

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Avon Kirkland

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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>	Kirkland, Avon
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Avon Kirkland,
<b>Dates:</b>	April 6, 2004
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2004
<b>Physical Description:</b>	7 Betacame SP videocassettes (3:19:15).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Film producer Avon Kirkland (1936 - ) served as the primary writer, director, and producer of many films about the black experience through his company, New Images Production. His films and documentaries covered public figures such as educator, Booker T. Washington and writer, Ralph Ellison, as well as topics such as the 1954 Brown v. Board Education decision. Kirkland was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on April 6, 2004, in Berkeley, California. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2004_042
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Film producer Avon Kirkland was born on November 27, 1936, in Jacksonville, Florida to his widowed mother, Lula Mae Durham Kirkland. His father, William Kirkland, died in an accident prior to Kirkland and his twin sister, Yvonne Kirkland Moody's birth. After matriculating through Jacksonville's Donald Cookland Elementary and New Stanton High, Kirkland, obtained his B.S. degree in chemistry in 1958 from Clark University, now Clark Atlanta University in Atlanta, Georgia. In 1964, he received his Ph.D. degree in organic chemistry from Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri.

Between 1964 and 1967, following three years of work as a research chemist for the Sinclair Research Laboratories in Harvey, Illinois, Kirkland began to lose interest in science and spent a year in New York City studying the guitar. From 1967 to 1968, he used his scientific training to design and facilitate a multifaceted after-school educational program for inner city children. This experience helped him create an elementary school reading and math programs for the Behavioral Research Labs of Palo Alto, California. In 1973, he took another year off and spent so much time watching television that he decided to pursue work in the television industry. From 1974 to 1977, he was the director of Instructional Service for KQED in San Francisco.

In 1977, Kirkland became the executive producer of *Up & Coming*, an hour-long drama featuring a black family, which ended in 1982 after twenty-five shows. Kirkland enjoyed this work immensely. He founded New Images Productions, a non-profit media production company in Berkeley, California, then devoted to creating films about the lives and experiences of African Americans. He serves as the primary writer, director and producer for many of the company's projects. His work includes *Up From Slavery: The Triumph and Tragedy of Booker T. Washington*, *Ralph Ellison: An American Journey*, *Street Soldiers*, *Simple Justice* and *Booker*. His films have received many honors and awards including the Blue Ribbon Award in 1981; the 1986 Prix Jeunesse International Prize; The

CINE Golden Eagle, Best Public Affairs Documentary and a special showing at the 2002 Sundance Film Festival.

Mr. Kirkland is divorced and has one son. He resides in Berkeley, California, where he enjoys music and competitive tennis.

Avon Kirkland was interviewed by *HistoryMakers* on April 6, 2004.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Avon Kirkland was conducted by Loretta Henry on April 6, 2004, in Berkeley, California, and was recorded on 7 Betacame SP videocassettes. Film producer Avon Kirkland (1936 - ) served as the primary writer, director, and producer of many films about the black experience through his company, New Images Production. His films and documentaries covered public figures such as educator, Booker T. Washington and writer, Ralph Ellison, as well as topics such as the 1954 Brown v. Board Education decision.

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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:

Kirkland, Avon

Henry, Loretta (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

### Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Kirkland, Avon--Interviews

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Kirkland, Avon--Interview.

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African American motion picture producers and directors--Interview.

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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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New Images Productions

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## Occupations:

Film Producer

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## HistoryMakers® Category:

EntertainmentMakers

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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 Avon Kirkland, April 6, 2004. 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.

## Detailed Description of the Collection

### Series I: Original Interview Footage

Video Oral History Interview with Avon Kirkland, Section A2004\_042\_001\_001, TRT: 0:29:30 ?

Avon Kirkland was born on November 27, 1936 in Jacksonville, Florida. His mother, Lula Mae Durham, was born in 1910 in Parrott, Georgia. Her father was a white landowner. At the age of sixteen, Durham left home to attend Tuskegee Institute where she earned her high school diploma. She moved to Jacksonville to live with her sister and became a domestic because she could not find a job teaching. Kirkland's father, William Kirkland, was born near Newville, Alabama and moved to Jacksonville where he lived with his sister and met Durham. He died from an accident, before Kirkland and his twin sister, Yvonne K. Moody, were born. Along with his mother and an aunt, the Felder family took care of Kirkland and his sister while his older brother was sent to live with relatives in St. Petersburg, Florida. Kirkland's family was poor and lived across the street from a juke joint. He remembers baking a cake for his mother, holidays during his childhood and hearing the news that President Franklin D. Roosevelt died.

African American families--Florida.

Race relations--Southern States.

African American household employees--Florida--Jacksonville.

Miscegenation.

Video Oral History Interview with Avon Kirkland, Section A2004\_042\_001\_002, TRT: 0:31:00 ?

Avon Kirkland grew up in Black Bottom, a poor African American neighborhood in Jacksonville, Florida where he attended Darnell-Cookman Elementary School and regularly attended Sunday school at Grant Memorial A.M.E. Church. He recalls his neighbors, Jacksonville's humidity and the mango trees. His mother was a domestic who once had a white toddler she took care of call her a racist name. Kirkland recalls his mother's reaction to the Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka (1954) decision and reflects upon the quality of education in Jacksonville. Kirkland graduated from New Stanton Senior High School, which was a nicer facility than the old school, but remained segregated. In high school, Kirkland had lost interest in studying, enrolled himself in industrial courses and was focused on his jobs: as a dishwasher, at a dry cleaners and two paper routes. After he graduated, he washed dishes at a cigar factory's cafeteria where he and a friend attempted an unsuccessful strike. He shares his favorite quote.

Segregation in education--Law and legislation--United States.

Race relations--Florida.

National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

African Americans--Florida--Jacksonville--Social life and customs.

African American children--Education (Secondary)--Florida.

Civil rights movements--Florida--20th century.

Video Oral History Interview with Avon Kirkland, Section A2004\_042\_001\_003, TRT: 0:29:40 ?

Avon Kirkland applied to Clark College in Atlanta, Georgia at the suggestion of his paternal aunt and uncle. While attending Clark, he lived with the couple and worked for his uncle who was a janitor at the Georgia Institute of Technology. Kirkland majored in chemistry, made the honor roll and was in drama and

student government. In 1957, through the Experiment in International Living program, he spent the summer in Italy where he stayed with a wealthy Italian family and interacted with white students from the South. Prior to his trip, he studied Italian arts and culture, and impressed a fellow student when he knew the plot of 'Aida.' When he graduated from Clark College in 1958, Kirkland received a Woodrow Wilson graduate fellowship; he was one of four African Americans, including HistoryMaker Reatha Clark King, to receive the award. He attended the graduate program in chemistry at Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri. There, he began playing the guitar and abandoned the idea of becoming a doctor.

Clark Atlanta University.

African Americans--Travel--Italy.

African Americans--Georgia--Atlanta--Social life and customs.

African American college students--Georgia--Atlanta.

African Americans--Social life and customs--Florida--Jacksonville.

Video Oral History Interview with Avon Kirkland, Section A2004\_042\_001\_004, TRT: 0:30:00 ?

Avon Kirkland joined the NAACP and CORE as a graduate student at Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri. After earning his Ph.D. degree in chemistry, he worked as a research chemist in Illinois, but eventually grew bored of the work. He established study centers in Chicago's housing projects before moving to New York where he worked as a regional manager at publisher, Behavioral Research Labs. In 1972, he became a vice president at BLR and moved to California. In 1973, he left BRL and took a year off, during which he wrote a script for 'Sanford & Son' and submitted it to the show's producers. In 1974, he accepted a job as director of instructional services at PBS station KQED in San Francisco. In 1977, he produced the series 'Up and Coming.' After founding New Images Productions, Kirkland received a grant from the U.S. Department of Education to produce 'Booker' based on ten-year-old Booker T. Washington's life. In 1993 he produced 'Simple Justice' about the 1954 Brown v. Board decision.

Massey, Walter E.

Civil rights movements--Missouri--Saint Louis.

Congress of Racial Equality.

National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Saint Louis Branch.

New Images Productions.

Civil rights demonstrations--Missouri--Saint Louis.

African American chemists.

African Americans--Education (Higher)--Missouri.

African Americans on television.

African American television producers and directors.

Video Oral History Interview with Avon Kirkland, Section A2004\_042\_001\_005, TRT: 0:29:30 ?

Avon Kirkland's mother attended a screening of his PBS television program, 'Up and Coming,' before she passed away. He produced and directed the documentary, 'Street Soldiers,' about the Omega Boys Club run by HistoryMaker Joe Marshall, which aired nationally on PBS in 1997 and was screened on Capitol Hill by the Congressional Black Caucus. Kirkland became interested in producing a film about Ralph Ellison, the author of 'Invisible Man,' after reading Ellison's obituary in 1994. He talks about the process of securing

the rights to dramatize 'Invisible Man' and Ellison's perspective on African American identity. Kirkland's documentary 'Ralph Ellison: An American Journey' was accepted by the Sundance Film Festival and broadcasted on PBS' 'American Masters' series in 2002. Kirkland plans to produce a documentary on the adult life of Booker T. Washington and reflects upon controversial legacy and others' perspectives of Washington. Kirkland describes his process for creating and producing documentaries.

Omega Boys Club (San Francisco, Calif).

Ellison, Ralph.

Sundance Film Festival.

African American motion picture producers and directors.

Documentary films--Production and direction.

Video Oral History Interview with Avon Kirkland, Section A2004\_042\_001\_006, TRT: 0:31:15 ?

Avon Kirkland has a son, Avery Julian Kirkland, with his former wife, Evelyn Lewis. Lewis teaches at the University of California Davis School of Law in Davis, California. He reflects upon his relationships, the meaning of intimacy and the importance of accumulating assets. Kirkland would like to travel more, study philosophy, learn to operate a camera artfully and improve his tennis skills. Kirkland would like to work on a music or rhythm and blues documentary and a documentary of Sammy Davis, Jr. or Richard Pryor. He shares advice for young filmmakers and producers, describes his hopes and concerns for the African American community and how he would like to be remembered. He reflects upon his life and concludes by narrating his photographs.

African American families.

African American fathers.

African Americans--Marriage.

African Americans--Motion picture producers and directors--Vocational guidance.

Video Oral History Interview with Avon Kirkland, Section A2004\_042\_001\_007, TRT: 0:18:20 ?

Avon Kirkland narrates his photographs.