

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Leonard Pitts

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Pitts, Leonard
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Leonard Pitts,
Dates:	October 23, 2013
Bulk Dates:	2013
Physical Description:	7 uncompressed MOV digital video files (3:02:56).
Abstract:	Syndicated columnist Leonard Pitts (1957 -) won the 2004 Pulitzer Prize for Commentary. He was a columnist at the Miami Herald for two decades, and the author of <i>Becoming Dad: Black Men and the Journey to Fatherhood</i> , <i>Before I Forget</i> , <i>Forward from This Moment: Selected Columns, 1994-2008</i> , and <i>Freeman</i> . Pitts was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on October 23, 2013, in Washington, District of Columbia. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2013_273
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Journalist and author Leonard Garvey Pitts, Jr. was born on October 11, 1957 in Orange, California to Leonard Garvey and Agnes Rowan Pitts. He grew up in the impoverished South Central section of Los Angeles, California. A successful student, Pitts skipped several grades and entered the University of Southern California at age fifteen, where he graduated with his B.A. degree in English in 1977.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, Pitts worked as a freelance journalist, writing for publications ranging from *Musician* to *Reader's Digest*. From 1976 until 1980, Pitts worked for *Soul* magazine as writer and editor. In 1980, he was hired as a writer for KFWB radio in Los Angeles, and, from 1983 to 1986, he worked for a program called Radioscope. Pitts wrote scripts for several radio documentaries in the late 1980s, including *King: From Atlanta to the Mountaintop*, *Who We Are*, and *Young Black Men: A Lost Generation*. He was hired by Westwood One, Inc. in 1989, and then by the *Miami Herald* in 1991, where he served as a music critic. Then, in 1994, Pitts was promoted to columnist at the *Miami Herald*, where he authored a column on race, politics and culture. His column was picked up for syndication by the Knight Ridder News Service, and appeared in about 250 newspapers.

Pitts is also the author of four books. His first book, *Becoming Dad: Black Men and the Journey to Fatherhood* was published in 1999; *Before I Forget*, Pitts's first novel, was released in March 2009; *Forward from This Moment: Selected Columns, 1994-2008* was published in August 2009; and *Freeman*, his second novel, was released in 2012. Pitts has also been invited to teach at a number of institutions, including Hampton University, Ohio University, the University of Maryland, and Virginia Commonwealth University. In 2011, he served as a visiting professor at Princeton University, and in 2013, he taught at George Washington University.

Pitts has received numerous awards. In 1997, he took first place for commentary in the American Association of Sunday and Feature Editors' Ninth Annual Writing Awards competition. In 2001, Pitts received the American Society of Newspaper Editors ASNE Award for Commentary Writing, and was named Feature of the Year - Columnist by Editor and Publisher magazine. In 2002, the National Society of Newspaper Columnists awarded Pitts its inaugural Columnist of the Year award. In 2002 and in 2009, GLAAD Media awarded him the Outstanding Newspaper Columnist award, and, in 2004, he was awarded a Pulitzer Prize for commentary. Pitts also received the National Association of Black Journalists' Award of Excellence three times, and was chosen as NABJ's 2008 Journalist of the Year. He is a five-time recipient of the Atlantic City Press Club's National Headliners Award and a seven-time recipient of the Society of Professional Journalists' Green Eyeshade Award. Pitts has received honorary doctorate degrees in humane letters from Old Dominion University and Utica College.

Leonard Pitts was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on October 23, 2013.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Leonard Pitts was conducted by Larry Crowe on October 23, 2013, in Washington, District of Columbia, and was recorded on 7 uncompressed MOV digital video files. Syndicated columnist Leonard Pitts (1957 -) won the 2004 Pulitzer Prize for Commentary. He was a columnist at the Miami Herald for two decades, and the author of *Becoming Dad: Black Men and the Journey to Fatherhood*, *Before I Forget*, *Forward from This Moment: Selected Columns, 1994-2008*, and *Freeman*.

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:

Pitts, Leonard

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Pitts, Leonard--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Syndicated Columnist

HistoryMakers® Category:

MediaMakers

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 Leonard Pitts, October 23, 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).

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

Video Oral History Interview with Leonard Pitts, Section
A2013_273_001_001, TRT: 1:28:42 2013/10/23

Leonard Pitts was born on October 11, 1957 in Orange, California to Agnes Rowan Pitts and Leonard Pitts, Sr. One of Pitts' maternal ancestors served in the Union Army during the Civil War. His paternal grandfather, John Wesley Pitts, was the son of an Irish woman and a former slave, and farmed six hundred acres of land in Mashulaville, Mississippi. Pitt's father grew up on the farm, and joined the U.S. Army after his eighteenth birthday. Pitts' mother was raised in Natchez, Mississippi, and completed seven years of schooling. His parents met at a party on a warship in Natchez prior to his father's deployment. Pitts' father was a driver for the Red Ball Express during World War II, and began dating Pitts'

mother upon his return in 1947. They married in 1952, and lived briefly in Holly Springs, Mississippi and Memphis, Tennessee. There, Pitts' father drove a cab, and his mother worked as a domestic. Pitts' father then joined the U.S. Marine Corps, and they moved to his station in Orange County, California.

Video Oral History Interview with Leonard Pitts, Section
A2013_273_001_002, TRT: 2:28:09 2013/10/23

Leonard Pitts grew up in South Central Los Angeles, California. His family moved frequently because of his father's alcoholism, which often affected his employment. Pitts was the oldest of four children, and learned to read and write at an early age. His favorite authors included Beverly Cleary, columnist Erma Bombeck and the creator of Marvel Comics, Stan Lee. Pitts particularly enjoyed comic books, which provided an inexpensive escape from his father's abuse and his social isolation at school. Pitts also enjoyed writing stories. He was encouraged by his mother and teachers, including San Pedro Street School Principal Renee Boring, who allowed him to use the school's electric typewriters and mimeograph machines to write and copy his work. Pitts was less adept at math and science, but nevertheless excelled academically and skipped three grade levels. He graduated early from John C. Fremont High School, and enrolled at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles at fifteen years old.

Video Oral History Interview with Leonard Pitts, Section
A2013_273_001_003, TRT: 3:30:06 2013/10/23

Leonard Pitts met his wife, Marilyn Pickens Pitts, for the first time in the fifth grade at the 111th Street School in Los Angeles, California. His family moved shortly afterwards, and he lost contact with her. They met again briefly at John C. Fremont High School, but her family soon moved away. Pitts was encouraged to write by his high school English teacher, James Barbee, who let him spend recess in the library and bought him a subscription to a literary magazine. Pitts began submitting his poetry to magazines, and had his first piece published in the Los Angeles Sentinel at fourteen years old. After finishing the eleventh grade, Pitts enrolled in the University of Southern California's Resident Honors Program. He was

younger than his peers, and one of the few African American students at the university. During his senior year, Pitts was offered a position as a music critic at Soul magazine. He worked there from 1976 to 1980, and reviewed artists such as Gladys Knight, The O'Jays and Diana Ross.

Video Oral History Interview with Leonard Pitts, Section
A2013_273_001_004, TRT: 4:26:35 2013/10/23

Leonard Pitts graduated from the University of Southern California in 1977, and began working as a music critic for Soul magazine. He enjoyed writing about artists like The Temptations, and worked at the magazine until 1980. In 1981, Pitts married Marilyn Pickens Pitts, with whom he had reconnected during college. He also started writing scripts for programs on KFWB Radio. In 1983, he joined Radioscope, an entertainment news program. He also began creating radio documentaries, including 'King: From Atlanta to the Mountaintop' in 1986, and the black history documentary 'Who We Are' in 1988. He joined the writing staff of 'Casey's Top 40' on Westwood One in 1989, and continued creating radio documentaries until 1991, when he was offered a position at the Miami Herald. One of his early stories covered the Rodney King riots in his hometown of Los Angeles, California. He also wrote a piece on Elvis Presley's relationship with the black community for the twentieth anniversary of Presley's death.

Video Oral History Interview with Leonard Pitts, Section
A2013_273_001_005, TRT: 5:28:39 2013/10/23

Leonard Pitts began his career at the Miami Herald as a music critic, and often wrote about music's social context. Displeased with the changes in the recording industry in the 1990s, Pitts decided to become a columnist in 1993. He approached his editor about writing more social commentary, and was assigned a biweekly column in the Miami Herald in 1994. Pitts' commentary focused on social issues and the human condition. He was one of two black male columnists at the newspaper at the time, and was often accused by his editors and readers of writing disproportionately about race. Occasionally, Pitts addressed such criticism in his columns. In 1999, after

writing several columns about fatherhood, Pitts was contacted to write a book on the subject. He wrote 'Becoming Dad: Black Men and the Journey to Fatherhood,' a memoir about his relationship with his father and the experiences of other African American fathers. At this point in the interview, Pitts shares his advice about fatherhood.

Video Oral History Interview with Leonard Pitts, Section
A2013_273_001_006, TRT: 6:28:34 2013/10/23

Leonard Pitts wrote a column about the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 that echoed the sentiments of many Americans at the time. The article attracted a national audience, and elicited thousands of emails of support. In 2004, Pitts won a Pulitzer Prize for his commentary in the Miami Herald. He published his second book, 'Before I Forget,' in 2009. After criticizing the neo-Nazi response to an interracial murder, Pitts was targeted by white supremacist groups. He received threatening phone calls and messages at his home for two months afterwards. In 2012, Pitts completed his third novel, a work of historical fiction titled 'Freeman.' The story was inspired by Leon Litwack's 'Been in the Storm so Long: The Aftermath of Slavery,' and followed a former slave's journey to find his wife after the Civil War. Pitts conducted extensive research, and the book was well received by critics and historians. Pitts talks about the importance of African American history, and the film '12 Years a Slave.'

Video Oral History Interview with Leonard Pitts, Section
A2013_273_001_007, TRT: 7:12:11 2013/10/23

Leonard Pitts was writing his fourth novel at the time of the interview. The story was set in the aftermath of the 2008 presidential election, and included flashbacks to the assassination of Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1968. Pitts also wrote several columns about the rollout of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act of 2010, and criticized Dr. Benjamin Carson, Sr.'s statement that the legislation was akin to slavery. Pitts reflects upon his life and legacy, and describes his family, which included his wife, two step-children, three biological children and one granddaughter. He also talks about his journalistic philosophy. Pitts concludes the interview by describing

how he would like to be remembered.