

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Renee Poussaint

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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>	Poussaint, Renee
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Renee Poussaint,
<b>Dates:</b>	January 16, 2013
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2013
<b>Physical Description:</b>	8 uncompressed MOV digital video files (3:45:24).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Journalist Renee Poussaint (1944 - ) is co-founder of the The National Visionary Leadership Project and founder of Wisdom Works. Poussaint was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on January 16, 2013, in Washington, District of Columbia. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2013_036
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Journalist Renee Poussaint was born on August 12, 1944. Poussaint received her B.A. degree in English literature from Sarah Lawrence College in 1964; and, in 1970, she graduated with her M.A. degree in African studies from the University of California, Los Angeles. She has also studied at Yale Law School and the Sorbonne in Paris, France.

In 1970, Poussaint began her career in television broadcasting working as a news correspondent at WBBM-TV in Chicago, Illinois. She went on to anchor the *ABC Evening News*, substituting for Peter Jennings, as well as news segments on *Good*

*Morning America*. She was a national correspondent for the CBS network, and ABC's news magazine show *Prime Time Live*. Poussaint also anchored the local ABC evening news in Washington, D.C. for more than a decade. She has reported from locations around the world including Haiti, South Africa and Uganda, and has interviewed many historic movers and shakers, as well as everyday people whose problems shape our world.

In 2001, Poussaint and Camille Cosby, educator and producer, founded the National Visionary Leadership Project. The project utilizes various educational media to record, preserve, and distribute the stories and wisdom of older generations of African Americans. The entirety of the NVLP collection is archived at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. as a component of the broader "National Visionary Leadership Project Collection." In 2004, Poussaint and Cosby co-authored a book titled, *A Wealth of Wisdom: Legendary African American Elders Speak*, which appeared on the *New York Times* best-seller list.

Poussaint is also founder of Wisdom Works, a documentary production company. The company's highly-acclaimed documentary, "Tutu and Franklin: A Journey towards Peace," aired nationally on PBS in 2001, and was filmed at the infamous slave port Goree, Senegal. Her work as a documentary filmmaker has also appeared on Discovery, A&E, and Lifetime. In addition, she taught journalism at the University of Maryland.

Poussaint is the recipient of three national and seven local Emmy awards. As an independent consultant and community activist, Poussaint has worked with nonprofit and community organizations to help them better define their message for a larger audience. Her volunteer activities have included tutoring, mentoring, and reading newspapers for the blind. Poussaint has received honorary doctorates from Georgetown University and Mount Vernon College.

Renee Poussaint was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on January 17, 2013.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Renee Poussaint was conducted by Larry Crowe on January 16, 2013, in Washington, District of Columbia, and was recorded on 8 uncompressed MOV digital video files. Journalist Renee Poussaint (1944 - ) is co-founder of the The National Visionary Leadership Project and founder of Wisdom Works.

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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:

Poussaint, Renee

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

### Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Poussaint, Renee--Interviews

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African American journalists--Interviews.

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African American television producers and directors--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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National Visionary Leadership Project

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## **Occupations:**

Journalist

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## **HistoryMakers® Category:**

MediaMakers

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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 Renee Poussaint, January 16, 2013. 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 Renee Poussaint, Section A2013\_036\_001\_001, TRT: 1:28:46 2013/01/16

Renee Poussaint talks about her family background. The product of an arranged marriage, her mother, Bobbie Vance, was born on June 8, 1925, in Birmingham, Alabama. Vance's father, Willis Vance, was a Baptist minister, while her mother, Gustava Maclin Vance, was a pharmacist and pharmacy owner. Renee Poussaint shares stories of her mother's upbringing. Bobbie Vance lived comfortably even in the midst of the Great Depression, and attended boarding school at Tuskegee High School in Tuskegee, Alabama. She enrolled at Hampton University in Hampton Virginia around 1943 where she met Christopher Poussaint. Christopher Poussaint was born to a newspaper printer in Spanish Harlem, New York City, New York on October 26, 1920. Vance's family did not approve of the couple's courtship due to Poussaint's working class background. Nevertheless, Bobbie Vance left Hampton University to marry him. Renee Poussaint talks about the origin of her last name, and closes by describing a life-changing visit to Mali.

African American grandparents--Alabama.

African American parents--Marriage.

Hampton University.

African American neighborhoods.

Boarding-school--Education.

Travel--Africa.

Video Oral History Interview with Renee Poussaint, Section  
A2013\_036\_001\_002, TRT: 2:29:34 2013/01/16

Renee Poussaint talks about her father's siblings, including HistoryMaker Dr. Alvin Poussaint. Her father, Christopher Poussaint, was raised in the Spanish Harlem neighborhood of New York City, New York in a household with a traditional father. Though Christopher Poussaint aspired to be a graphic artist, he became the first in his family to go to college after enrolling at Hampton University in Hampton, Virginia, where he wanted to become a printer like his father. It was here that he met his wife Bobbie Vance. Vance dropped out of Hampton University, married Poussaint in 1943, and gave birth to Renee Poussaint a year later. The couple moved to New York City, New York, where Bobbie Vance Poussaint became an active member of the Communist Party. The couple divorced in 1953, and Bobbie Vance Poussaint moved with Renee and her brother Christopher to Queens, New York City, New York. Renee Poussaint shares memories of growing up between the Queens and Spanish Harlem neighborhoods, and of attending Catholic school.

African American fathers.

African American mothers.

Hampton University.

African American neighborhoods--New York (State)--  
New York.

Childhood and youth--New York (State)--New York.

African Americans--Education.

Video Oral History Interview with Renee Poussaint, Section  
A2013\_036\_001\_003, TRT: 3:29:43 2013/01/16

Renee Poussaint talks about her mother, Bobbie Vance Poussaint, and her involvement with the Communist Party.

Bobbie Vance Poussaint raised Renee Poussaint and her brother Christopher in Queens, New York City, New York. Poussaint talks about being exposed to black and multi-ethnic identity in her Queens neighborhood. The neighborhood went through a number of changes during Poussaint's youth, transforming from a white, to multi-ethnic, then middle class black neighborhood. Poussaint attended Andrew Jackson High School in Cambria Heights, Queens, New York City. She was involved in a number of academic and social clubs, and was salutatorian of the graduating Class of 1962. She received a full scholarship to attend Sarah Lawrence College in Bronxville, New York, in 1962. The college transformed the scholarship into a loan, which forced Poussaint to work three jobs to pay for school. During her junior year, Poussaint studied abroad in Paris, France.

African American mothers--New York (State)--New York.  
Communist parties--United States.

Childhood and youth--New York (State)--New York.

African American neighborhoods.

African Americans--Education, Secondary--New York (State).

Sarah Lawrence College.

Foreign study--France--Paris.

Video Oral History Interview with Renee Poussaint, Section  
A2013\_036\_001\_004, TRT: 4:28:54 2013/01/16

Renee Poussaint began attending Sarah Lawrence College in 1962, where she was influenced by a number of black writers. In 1963, she attended the March on Washington as a college sophomore. Poussaint also shares stories about her time studying abroad in France in 1965. Poussaint wanted to become a Civil Rights lawyer, and applied to a number of law schools during her senior year in 1966. She enrolled at Yale Law School in 1966, but was not comfortable an environment made up of privileged, white males. As a result, she dropped out of school and moved to Malawi with her then-fiancée. While in Malawi, Poussaint worked as a receptionist for a local radio station. She recalls her experiences in the country, including her

difficulty finding a job, her interactions with other expatriates, and getting used to the standards of living. Poussaint also learned a lot by interacting with and observing native and French women abroad.

Sarah Lawrence College.

March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, Washington, D.C., 1963.

Foreign study--France--Paris.

Yale Law School.

Relocation (Housing)--Malawi.

Video Oral History Interview with Renee Poussaint, Section A2013\_036\_001\_005, TRT: 5:30:17 2013/01/16

In 1969, Renee Poussaint enrolled at the University of California, Los Angeles, to pursue her M.A. Degree in African Studies. After completing the program, she enrolled in the University of Indiana's Ph.D. program in comparative literature in 1971. After recognizing that many of her students were illiterate, and that their main source of information was through television, Poussaint was inspired to change her focus to mass communications. She left her Ph.D. program and entered the Michele Clark Fellowship Program for Minorities at Columbia University in New York City, New York. In 1971, Poussaint was offered a position as a news writer for WBBM News in Chicago, Illinois. After spontaneously covering a fire, murder, suicide, Poussaint was promoted to a news reporter. She was offered a position as a CBS News correspondent around 1973. She accepted the position in 1974, and worked as the correspondent for CBS News' Midwest Bureau until 1976, when she became a White House correspondent in Washington, D.C.

University of California, Los Angeles.

Columbia University.

WBBM-TV (Television station : Chicago, Ill.).

Journalism.

CBS News.

Video Oral History Interview with Renee Poussaint, Section A2013\_036\_001\_006, TRT: 6:29:11 2013/01/16



In 1978, Renee Poussaint married her longtime fiancée Henry Richardson. That same year, she left her position as a CBS News White House correspondent to serve as an anchor for WJLA-TV in Washington, D.C. Poussaint struggled with the scrutiny she received from the black community about her appearance, including wearing an Afro and glasses. Poussaint also had difficulty with the celebrity of the position. She left WJLA in 1990 to become a correspondent for ABC's "Prime Time Live." Unsatisfied with the lack of cultural sensitivity at "Prime Time Live," as well as the fluff pieces she was asked to do, Poussaint left in 1993 to start her own production company, Wisdom Works. Wisdom Works produced "Tutu and Franklin: A Journey Towards Peace" in 1998, and "The Life and Surprising Times of Dr. Dorothy Height" in 2001. Poussaint describes filming "A Journey Towards Peace," as well as her visit to South Africa to cover the country around the time of Nelson Mandela's release.

WJLA-TV (Television station : Washington, D.C.).

Marriage.

American Broadcasting Company.

African American business enterprises.

Travel--Africa.

Video Oral History Interview with Renee Poussaint, Section  
A2013\_036\_001\_007, TRT: 7:29:07 2013/01/16

Renee Poussaint talks about some of her television projects, including "Tutu and Franklin: A Journey Towards Peace" and "Malcom X". Poussaint narrated "Malcom X" for A&E's "Biography" series in 1997, while her production company, Wisdom Works, produced "A Journey Towards Peace" in 1998. This documentary aired nationally on PBS in 2001. Camille Cosby was a major supporter of "A Journey Towards Peace," as well as some of Poussaint's other projects, including the 2002 film "The Life and Surprising Times of Dr. Dorothy Height" and the National Leadership Visionary Project. Poussaint founded the National Leadership Visionary Project in 2000, and served as its CEO until 2006. Poussaint describes her experiences managing and performing interviews for the project. In 2004, Poussaint and Cosby edited book of

excerpts from the project's collection entitled "A Wealth of Wisdom." Poussaint talks about Dorothy Height, her admiration of John Hope Franklin, and interviewing Coretta Scott King, as well.

Documentary television programs.

National Visionary Leadership Project.

African American chief executive officers.

Franklin, John Hope, 1915-2009.

Height, Dorothy I. (Dorothy Irene), 1912-2010.

King, Coretta Scott, 1927-2006.

Cosby, Camille O. (Camille Olivia), 1944-

Video Oral History Interview with Renee Poussaint, Section  
A2013\_036\_001\_008, TRT: 8:19:52 2013/01/16

Renee Poussaint talks about Bill and Camille Cosby, and the couple's commitment to advancing the welfare of blacks. Camille Cosby was a major advocate for the National Leadership Visionary Project, which Poussaint founded in 2000. In the early 2000s, the Project partnered with Paul Laurence Dunbar High School in Washington, D.C., and trained students to conduct oral history interviews with local elders. Poussaint describes the National Leadership Visionary Project's criteria for selecting interviewees and performing interviews, and considers how it compliments other non-profits like The HistoryMakers. The National Leadership Visionary Project's collection of 200 interviews is currently housed in the Library of Congress. Poussaint ended her tenure as CEO of the organization in 2006, and has since focused on mentoring youth and volunteering. Poussaint talks about her hopes and concerns for the African American community, and closes by reflecting upon her legacy and how she would like to be remembered.

Cosby, Camille O. (Camille Olivia), 1944-

National Visionary Leadership Project.

Cosby, Bill, 1937-

Oral histories.

African Americans--Mentoring.