

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Derrick A. Bell, Jr.

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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>	Bell, Derrick, 1930-2011
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Derrick A. Bell, Jr.,
<b>Dates:</b>	December 1, 2004
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2004
<b>Physical Description:</b>	7 Betacame SP videocassettes (3:26:03).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Law professor and civil rights lawyer Derrick A. Bell, Jr. (1930 - 2011 ) was recruited by Thurgood Marshall to join the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, where he oversaw three hundred school desegregation cases; he was later named Deputy Director of Civil Rights at the U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. Bell later became the first African American to serve as a tenured professor at Harvard Law School, and, the first African American dean of the University of Oregon Law School. Bell was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on December 1, 2004, in New York, New York. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2004_242
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Derrick Albert Bell, Jr., was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, on November 6, 1930. Bell was offered a scholarship to Lincoln University but was unable to attend because he did not receive enough financial aid. Becoming the first member of his family to go to college, Bell chose to attend Duquesne University, earning his A.B. in 1952.

While attending Duquesne University, Bell joined the ROTC, and following his graduation, went to Korea as part of the U.S. Air Force. Returning from the war in 1954, Bell attended the University of Pittsburgh Law School, earning an L.L.B. in 1957. Bell was hired by the U.S. Justice Department after graduation, but left in 1959 over his refusal to terminate his involvement with the NAACP; subsequently, Thurgood Marshall recruited him to join the NAACP Legal Defense Fund where he oversaw three hundred school desegregation cases. In 1966, Bell was named deputy director of civil rights at the U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, before becoming a teacher at USC law school and director of USC's Western Center on Law and Poverty in 1968.

In 1971, Bell became the first African American to become a tenured professor at Harvard Law School; there he established a course in civil rights law and wrote *Race, Racism and American Law*, which today is a standard textbook in law schools around the country. Leaving Harvard, Bell became the first African American dean of the University of Oregon Law School, and in 1985, he resigned in protest after the university directed him not to hire an Asian American candidate for a faculty position. Returning to Harvard Law School, Bell would again resign in protest in 1992 over the school's failure to hire and offer tenure to minority women.

In addition to his work in the classroom, Bell was an acclaimed author, having written numerous books, most

notably his series featuring fictional civil rights leader Geneva Crenshaw, including *And We Are Not Saved* and *Faces at the Bottom of the Well*. In 2002, Bell wrote *Ethical Ambition: Living a Life of Meaning and Worth*, which contained his thoughts on achieving success while maintaining integrity. Most recently, Bell authored *Silent Covenants: Brown v. Board of Education and the Unfulfilled Hopes for Racial Reform*. Bell had been the recipient of numerous honors and awards; his later work included serving as a visiting professor of law at the New York University School of Law.

Derrick Bell passed away on October 5, 2011 at age 80.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Derrick A. Bell, Jr. was conducted by Larry Crowe on December 1, 2004, in New York, New York, and was recorded on 7 Betacame SP videocassettes. Law professor and civil rights lawyer Derrick A. Bell, Jr. (1930 - 2011 ) was recruited by Thurgood Marshall to join the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, where he oversaw three hundred school desegregation cases; he was later named Deputy Director of Civil Rights at the U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. Bell later became the first African American to serve as a tenured professor at Harvard Law School, and, the first African American dean of the University of Oregon Law School.

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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:

Bell, Derrick, 1930-2011

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

## Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews  
Bell, Derrick, 1930-2011--Interviews

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African American law teachers--Interviews

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Universities and colleges--Faculty--Interviews

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African American authors--Interviews

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African American civil rights workers--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:

Law Professor

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## HistoryMakers® Category:

LawMakers

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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 Derrick A. Bell, Jr., December 1, 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).

## 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 Derrick A. Bell, Jr., Section A2004\_242\_001\_001, TRT: 0:30:24 ?

Derrick A. Bell, Jr. was born on November 6, 1930 in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. His maternal grandfather, John Childress, a cook on the Pennsylvania Railroad, was rendered blind from prolonged exposure to the hot ovens. His paternal grandfather, Albert Bell, was a minister in Dothan, Alabama. Bell's mother, Ada Childress Bell, was born in 1910 in Pittsburgh and graduated from Fifth Avenue High School. His father, Derrick Bell, was born in Dothan in 1908 and moved to Pittsburgh following an incident where he attacked two white men in retaliation for whipping him. Bell's parents met and eloped in Pittsburgh in 1930. He recalls his father's career in the steel mills, as a porter at a department store and as an entrepreneur owning a fleet of trucks. Bell's family lived in Pittsburgh's Hill District before buying a house in a middle-class neighborhood with a park and good schools. Bell recalls his maternal uncles, his memories of his parents and neighborhood, his self-confidence and his interest in photography.

African American law teachers--Interviews.

Universities and colleges--Faculty--Interviews.

African American authors--Interviews.

African American civil rights workers--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with Derrick A. Bell, Jr., Section A2004\_242\_001\_002, TRT: 0:30:11 ?

Derrick A. Bell, Jr. attended McKelvey Elementary School, Madison Elementary School and Herron Hill Junior High School in Pittsburgh. As the youngest in his class at Herron Hill, he was unable to compete in the school's limited athletic program. Bell attended the historic Camp James Weldon Johnson program, where he learned about the accomplishments of Paul Laurence Dunbar, Marian Anderson and Harriett Tubman, and HBCUs that his counselors attended. Bell later worked there as a counselor. Despite his interest in photography and aeronautical engineering, Bell had no role models to encourage him. While delivering the Pittsburgh Press, he met eminent black lawyers like Homer S. Brown, Everett Utterback and Paul Jones, who inspired his interest in a legal career. He attended the majority white Schenley High School, where he met his future first wife, Jewel Hairston Bell, an aspiring actress who later worked at Karamu House in Cleveland. Bell reflects upon developing a work ethic and raising disciplined children.

Video Oral History Interview with Derrick A. Bell, Jr., Section A2004\_242\_001\_003, TRT: 0:30:13 ?

Derrick A. Bell, Jr. graduated in 1948 from Schenley High School in Pittsburgh,

where he experienced discrimination in the Civil Air Patrol. The scholarship he was offered to Lincoln University in Philadelphia did not provide enough funding, so instead Bell attended Duquesne University in Pittsburgh, earning his A.B. degree in 1952. While there, his mentor, Father Vincent Deer, encouraged him to work hard. Bell joined the U.S. Air Force ROTC; after graduation, he served in the Korean War with the U.S. Air Force. He describes his experience as a black serviceman on Air Force bases in the South in the 1950s, and his service as an officer of the guard in Korea. Returning from the war in 1954, Bell attended the University of Pittsburgh School of Law, where he became interested in civil rights law. He recalls proposing to his first wife, Jewel Hairston Bell; their marriage; and her sense of insight. Upon earning his L.L.B. in 1957, Bell was hired by the U.S. Department of Justice.

Video Oral History Interview with Derrick A. Bell, Jr., Section A2004\_242\_001\_004, TRT: 0:30:44 ?

Derrick A. Bell, Jr. earned his L.L.B. degree from the University of Pittsburgh School of Law in 1957, and joined the U.S. Department of Justice, where worked in the newly established Civil Rights Division. Under pressure to give up his NAACP membership, Bell resigned from this position in 1959. He returned to Pittsburgh to work for the local NAACP. While there, Thurgood Marshall, upon the recommendation of William H. Hastie, recruited Bell to join the NAACP Legal Defense Fund in 1960. Bell, along with Marshall, Constance Baker Motley, Jack Greenberg, and James M. Nabrit, III, served as defense counsel for those arrested in the Greensboro sit-ins of 1960. He oversaw three hundred school desegregation cases during his tenure, working closely with Motley, Medgar Evers, and HistoryMakers Robert L. Carter and Julius Chambers. Bell reflects upon the challenges of school desegregation in the South, and alternatives to integration that might have achieved a higher quality of education for African Americans.

Video Oral History Interview with Derrick A. Bell, Jr., Section A2004\_242\_001\_005, TRT: 0:30:37 ?

Derrick A. Bell, Jr. worked at the NAACP Legal Defense Fund from 1960 to 1966. In that time, he oversaw the desegregation of over 300 schools. He recalls the fear experienced by rural African American communities in Mississippi when the first school in the state was desegregated. In 1966, Bell was appointed the deputy director of civil rights at the U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. Two years later, he joined the law faculty at the University of Southern California. In 1971, he became the first African American to receive tenure at Harvard Law School. Bell reflects upon the political psychology that influences civil rights policy in the United States; the 2004 presidential election; and challenges faced by the African American community. Bell talks about his textbooks and non-fiction writings, including 'Race, Racism and American Law,' which was published in 1973 and is often used as a standard textbook in law schools across the country. He also describes the Hayes-Tilden Compromise of 1877.

Video Oral History Interview with Derrick A. Bell, Jr., Section A2004\_242\_001\_006, TRT: 0:30:12 ?

Derrick A. Bell, Jr. wrote 'The Space Traders' in 1992, which was adapted for the minority-focused science fiction television series, 'Cosmic Slop.' Bell describes the characters in his book 'Faces at the Bottom of the Well' and its sequel, 'Gospel Choirs.' Upon leaving Harvard Law School in 1980, Bell became the first African American dean of the University of Oregon Law School; but, in 1985, he resigned in protest after the university failed to hire a

deserving Asian American candidate for a faculty position. Returning to Harvard Law School, Bell resigned in 1992 over the school's failure to hire and offer tenure to a minority woman until 1998, when HistoryMaker Lani Guinier became the first woman of color to receive tenure. After his first wife succumbed to breast cancer, Bell accepted a position as a visiting faculty member at New York University School of Law, where he taught for over fourteen years. He reflects upon teaching civil rights and his students, including HistoryMaker Charles Ogletree.

Video Oral History Interview with Derrick A. Bell, Jr., Section A2004\_242\_001\_007, TRT: 0:23:42 ?

Derrick A. Bell, Jr. shares his hopes and concerns for the African American community. He offers his opinion of prominent African Americans in the Republican Party, including HistoryMaker General Colin L. Powell. Bell reflects upon his life, his achievements, his legacy, and his parents' reaction to his career. To conclude the interview, Bell describes how he would like to be remembered.