing.

Video Oral History Interview with Alisa Starks, Section  
A2003\_208\_001\_002, TRT: 0:29:20 2003/08/27

Throughout grade school, Starks was outspoken, but as she transitioned into high school she turned toward writing instead. As class valedictorian, Alisa Starks graduated Aquinas Dominican High School in 1978. She began her freshman year that fall at Northwestern University in Chicago, Illinois. She graduated in 1982 with a degree in journalism and a minor in African American Studies. She continued on at Northwestern to obtain her master's

degree in advertising with the hopes of working for Burrell Advertising, one of the world's largest multi-cultural advertising firms. Starks received her master's in 1983 and through a series of persistent phone calls and meetings she was hired at Burrell. Starks stayed there for five years before moving to Los Angeles, California with her husband, HistoryMaker Donzell Starks. The Starks returned to Chicago in 1991. She continued working for Burrell for another six years before fully devoting herself to the movie theater venture.

Video Oral History Interview with Alisa Starks, Section  
A2003\_208\_001\_003, TRT: 0:29:05 2003/08/27

Alisa Starks and her husband, HistoryMaker Donzell Starks, met in the eighth grade, dated throughout high school and college, and eventually got married in 1989. Together they explored many business options, including McDonalds and Dock's Fish franchises. While the Starks were living in Los Angeles, California went to the Baldwin Theater, the only first-run black-owned movie theater in the country. Once they moved back to Chicago, Illinois Alisa began seriously considering opening an inner city movie theater. They tried to secure locations in L.A. and Atlanta before settling on Chicago. Between her marketing expertise and her husband's banking experience, they felt prepared for this endeavor. They opened three multiplexes on the south and west sides of Chicago on November 24, 1997. Starks has witnessed the positive changes that additional developments have made on those communities because of the theater's presence.

Video Oral History Interview with Alisa Starks, Section  
A2003\_208\_001\_004, TRT: 0:29:30 2003/08/27

Many people did not think Alisa Starks' movie theaters would thrive in Chicago's South Side. However, Starks pointed out that, even during the L.A. Riots in 1992, places like the Baldwin Theater and the McDonald's in Los Angeles were untouched because of their relationships to the community. When the theater first opened there was one problem for patrons: hats were prohibited to be worn inside. Starks thought this requirement would help curb gang violence, but instead it caused a slight uproar. The rule was quickly revoked. Starks ensures that each movie

theater is catering to its respective audience through music, décor, ticket pricing, and movie genres. Starks is proud that the theater is providing entry-level jobs for people who need to gain experience before entering the workforce. She has also been an avid promoter of black independent filmmakers and their films.

Video Oral History Interview with Alisa Starks, Section  
A2003\_208\_001\_005, TRT: 0:07:25 2003/08/27

Alisa Starks reflects upon the abatement of the black middle class. She remembers a time when black teachers, doctors, and social workers were forced to live side-by-side because of segregation, but now the middle and upper class African Americans are living far from the poorer black communities. Starks and her husband, HistoryMaker Donzell Starks, make a concerted effort to remain close to the community they grew up in on the South Side of Chicago. Starks believes that her legacy is still building toward something greater, but, for now, she is a testament to working hard to achieving goals. Starks' constant driving factor is to help develop communities and work together with community members to make that possible.