

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Curtis Symonds

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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>	Symonds, Curtis, 1955-
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Curtis Symonds,
<b>Dates:</b>	April 23, 2007
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2007
<b>Physical Description:</b>	5 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:20:30).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Broadcast executive and sports executive Curtis Symonds (1955 - ) worked for ESPN and then BET in marketing and sales, eventually becoming Executive Vice President of BET on Jazz. He helped BET build its subscriber base from 18.8 million to 65 million homes. He was also COO of the Washington Mystics WNBA team. Symonds was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on April 23, 2007, in Arlington, Virginia. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2007_154
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Corporate executive Curtis Symonds was born on August 12, 1955 in Bermuda to Barbara and Norman Symonds. His family moved to Wilberforce, Ohio when he was two years old. Symonds attended the local Xenia High School, graduating in 1973, and he went on to receive his B.S. degree from Central State University in 1978.

Upon graduation from college, Symonds began working for Continental Cablevision in Ohio in 1979 as system manager. In 1983, he moved to Chicago, Illinois to work for ESPN as a local advertising sales consultant. He was later promoted to Director of Affiliate Marketing for the Midwest region. Symonds remained at ESPN for five years before joining Black Entertainment Television (BET) in 1988 as Executive Vice President of Affiliate Sales and Affiliate Marketing. In 1992, Symonds became President and Chief Operating Officer of BET Action Pay-Per-View and BET International. Symonds served as Executive Vice President of BET on Jazz in 1996 and remained in that position until his retirement in 2001. During his tenure, he helped BET build its subscriber base from 18.8 million to 65 million homes.

In 2005, Sheila C. Johnson, President of the Washington Mystics, a professional women's basketball team in the Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA), appointed Symonds Chief Operating Officer of the Washington Mystics. He is responsible for the organization's day-to-day operations. In 2006, Symonds opened a privately funded indoor basketball facility called Hoop Magic in Chantilly, Virginia.

Symonds has also served as the President of the T. Howard Foundation, a non-profit organization devoted to promoting women and people of color in entertainment and multimedia platforms. He is a recipient of the 1998 National Cable Television Association (NCTA) Vanguard Award for marketing excellence, the highest award for marketing in the cable industry.

Symonds resides in McLean, Virginia with his wife, Pat, and their three children.

Symonds was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on April 23, 2007.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Curtis Symonds was conducted by Denise Gines on April 23, 2007, in Arlington, Virginia, and was recorded on 5 Betacame SP videocassettes. Broadcast executive and sports executive Curtis Symonds (1955 - ) worked for ESPN and then BET in marketing and sales, eventually becoming Executive Vice President of BET on Jazz. He helped BET build its subscriber base from 18.8 million to 65 million homes. He was also COO of the Washington Mystics WNBA team.

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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:

Symonds, Curtis, 1955-

Gines, Denise (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

### Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

## **Organizations:**

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

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The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

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Black Entertainment Television.

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Women's National Basketball Association

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## **Occupations:**

Broadcast Executive

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Sports Executive

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## **HistoryMakers® Category:**

MediaMakersI

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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 Curtis Symonds, April 23, 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 2/5/2020 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

Video Oral History Interview with Curtis Symonds, Section  
A2007\_154\_001\_001, TRT: 0:28:30 2007/04/23

Curtis Symonds was born on August 12, 1955 in Bermuda to Barbara Horton Symonds and Norman Symonds. Both Symonds' maternal and paternal families were from Bermuda and the West Indies. His maternal grandparents, Josephine Horton and James Horton, lived in Somerset, Bermuda, where they owned an ice cream shop at the base of Cooks Hill. Symonds' mother was a well-known dancer and entertainer on the island. After graduating from high school, she attended the College of Education and Industrial Arts at Wilberforce in Wilberforce, Ohio and Columbia University in New York City. When Symonds was two years old, his mother accepted a teaching position at her alma mater in Wilberforce, and moved there with Symonds and his three adopted sisters. The community surrounding the all-black college campus was very close-knit, and Symonds grew up among a group of educated and successful African Americans. He attended grammar school on campus, at Lucinda Cook Elementary School.

Video Oral History Interview with Curtis Symonds, Section  
A2007\_154\_001\_002, TRT: 0:28:20 2007/04/23

Curtis Symonds attended Lucinda Cook Elementary School in Wilberforce, Ohio. There, he was taught by a number of influential teachers, including Dr. Lucinda Cook, for whom the school was named. Due to the proximity of Central State College, the African American community in Wilberforce was mostly comprised of faculty members and maintenance workers from the campus. Many residents also worked at the nearby Wright-Patterson Air Force Base in Dayton, Ohio. Symonds went on to attend the majority-white Warner Junior High School and Xenia High School in Xenia, Ohio. Although he did not participate in the high school's athletics programs, Symonds decided to try out for college basketball teams, and was accepted at Saint Joseph's College in Rensselaer, Indiana. There, he was one of the few African American students; and, although his friends and teammates were welcoming, he faced frequent discrimination in the community and while travelling to games with the basketball team.

Video Oral History Interview with Curtis Symonds, Section  
A2007\_154\_001\_003, TRT: 0:28:20 2007/04/23

Curtis Symonds enrolled at Saint Joseph's College in Rensselaer, Indiana in order to play on the school's basketball team, although he did not receive a scholarship. He assumed that he would receive one after his first season; but, when that did not happen, transferred to Central State University in his hometown of Wilberforce, Ohio, where he completed his last two years of college. After graduating, Symonds managed the Paxton's Sporting Goods store in Beavercreek, Ohio. Wanting to enter the telecommunications industry, he secured a position as the regional marketing assistant for Continental Cablevision, Inc. He was soon promoted to a management role in Xenia, Ohio, thus becoming the youngest cable system manager in the country. Symonds briefly worked at the Satellite News Channel; and then, from 1982, served as an advertising sales consultant at ESPN. In 1988, Symonds was contacted by Robert L. Johnson to become the vice president of sales for

Johnson's new cable channel, Black Entertainment Television.

Video Oral History Interview with Curtis Symonds, Section  
A2007\_154\_001\_004, TRT: 0:26:40 2007/04/23

Curtis Symonds served as the executive vice president of marketing and sales at Black Entertainment Television (BET), an African American cable channel founded by Robert L. Johnson. In this position, Symonds was tasked with convincing white advertisers of the buying power of the African American community. In 1992, BET became a publically traded company, and began establishing secondary channels and diversifying its programming in order to reach a broader viewership. The BET company expanded to include networks such as BET2, BET International and Action Pay-Per-View. Symonds served as the president of BET on Jazz and Action Pay-Per-View, the latter of which was among the first pay-per-view channels in the country. In 2001, Symonds retired from BET, and became the head of the T. Howard Foundation as well as the Symonds Synergy Group marketing firm. Symonds also talks about Robert L. Johnson's role as a prominent black businessman at a time when many of the most well-known African Americans were athletes.

Video Oral History Interview with Curtis Symonds, Section  
A2007\_154\_001\_005, TRT: 0:28:40 2007/04/23

Curtis Symonds served as the president of the T. Howard Foundation, which provided educational opportunities and funding to women and minorities who were pursuing careers in telecommunications. Symonds used his connections in the cable industry to secure internships for the students at companies like ESPN, BET and MTV. In 2005, Symonds accepted Sheila C. Johnson's invitation to become the COO of the Washington Mystics, which was the Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA) team in Washington, D.C. In this role, he oversaw the team's daily operations, and implemented marketing strategies to increase interest in the WNBA. Symonds reflects upon the perceptions of women's basketball, including the derogatory remarks of commentators Jimmy Snyder and Don Imus. Symonds shares his advice to future generations, and his hopes and concerns for the

African American community. He concludes the interview by reflecting upon his life and legacy.