



# 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>	Avon Kirkland
<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 Betacam SP videocassettes (3:17:55).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Film producer Avon Kirkland (1936 - ) has 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 have 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, Lou 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 Stranton High, Kirkland, obtained his B.S. degree in chemistry in 1958 from Clark College, 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 Oil Research Labs 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 Betacam SP videocassettes. Film producer Avon Kirkland (1936 - ) has 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 have 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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## HistoryMakers® Category:

EntertainmentMakers

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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 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 8/4/2011 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, April 6, 2004

Video Oral History Interview with Avon Kirkland, Section A2004\_042\_001\_001, TRT: 0:29:30  
2004/04/06

Avon Kirkland discusses his paternal and maternal families. His mother, Lula Mae Durham Kirkland was born in Parrott, Georgia in 1910. He describes her as a typical, black southern child who lived with her mother, Classie Durham, on a farm. The farm was bequeathed to Durham by a white man who also fathered her three children. Durham died when Kirkland's mother was ten years old. At sixteen, Kirkland's mother worked while attending Tuskegee Institute. Kirkland's father, William Kirkland, was born near Newville, Alabama and met Lula Mae in Jacksonville, Florida. He died in an accident before Kirkland and his twin sister Yvonne Kirkland Moody were born in 1936. Kirkland learned from his mother and aunts that his father was ambitious despite being poor and uneducated. Unable to find work as a teacher in Jacksonville, Kirkland's mother became a maid. Kirkland continues to discuss his desire to meet the family of his white grandfather. He also elaborates on the close relationship he shares with his twin sister.

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  
2004/04/06

Avon Kirkland discusses how his consciousness has been informed by his experiences growing up poor and through reading. He admits that though he was protected from the racial issues in Florida, he still encountered incidences of racial discrimination in the areas of public accommodation, employment practices, and segregated neighborhoods. Kirkland also reflects on the customs of Jacksonville, its humidity, beach water, mango trees and fresh orange juice. He also remembers the Civil Rights activities taking place during his years as a student at New Stranton High School in 1951. He recalls the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People's early efforts to address school desegregation, which eventually culminated with the 1954 Brown v. Board of Education decision. He also describes his own involvement in protest efforts. In reflecting on his youth, Kirkland discusses the various churches, schools, friends, his job as a dishwasher and his ambition to attend college.

African American life--Florida.

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

Race relations--Florida.

National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

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

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  
2004/04/06

Avon Kirkland talks about his decision to go to college. Though initially interested in Tennessee State University, his family convinced him otherwise. Kirkland's Aunt Berley and Uncle Robert told him about Clark Atlanta University in Atlanta, Georgia, where their children were enrolled. He decided to attend Clark Atlanta, where he majored in sociology and then switched to chemistry. During his college years, Kirkland made the honor roll, participated in drama, and held many leadership positions in student government. Upon graduating from college, Kirkland was offered a Woodrow Wilson fellowship, among other accolades. Kirkland reflects on the differences between black life in Atlanta and Jacksonville. He then shifts his attention to a scholarship he received to travel to Europe as a goodwill ambassador. He was the only African American in the group traveling to Italy. During his tour, Kirkland noted the absence of legalized racial discrimination and the impact it had on him.

Clark Atlanta University.

African Americans--Travel--Italy.

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

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: 0:29:00  
2004/04/06

Avon Kirkland discusses his political activities during his graduate studies at Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri. He was actively involved in the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the Committee of Racial Equality. Kirkland recalls singing protest songs and participating in a sit-in with Walter Massey at a bank in St. Louis that would not hire African Americans. During this time, Kirkland also began reading the works of Ralph Ellison, William Shakespeare and Walt Whitman. After graduate school, he worked for three years as a research chemist, took a break, and in 1972 he accepted a leadership position with Behavioral Research Lab in San Francisco, California. Kirkland goes on to discuss his early career in television production and his desire to see programs that dealt with the lives of "everyday" black people. He also talks about his decision to found New Images Productions, where he produced such television programs such as "Booker" and "Simple Justice."

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  
2004/04/06

Avon Kirkland reflects upon the pilot episode of his television program, “Up and Coming,” and how proud his mother was to witness his career coming into fruition; she died shortly after the program aired. In collaboration with the founder of Omega Boys Club, a community program for teenage boys who have had trouble with law enforcement, Kirkland produced a documentary entitled “Street Soldiers.” The documentary, which traced the lives of these teenagers for one year, became a national PBS show. After reading writer Ralph Ellison’s obituary, Kirkland was inspired to research and document Ellison’s life. He decided to create a documentary about Ellison, which was shown at the Sundance Film Festival. Kirkland also discusses his creative process as a filmmaker and his efforts to raise funds for various film and documentary productions.

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  
2004/04/06

Avon Kirkland discusses his personal life, including his sixteen-year-old son, Avery, and his marriage and subsequent divorce from Evelyn Lewis. He reflects upon the important role fatherhood plays in his life and the way black families, and black men in particular, negotiate the concept of intimacy. In his free time, Kirkland would like to travel more, go back to school to study philosophy, sharpen his tennis game, and learn how to artfully operate a camera. Music, Kirkland adds, is an important part of his life and he would like to do a film or television program on the Blues genre. Kirkland goes on to discuss the progress of black people since slavery, his concerns for the larger black community and advice for young filmmakers. In closing, he states that he would like to be remembered as a good guy who tried to do good things and tried to take care of his responsibilities.

African American families.

African American fathers--Attitudes.

African American marriages.

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

Video Oral History Interview with Avon Kirkland, Section A2004\_042\_001\_007, TRT: 0:18:00  
2004/04/06

Avon Kirkland narrates personal photographs on this tape.