Overview of the Collection

Repository: The HistoryMakers® 1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616
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Creator: Henderson, Jeff
Title: The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Jeff Henderson,
Dates: April 7, 2007
Bulk Dates: 2007
Physical Description: 5 Betacam SP videocassettes (2:20:51).
Abstract: Chef Jeff Henderson (-) was a convicted drug dealer that became a head chef at Caesars Palace in Las Vegas, Nevada. He is also the founder of a non-profit organization called The Westside Group. Henderson was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on April 7, 2007, in Las Vegas, Nevada. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification: A2007_128
Language: The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Chef Jeffery Henderson was born in 1965 in the Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles, California to June Maria Jiles, a welder, and Charles Henderson, Jr. Raised by a singer mother, Henderson was born months before the Watts Riots of 1965. Henderson attended several elementary and junior high schools including Toluca Lake Elementary School in North Hollywood, California and Hamilton Junior High School in Long Beach, California. While attending John Muir Junior High in Burbank, California, he met a cousin who was a drug dealer and started selling drugs.

Henderson grew up on the tough streets of South Central, Los Angeles and San Diego in areas where local gangs battled daily. In the early 1980s, Henderson moved to San Diego, along with his mother and sister, and his drug dealing habits increased. He earned as much as $35,000 a week dealing cocaine in San Diego. Then, in 1988, when Henderson was twenty four years old, the police arrested one of his couriers with $40,000 in cash and a large amount of cocaine. The paperwork led them directly to Henderson, who received a sentence of ten years and seven months in prison. In 1989, Henderson entered prison. While incarcerated, Henderson developed a passion for cooking and was committed to turning his life around. He watched news programs on television, read the "L.A. Times," "USA Today," self-help books and took business courses. He also worked in prison kitchens, starting as a dishwasher and eventually preparing meals as a chef. In 1992, Henderson was transferred to Nellis Air Force Base and worked in the dining hall. Henderson was accepted into the Culinary Training School for inmates at Maxwell Air Force Base in Alabama.

In 1997, Henderson left prison and his attempt to find employment proved fruitless. Henderson was hired as a dishwasher, and then was promoted to line cook. He moved on to other Los Angeles area restaurants, studying menus and books, and ultimately he was hired at the Ritz-Carlton in Marina Del Rey, Hotel Bel-Air in Los Angeles, and then at the Four Seasons Hotel. In 2003, Henderson opened his own restaurant called "The Westside Group" and became a successful chef and restaurateur.
Angeles and the L'Ermitage Hotel in Beverly Hills. Soon, he moved to Las Vegas, and after numerous rejections won a job with Caesars Palace. Within the year, Henderson was promoted to head chef. He became Executive Chef at Café Bellagio in Las Vegas. By 2001, Henderson was honored as Chef of the Year by the American Food and Wine Tasting Federation, and soon established The Westside Group, a non-profit organization to help troubled kids. In 2007, he published his memoir, "Cooked: From the Streets to the Stove, from Cocaine to Foie Gras." Henderson focuses on giving back to his community with "The Chef Jeff Project," in which he takes six at-risk young adults and commits to turning their lives around by putting them to work in his catering company, Posh Urban Cuisine.

Jeff Henderson resides in Las Vegas with his wife and three children.

Jeff Henderson was interviewed by The HistoryMakers April 7, 2007.

**Scope and Content**

This life oral history interview with Jeff Henderson was conducted by Paul Brock on April 7, 2007, in Las Vegas, Nevada, and was recorded on 5 Betacam SP videocassettes. Chef Jeff Henderson was a convicted drug dealer that became a head chef at Caesars Palace in Las Vegas, Nevada. He is also the founder of a non-profit organization called The Westside Group.

**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:**

Henderson, Jeff

Brock, Paul (Interviewer)
Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews
Henderson, Jeff--Interviews

African American cooks--Interviews.

African American authors--Interviews.

Organizations:

HistoryMakers (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

The Westside Group

HistoryMakers® Category:

ArtMakers

BusinessMakers

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 Jeff Henderson, April 7, 2007. The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

Processing Information

This interview collection was processed and encoded on 11/7/2011 by The HistoryMakers® staff. The finding aid was created adhering to the following standards: DACS, AACR2, and the Oral History Cataloging Manual (Matters 1995).
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, April 7, 2007

Video Oral History Interview with Jeff Henderson, Section A2007_128_001_001, TRT: 0:28:19 2007/04/07

Jeff Henderson reflects on the hardships growing up in the Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles, California. Raised by a singer mother, June Maria Jiles, who worked as a welder, Henderson was born months before the Watts Riots of 1965. Henderson remembers attending Toluca Lake Elementary School in North Hollywood, California, a majority white school. He and his sister were the only two African Americans in the entire school. During elementary school, Henderson discovered he was partially blind in one eye after running into a tree. Henderson transferred from Toluca Lake Elementary School to Kit Carson Elementary School, in Hanford, California and then reflects on living in the projects in San Diego. He moved around several times, was very rebellious and attended several junior high schools. Henderson ends this segment of the interview by describing how he became involved with the Big Brothers Mentoring Program at Montgomery Junior High School in San Diego.

African American children--Social life and customs.
African American children--Education (Elementary)--California--Los Angeles.
African American families--California--Los Angeles.
African American neighborhoods--California--Los Angeles--History--20th century.
African American single mothers.
African American neighborhoods--California--San Diego--History--20th century.
Public housing.

Video Oral History Interview with Jeff Henderson, Section A2007_128_001_002, TRT: 0:29:02 2007/04/07

Jeff Henderson talks about moving to Los Angeles to live with his father, Charles Henderson, Jr. Then, the family moved to Culver City, California and resided on Cloverdale Avenue. Henderson attended Palms Junior High School. Henderson recounts being rebellious at school, and as a result, he was kicked out of Palm Junior High School and the entire Los Angeles School District. Henderson's father moved the family to Long Beach, California where Henderson attended Hamilton Junior High. However, he was suspended from Hamilton for selling fireworks inside the school. Henderson describes how he earned his first arrest for stealing a bike when he was fifteen years old. In 1981, he was stabbed and almost killed by gang members at a mall in Inglewood, California. Henderson ends this segment of the interview by discussing how he moved back to San Diego where he met several criminal mentors and eventually started to sell drugs.

African American fathers.
Jeff Henderson discusses his growing cocaine business. He describes his covert relationship with all the different gangs and crews around South Central Los Angeles to maximize his drug endeavors. He told his mother that he was a drug dealer. Henderson and his family benefited greatly from the extremely large drug profits, including trips to Hawaii, shopping sprees and buying cars. He then discusses the decline of his drug empire when one of his protégés was indicted for trafficking some of Henderson's drugs, and subsequently turned Henderson into the police as well. After fighting his case in court for eleven months, Henderson was sentence to ten years at Terminal Island Prison in San Pedro, California in 1988. He ends the interview segment by describing his early stint in prison as a "pseudo-college experience" including his introduction to the Nation of Islam and Minister Louis Farrakhan.

Henderson talks about discovering a sense of self from "The Brotherhood," the African American inmates at Terminal Island Prison in San Pedro, California. He describes gaining cooking experience from African American chief inmate cooks and mentors. Henderson was transferred from Terminal Island Prison to Nellis Prison in Las Vegas, Nevada where he learned most of his cooking skills. He received a reduced prison sentence to nine years and seven months and eventually transferred to Maxwell Prison in Alabama. Then, Henderson was moved to a Prison in Sheridan Oregon. In 1966, Henderson was released from prison and moved to Beverly Hills, California where he received jobs at Roberts Restaurant and the Los Angeles Airport Marriott Hotel. Henderson ends the interview segment by describing how he married the daughter of Motown singer, Marion Wells, Stacey; he and his wife had three children, Jeffery Jr., Noel Marie, and Kennedy.
Jeff Henderson shares his experiences working as a chef in several restaurants. Henderson worked at the Los Angeles Airport Marriott Hotel Restaurant for one year, the Ritz Carlton and the Hotel Bel-Air, where he was promoted to the first ever banquet chef at the hotel. He moved to Las Vegas, Nevada to pursue his career. Henderson worked at Caesars Palace Hotel and was the first African American in the hotel's history to become the Chef of Cuisine. He then worked at the Hard Rock Hotel in Las Vegas as the first African American chef to manage the Steak House. Henderson describes how he moved back to Los Angeles to become the first African American executive chef at the Cafe Bellagio Hotel's restaurant. He ends the interview discussing how he founded the Westside Foundation and Urban Education Consulting Firm, his book and his project for a reality television show on the Food Network.

African American cooks.
Hotel restaurants.
African American families--Nevada--Las Vegas.
African Americans--Nevada--Las Vegas--Social life and customs.
Ritz-Carlton Hotels (Firm).
African American authors.
Food Network (Firm).