

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with The Honorable Ertharin Cousin

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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>	Cousin, Erthari, 1957-
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Ertharin Cousin,
<b>Dates:</b>	July 30, 2010
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2010
<b>Physical Description:</b>	6 uncompressed MOV digital video files (2:57:38).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Food service executive and foreign ambassador The Honorable Ertharin Cousin (1957 - ) served as a chief executive of several corporations, worked extensively with food relief charities like Feeding America and continued to promote food equity in her role as the U.S. ambassador to the UN agencies for food and agriculture. Cousin was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on July 30, 2010, in Chicago, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2010_099
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Foreign ambassador, food service executive, and public affairs director Ertharin Cousin was born in 1957, in Chicago, Illinois. She received her B.A. degree from the University of Illinois at Chicago in 1979, and went on to receive her J.D. degree from the University of Georgia School of Law in 1982. In 1993, Cousin moved to Washington D.C. and began working as the deputy chief of staff for the Democratic National Committee. In 1994, she began serving as the U.S. State Department's liaison to the White House, in which capacity she received a Meritorious Service Award.

In 1996, Cousin stopped her work for the State Department in order to run the Illinois portion of President Bill Clinton and Vice President Albert Gore's reelection campaign and in 1997, Cousin was appointed to the board for International Food and Agricultural Development and began serving as vice president for government and community Affairs for Jewel Food Stores. Two years later, when Albertsons Foods bought Jewel, Cousin began serving as group vice president of public affairs for Albertsons and was later promoted to senior vice president of public affairs. In 2002, Cousin joined the board of directors for food bank and food relief distribution nonprofit Feeding America and in 2004, she became its executive vice president and chief operating officer. In this capacity, she led food relief efforts during Hurricane Katrina which helped to deliver over 62 million pounds of food to the devastated Gulf Coast of the U.S.

In 2006, Cousin left Feeding America to found and serve as president of the Polk Street Group, a public affairs consulting firm based in Chicago, Illinois. After serving in that capacity for three years, Cousin left the company in the hands of her son, Maurice Cousin, in order to accept President Barack Obama's appointment as U.S. Representative to the United Nations Agencies for Food and Agriculture in Rome, Italy. During her time with the U.N. agencies, she has worked to help set up several new country-led aid programs and has also worked to bring food relief to Port-au-Prince, the capital of Haiti, after the massive earthquake there in 2010.

# Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with The Honorable Ertharin Cousin was conducted by Thomas Jefferson on July 30, 2010, in Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on 6 uncompressed MOV digital video files. Food service executive and foreign ambassador The Honorable Ertharin Cousin (1957 - ) served as a chief executive of several corporations, worked extensively with food relief charities like Feeding America and continued to promote food equity in her role as the U.S. ambassador to the UN agencies for food and agriculture.

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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:

Cousin, Erthari, 1957-

Jefferson, Thomas (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

## Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Cousin, Erthari, 1957- --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:

Foreign Ambassador

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Food Service Executive

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### HistoryMakers® Category:

CivicMakers|PoliticalMakers

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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 Ertharin Cousin, July 30, 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 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).

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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 Ertharin Cousin, Section A2010\_099\_001\_001, TRT: 0:28:54 ?

The Honorable Ertharin Cousin was born on May 12, 1957 in Chicago, Illinois to Annie Harris Cousin and Julius Cousin. Cousin's maternal grandparents,

Katie Butler Harris and Arch Harris, grew up as cotton sharecroppers in Washington, Georgia. After securing positions at a mill and in domestic service, they saved money to buy a home, and gained the respect of both the white and black communities in Washington. Cousin's mother was the oldest of their five children, and attended Paine College in Augusta, Georgia. She moved to Chicago to work as a nurse, and later became a social worker. Cousin's father was born and raised in Washington Parish, Louisiana. His father died when he was young, and his mother remarried three times. Cousin's father had five children with his first wife in Louisiana; and then moved to Chicago, where he met and married Cousin's mother, and studied at the Washburne Trade School to become a chef.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Ertharin Cousin, Section A2010\_099\_001\_002, TRT: 0:29:57 ?

The Honorable Ertharin Cousin grew up in Lawndale, a middle class African American neighborhood on the West Side of Chicago, Illinois. Her parents, Annie Harris Cousin and Julius Cousin, converted to Catholicism in order to enroll her in Chicago's Catholic schools; and Cousin began her education at the Presentation School, where she was inspired by the civil rights activism of Monsignor John J. Egan. When the archdiocese implemented a busing program, Cousin was assigned to the St. Louise de Marillac School in LaGrange Park, Illinois. After graduating there, Cousin's father tried to enroll her in the secretarial program at Alvernia High School, but Cousin decide to matriculate in the first coeducational class at the majority-white Albert Grannis Lane Technical High School. Cousin also remembers her early environmental advocacy, including a petition to President Richard Nixon on behalf of baby seals, for which she was featured in Jet magazine at the age of ten years old.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Ertharin Cousin, Section A2010\_099\_001\_003, TRT: 0:30:28 ?

The Honorable Ertharin Cousin became pregnant with her son in 1975, shortly before her graduation from Albert Grannis Lane Technical High School in Chicago, Illinois. With her parents' support, she enrolled at the University of Illinois at Chicago Circle; and, during her freshman year, also worked full time at the post office. Cousin went on to earn a law degree in 1982 from the University of Georgia School of Law. She then returned to Chicago, where she worked for civil rights lawyer E. Duke McNeil and assisted with Harold Washington's mayoral campaign. In 1985, Cousin briefly worked as an attorney for the United Auto Workers Union, and then became the affirmative action officer of the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago. Cousin also describes the political influence of her father, Julius Cousin, who was a founding member of the Pyramidwest Development Corporation and the Lawndale People's Planning and Action Council on the West Side of Chicago.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Ertharin Cousin, Section A2010\_099\_001\_004, TRT: 0:29:06 ?

The Honorable Ertharin Cousin campaigned in 1987 for the commissionership of the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago. Despite her overall loss, her victories in the city's lakefront and majority-black wards attracted the attention of the Democratic Party. In 1990, Cousin served as a deputy manager of Neil Hartigan's unsuccessful Illinois gubernatorial campaign. Shortly after, she was hired as the director of government affairs for AT&T Inc., where she helped write Illinois' new telecommunications legislation. She was also appointed to the state redistricting commission by Illinois Speaker Michael Madigan. Through her friend, Democratic campaign manager David Wilhelm,

Cousin volunteered to work on William Jefferson "Bill" Clinton's first presidential campaign in 1992. After his election, she became the White House liaison to the U.S. Department of State. In 1996, Cousin served as the Illinois regional director of Clinton's reelection campaign, and helped direct his inaugural committee.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Ertharin Cousin, Section A2010\_099\_001\_005, TRT: 0:31:16 ?

The Honorable Ertharin Cousin was the director of President William Jefferson "Bill" Clinton's reelection campaign in Illinois. After serving on President Clinton's inaugural committee, she returned to Illinois as the vice president of community affairs for Jewel Food Stores. She helped open the first Jewel Food Stores location in a predominantly black neighborhood, and hired the company's first African American contractor. During this time, Cousin was appointed by President Clinton to the Board For International Food and Agricultural Development. In 2003, Cousin left Jewel Food Stores to become the COO of America's Second Harvest—The Nation's Food Bank Network, the nation's largest domestic hunger relief organization; and directed the group's relief efforts following Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Cousin left America's Second Harvest in 2006 to found a consulting firm called the Polk Street Group, LLC. Then, U.S. Senator Barack Obama invited Cousin to work on his first presidential campaign in 2008.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Ertharin Cousin, Section A2010\_099\_001\_006, TRT: 0:27:57 ?

The Honorable Ertharin Cousin was a senior advisor to Barack Obama during his presidential campaign in 2008. She was responsible for outreach to African Americans, women and union workers, and attended President Obama's inauguration in 2009. Subsequently, Cousin was appointed as the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations (UN) agencies in Rome, Italy, where she was tasked with assisting the UN's efforts in the area of global food security through the World Food Programme (WFP), the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD). She talks about the WFP's response to the earthquake in Haiti, which occurred six months prior to the interview in 2010. She also describes her hopes and concerns for the African American community, and her advice to future generations. Cousin concludes the interview by reflecting upon her life, legacy and how she would like to be remembered.