

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with The Honorable Ivan Lemelle

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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>	LeMelle, Ivan, 1950-
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Ivan Lemelle,
<b>Dates:</b>	June 8, 2010
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2010
<b>Physical Description:</b>	7 uncompressed MOV digital video files (3:12:17).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Federal district court judge The Honorable Ivan Lemelle (1950 - ) served as the U.S. Magistrate to the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Louisiana for over a decade, and in 1998, he was appointed by President Bill Clinton to serve as a U.S. District Court Judge for the Eastern District of Louisiana. LeMelle was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on June 8, 2010, in New Orleans, Louisiana. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2010_054
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

U.S. District Court Judge Ivan L.R. Lemelle was born on June 29, 1950, in Opelousas, Louisiana. In 1971, Lemelle graduated cum laude from Xavier University with a B.S. degree. Lemelle received many scholarships in order to attend Loyola University College of Law in New Orleans, where he graduated in 1974 with a J.D. degree. After graduation, he served for three years as an Assistant District Attorney in New Orleans, where he was promoted to supervisory positions within that office, including co-chief of narcotic

prosecutions.

In 1977, Lemelle worked as a private practitioner with the law firm of Douglas, Nabonne & Wilkerson, the largest African American law firm in Louisiana at that time. He also served part-time as Assistant City Attorney for the City of New Orleans. From 1980 to October 2, 1984, Lemelle was the Assistant Attorney General for the Louisiana Department of Justice. From October 3, 1984 to 1998, he was a U.S. Magistrate Judge for the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Louisiana. His appointment to that office made him the first African American United States Magistrate Judge in Louisiana federal courts and the sixth African American U. S. Magistrate Judge in the Nation. In 1998, President Bill Clinton appointed Lemelle to the position of United States District Judge for the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Louisiana in New Orleans, where he currently serves as the only African American District Judge for that Court.

In addition to service in leadership positions with numerous civic, fraternal and professional organizations, Judge Lemelle has also served on the Federal Judicial Center's Advisory Committee for the Guide to Judicial Management of Cases in Alternate Dispute Resolution, President of the Loyola College of Law-Thomas More Inn of Court, Visiting Committee Board for Loyola College of Law, Amistad Research Center's Executive Board, Federal Bar Association New Orleans Chapter Board of Directors, District Judges Association for the U. S. Fifth Circuit Executive Committee, and the Board of Reconcile New Orleans, Inc.-a nonprofit committed to addressing the system of generational poverty, violence and neglect in the New Orleans area.

Judge Ivan Lemelle was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on June 8, 2010.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with The Honorable Ivan Lemelle was conducted by Denise Gines on June 8, 2010, in New Orleans, Louisiana, and was recorded on 7 uncompressed MOV digital video files. Federal district court judge The Honorable Ivan Lemelle (1950 - ) served as the U.S. Magistrate to the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Louisiana for over a decade, and in 1998, he was appointed by President Bill Clinton to serve as a U.S. District Court Judge for the Eastern District of Louisiana.

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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:**

LeMelle, Ivan, 1950-

Gines, Denise (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

### **Subjects:**

African Americans--Interviews

LeMelle, Ivan, 1950---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:**

Federal District Court Judge

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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 The Honorable Ivan Lemelle, June 8, 2010. 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 The Honorable Ivan Lemelle, Section A2010\_054\_001\_001, TRT: 0:29:45 ?

The Honorable Ivan Lemelle was born on June 29, 1950 in Opelousas, Louisiana to Cecilia Comeaux Lemelle and Clifford Lemelle. His paternal family descended from Francois Lemelle, who was a member of the Opelousas Post. His paternal grandfather, Joseph Lemelle, was a farmer and moonshiner who had inherited part of his father's land in the Opelousas area. Lemelle's father graduated from Xavier University of Louisiana in New Orleans, and went on to serve as assistant supervisor for the St. Landry Parish School Board. Lemelle's mother was born in Washington, Louisiana, where she was raised by her father, baker William Comeaux, and the Sisters of the Holy Family after the death of her mother, Dorothy Comeaux. In New Orleans, she attended St. Mary's Academy and Straight Business College, and worked as a secretary at Standard Life Insurance Company. Lemelle grew up on his paternal grandparents' farm until his parents bought a home in a predominantly black neighborhood of Opelousas.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Ivan Lemelle, Section A2010\_054\_001\_002, TRT: 0:29:26 ?

The Honorable Ivan Lemelle grew up in Opelousas, Louisiana, where he began his education at North Elementary School. In the third grade, he transferred to the all-black Holy Ghost Catholic School, where he was dissatisfied with the decrepit books from the white school. During this time, he played baseball and swam at the segregated North City Park in Opelousas. His mother,

Cecilia Comeaux Lemelle, integrated the staff of Abdalla's, an Opelousas department store, while his father, Clifford Lemelle, advocated for civil rights in the St. Landry Parish school system. In high school, he listened to music by Motown Records and frequented venues in Opelousas like the Yam Drive-In and the Delta Theatre. In his sophomore year, he attended St. Augustine Seminary in Bay St. Louis, Mississippi. Upon graduating from Holy Ghost Catholic School in 1967, he enrolled at Xavier University of Louisiana in New Orleans. Lemelle recalls his experiences of racial discrimination, and casualties of the Civil Rights Movement.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Ivan Lemelle, Section A2010\_054\_001\_003, TRT: 0:28:14 ?

The Honorable Ivan Lemelle worked as a teacher's aide at North Elementary School in Opelousas, Louisiana the summer before he entered Xavier University of Louisiana in New Orleans, Louisiana. During his first year, he lived in the all-male St. Michael Hall. Lemelle also played in a jazz band; pledged Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity; and served as treasurer of the Student Government Association, which organized on campus events like a concert by the R&B group The Dells. At this point of the interview, he describes Gert Town, a predominantly black neighborhood of New Orleans where he socialized with other students, and listened to jazz music. Lemelle also remembers thwarting a prank against Lady Bird Johnson at Xavier University of Louisiana at the time of Vietnam War. Inspired by university president Norman Francis, Lemelle decided to pursue a law career, and he matriculated at Loyola University New Orleans College of Law in 1971. He talks about the university's high attrition rate.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Ivan Lemelle, Section A2010\_054\_001\_004, TRT: 0:29:29 ?

The Honorable Ivan Lemelle attended the predominantly white Loyola University New Orleans College of Law in New Orleans, Louisiana from 1971 to 1974. During this period, he was a charter member of the school's Black Law Students Association. He participated in moot court, which was overseen by dean Frederick J. Gisevius, Jr.; and studied civil procedure under Thomas Sponsler and

constitutional law under Janet Mary Riley. After his first year, he clerked at the New Orleans Legal Assistance Corporation, where he successfully represented indigent clients on civil law matters. The following summer, he interned with the Fifth U.S. Army Judge Advocate General's Corps at Fort Sam Houston in San Antonio, Texas. He passed the bar examination in 1974, and then worked at both the law firm of Thierry and Gerdes in New Orleans and the Orleans Parish Criminal District Court before joining the district attorney's office. He talks about his personal growth; and his engagement to his wife, Patricia Waddell Lemelle.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Ivan Lemelle, Section A2010\_054\_001\_005, TRT: 0:28:03 ?

The Honorable Ivan Lemelle clerked for Judge Robert Collins in the Orleans Parish Criminal District Court from 1972 to 1974, when he was a student at Loyola University New Orleans College of Law in New Orleans, Louisiana. He then worked as an assistant district attorney with the New Orleans district attorney's office of Harry Connick, Sr. In 1977, he joined the firm of Douglas, Nabonne and Wilkerson. At this time, Lemelle also served as an assistant attorney general in the Louisiana Department of Justice, an assistant city attorney under New Orleans Mayor Moon Landrieu and as a state ad hoc judge. Lemelle then became a magistrate judge on the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Louisiana. After his first term, he applied for a federal district judgeship. Lemelle describes the federal judicial appointment process, and reflects upon his experiences with sentencing. He and his wife, Patricia Waddell Lemelle, had three children: Christopher Lemelle, Marc Lemelle and Tricia Lemelle.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Ivan Lemelle, Section A2010\_054\_001\_006, TRT: 0:30:28 ?

The Honorable Ivan Lemelle was confirmed as a judge of the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Louisiana by the U.S. Senate Committee on the Judiciary in 1998. He then inherited the chambers of Judge Frederick Heebe, the former chief judge of the court who had achieved senior status. At this point of the interview,

Lemelle talks about delivering his first life sentence, his preference for federal civil cases over criminal cases and the U.S. courts of appeals. Lemelle presided over several ongoing cases, including *Moore v. Tangipahoa Parish School Board*, a historic school desegregation case; a class action lawsuit against the Housing Authority of New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina; and a voting rights case relevant to the challenges faced by Hurricane Katrina evacuees, who were unable to vote as a result of their forced relocation. Lemelle also describes the impact of Hurricane Katrina for his family, whose home was flooded in the New Orleans East area of New Orleans, Louisiana.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Ivan Lemelle, Section A2010\_054\_001\_007, TRT: 0:16:52 ?

The Honorable Ivan Lemelle was active in the Just the Beginning Foundation, a non-profit organization in Chicago, Illinois that was developed by Judge Ann Claire Williams to promote diversity in the federal judiciary. In New Orleans, Louisiana, he worked with RNO, Inc., which facilitated programs in the restaurant industry and construction for underprivileged youth. He also served as president of the local chapter of the Thomas More Loyola Law School American Inn of Court; and worked with the Orleans Parish School Board to allow students to shadow him and his colleagues at the courthouse of the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Louisiana in New Orleans. Lemelle talks about the law profession and reflects upon his career. He also describes his interest in travelling and his advice for the youth. Lemelle concludes the interview by describing how he would like to be remembered and his hopes for the younger generation.