

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Renee Ferguson

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Ferguson, Renee, 1949-
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Renee Ferguson,
Dates:	July 20, 2005 and March 3, 2005
Bulk Dates:	2005
Physical Description:	9 Betacame SP videocassettes (4:12:50).
Abstract:	Television reporter Renee Ferguson (1949 -) was Chicago's first African American female investigative reporter. She reported on many issues, including the strip searches of women of color at O'Hare Airport and sexual harassment at Chicago's Ford Motor Plant. Ferguson was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on July 20, 2005 and March 3, 2005, in Chicago, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2005_058
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

TV journalist and investigative reporter Renee Ferguson was born on August 22, 1949 in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma to Eugene and Mary Ferguson. Attending Edwards Elementary School, Ferguson graduated from Frederick Douglass High School in 1967. At Indiana University, she covered the student unrest at Jackson State and Kent State Universities and worked as a Washington Post student intern during the summer of 1970. Ferguson earned her B.S. degree in journalism in 1971.

Ferguson worked in Indianapolis, Indiana as a writer for the *Indianapolis Star* newspaper and then as a news reporter for television station WLWI-TV. When she joined Chicago's WBBM-TV in 1977, she became the first African American woman to work as an investigative reporter in Chicago. In 1980, she worked as a network news correspondent for CBS News in New York City and Atlanta. Ferguson returned to Chicago in 1987, joining the UNIT 5 investigative team at NBC affiliate WMAQ-TV.

Ferguson has reported on many issues including strip searches of women of color at O'Hare Airport by United States Customs officials; sexual harassment at Chicago's Ford Motor Plant; the deaths of children involved in a clinical drug trial; a high school undercover investigation of drug and alcohol abuse and gun and drug sales held in the property room of the Gary, Indiana police department.

A recipient of seven Chicago Emmy Awards, the DuPont Award, the Gracie Award, the Associated Press Award for Best Investigative Reporting and many other accolades, Ferguson lives with her husband Ken Smikle and their son in Chicago's Kenwood neighborhood.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Renee Ferguson was conducted by Larry Crowe on July 20, 2005 and March 3, 2005, in Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on 9 Betacame SP videocassettes. Television reporter Renee Ferguson (1949 -) was Chicago's first African American female investigative reporter. She reported on many issues, including the strip searches of women of color at O'Hare Airport and sexual harassment at Chicago's Ford Motor Plant.

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®.

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.

Controlled Access Terms

This interview collection is indexed under the following controlled access subject terms.

Persons:

Ferguson, Renee, 1949-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Ferguson, Renee, 1949---Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Television Reporter

HistoryMakers® Category:

MediaMakers

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 Renee Ferguson, July 20, 2005 and March 3, 2005. 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.

Detailed Description of the Collection

Series I: Original Interview Footage

Video Oral History Interview with Renee Ferguson, Section A2005_058_001_001, TRT: 0:28:40 ?

Renee Ferguson was born on August 22, 1949 in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma to Mary and Eugene Ferguson. Mary Ferguson was born Mary Marcenia Anderson in Goodnight, Oklahoma in 1913. Ferguson talks about the family heirloom—a chest of gold the family maintains was given to them after emancipation. The gold was used to purchase land in Goodnight. Mary Ferguson attended Langston University in Oklahoma, where she earned a teaching certificate. Ferguson's father, Eugene Ferguson, was born in Bristow, Oklahoma. There is uncertainty surrounding his birthdate, it was changed to coincide with a friend. Ferguson dates her paternal family ancestry back to her great-grandfather Cuffie and to

white Fergusons in Corinth, Mississippi. Her paternal grandfather emigrated from Oklahoma to Mexico to escape racial discrimination. He married a Mexican woman, however, interracial marriages were not welcome in Mexico. The couple settled in the Imperial Valley of California, but were forcibly removed to create a U.S. naval base.

Video Oral History Interview with Renee Ferguson, Section A2005_058_001_002, TRT: 0:29:20 ?

Renee Ferguson describes her parents meeting as undergraduate students at Langston University in Langston, Oklahoma. She describes their personalities and her likeness to each of them. Ferguson and her older brother, Eugene A. Ferguson, were born and raised in the segregated northeast section of Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. She describes her working class community in Oklahoma City which was located between a sewage treatment plant and an oil well. Her mother and neighbors planted flowers to camouflage the stench. She describes her childhood house, having to fight in elementary school, and being a member of the Methodist church in Goodnight, Oklahoma that her aunt helped to found. Ferguson describes her childhood social life, including the high school prom and desegregation of a local amusement park. Ferguson talks about developing an interest in writing, ethical journalism and what factors made journalism enjoyable.

Video Oral History Interview with Renee Ferguson, Section A2005_058_001_003, TRT: 0:29:10 ?

Renee Ferguson describes reading newspapers as a child in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma and her experiences at Edwards Elementary School, Moon Junior High School and Douglass High School in Oklahoma City. She was the editor of Moon Junior High School's newspaper. Ferguson talks about her mentor, Willard Pitts, and working at the Daily Oklahoman, a right-winged newspaper. Ferguson describes civil rights activity and segregation in 1960s Oklahoma City. Her family participated in sit-ins and demonstrations, but did not allow her to join. She graduated from Douglass High School in 1967 and attended Indiana University in Bloomington, Indiana. She describes her undergraduate experience: Ferguson worked for the Daily Herald-Telephone, the Indiana Daily Student and Indiana University's public relations department. She covered the 1970 shootings at Jackson State College and Kent State University. She earned her B.S. degree in 1971 and was recommended for a job at Channel Thirteen WLVI television in Indianapolis, Indiana.

Video Oral History Interview with Renee Ferguson, Section A2005_058_001_004, TRT: 0:28:20 ?

Ferguson describes interviewing for an internship with the Washington Post in 1970. She was hired in the editorial department and focused on womanist and Black Nationalist issues. Ferguson worked with journalist Robert C. Maynard, then-national correspondent to the Washington Post and founder of the Maynard Institute for Journalism Education in Oakland, California. She also describes the influence of Washington Post editor Philip Geyelin and journalist Meg Greenfield. Ferguson earned her B.S. degree in 1971 from Indiana University in Bloomington, Indiana and joined the Indianapolis News. She worked at the obituary desk for one year and was recommended for a job at Channel Thirteen WLVI television station in Indianapolis, Indiana. Ferguson describes having relatively few role models of color in broadcast journalism. She wore an afro and was asked by the news director at WLVI to straighten her hair. She refused, despite complaints to the station.

Video Oral History Interview with Renee Ferguson, Section A2005_058_001_005, TRT: 0:29:50 ?

Renee Ferguson talks about covering the National Black Political Assembly following the 1968 election of Mayor Richard Hatcher in Gary, Indiana as well as the United States-Mexico border crossings and migrant labor camps while

working for WLWI in Indianapolis, Indiana. In 1977, she was hired to work at WBBM-TV in Chicago, Illinois. She describes going undercover as a high school student and living with a family in public housing to expose problems at the school and talks about the ethics of undercover reporting. Ferguson did an exposé on teacher and HistoryMaker Marva Collins, who she found to have plagiarized teaching methods alongside falsely claiming to have attended Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois. Ferguson was faced with backlash from the African American community for her reporting. The report also put her at odds with the CBS network, which had run a '60 Minutes' special on Collins in 1979.

Video Oral History Interview with Renee Ferguson, Section A2005_058_001_006, TRT: 0:29:30 ?

Renee Ferguson describes the aftermath following her exposé of HistoryMaker Marva Collins in 1982. She was criticized by Chicago politicians and CBS National News, who aired a '60 Minutes' special on Collins in 1979. Ferguson, however, was supported by Chicago journalists including HistoryMaker Vernon Jarrett, then-political and social commentator for the Chicago Sun-Times. Ferguson left WBBM CBS TV Chicago in 1981. She received a promotion and went to CBS National News in the Atlanta, Georgia bureau. She was transferred to New York City in 1984 to 'CBS Sunday Morning.' There, she met her husband, HistoryMaker Ken Smikle, who she had spoken briefly with following the Marva Collins controversy. Ferguson grew interested in investigative work and returned to Chicago in 1986. She joined WMAQ TV as an investigative reporter, an NBC owned-and-operated television station. She talks about Chicago Mayor Harold Washington's legacy and death in 1987.

Video Oral History Interview with Renee Ferguson, Section A2005_058_002_007, TRT: 0:29:20 ?

Renee Ferguson describes her 1986 return to Chicago, Illinois. She joined WMAQ-TV as an investigative reporter, an NBC owned-and-operated television station. However, the station assigned her to general reporting to make up for the lack of African American women on the evening news. Trained as an investigative journalist, she petitioned for several years before being given the title of investigative reporter. She describes battling to have her title changed, including a dispute with a gender-biased station manager who had been systematically firing and reducing the pay of women. Ferguson describes endorsements she received in support of her promotion from HistoryMakers Carol Mosley Braun and Reverend Jesse Jackson. Her campaign was successful, and she was named an investigative reporter. Shortly after, Ferguson completed an investigative report about Black women being subject to strip-searching without cause at O'Hare International Airport. Whereupon, she won an Alfred L. duPont-Columbia University Award.

Video Oral History Interview with Renee Ferguson, Section A2005_058_002_008, TRT: 0:28:50 ?

Renee Ferguson describes her career in investigative reporting. She describes her reporting style and the stories that interested her. She describes reporting the rape of a comatose patient in a nursing home; female employees that were sexually harassed at the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District in Chicago, Illinois; and complaints from female employees at the Ford Motor Company. Ferguson talks about misconduct within the Chicago Police Department and racial profiling. She describes her goals in the future, including plans to write a memoir. Ferguson describes the fiction reading and writing she enjoys; her philosophy of journalism; and imagines a racism-free future.

Video Oral History Interview with Renee Ferguson, Section A2005_058_002_009, TRT: 0:19:50 ?

Renee Ferguson talks about managing Chondrocalcinosis, a rare disease characterized by deposits of calcium into the muscles, ligaments and tendons

that causes extreme pain. Ferguson was diagnosed in 2000 and in her own research was able to suggest an experimental surgical procedure. The procedure was a success and she requested that the doctors train African American physicians and physicians serving low-income areas on the procedure. Ferguson talks about her relationship with the Investigate Reporters and Editors organization, and with the National Association of Black Journalists. She urges young people to consider careers in socially productive journalism; considers her legacy; and describes how she would like to be remembered.