

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Debra Simmons

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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>	Simmons, Debra Adams, 1964-
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Debra Simmons,
<b>Dates:</b>	February 11, 2014
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2014
<b>Physical Description:</b>	6 uncompressed MOV digital video files (2:54:11).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Journalist and newspaper executive Debra Simmons (1964 - ) served as the editor of The Plain Dealer in Cleveland, Ohio. Simmons was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on February 11, 2014, in Cleveland, Ohio. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2014_042
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Journalist and newspaper executive Debra Adams Simmons was born in Hartford, Connecticut. Simmons attended Syracuse University's Newhouse School of Public Communications and the College of Arts and Sciences, from which she received her B.A. degree. She is also a graduate of the Northwestern University Media Management Center's Advanced Executive Program in its Kellogg Graduate School of Management. Simmons had then planned to attend law school, but in 1986 was offered an internship at the local newspaper in Syracuse.

Simmons worked as a reporter and editor at the *Hartford Courant*, the *Detroit Free Press*, and the *Virginian-Pilot*. In 2003, she became managing editor of the *Akron Beacon Journal*, a Pulitzer prize-winning newspaper distributed throughout Northeast Ohio. Six months later she was appointed vice president of the newspaper. In 2007, Simmons was hired as managing editor of *The Plain Dealer*, Ohio's largest newspaper. Three years later, she was promoted to editor of *The Plain Dealer*, making her the only minority female running any of the nation's top twenty-five newspapers.

In 2014, Simmons became president of the Associated Press Media Editors. She has also served as the board chairman of the Youth Excellence Performing Arts Workshop, vice chair of the board of directors for Business Volunteers Unlimited: Center for Non-Profit Excellence, member of the board of directors of the American Society of News Editors, member of the National Association of Minority Media Executives, and member of the National Association of Black Journalists

For her journalistic and community achievements, Simmons has been given the Robert McGruder Award for Diversity by Kent State University's School of Journalism and Mass Communications, named as one of Cleveland's 40 Under 40 leading executives in Northeast Ohio by *Crain's*, won the ATHENA award, and has been inducted into the Women of Color Hall of Fame.

Simmons lives in Copley, Ohio, with her husband, Jonathan. They have two sons; Jacob and Jonathan.

Simmons was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on February 11, 2014.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Debra Simmons was conducted by Larry Crowe on February 11, 2014, in Cleveland, Ohio, and was recorded on 6 uncompressed MOV digital video files. Journalist and newspaper executive Debra Simmons (1964 - ) served as the editor of *The Plain Dealer* in Cleveland, Ohio.

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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:

Simmons, Debra Adams, 1964-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

### Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Simmons, Debra Adams, 1964---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:

Journalist

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Newspaper Executive

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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 Debra Simmons, February 11, 2014. 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 Debra Simmons, Section A2014\_042\_001\_001, TRT: 1:30:08 ?

Debra Simmons was born on November 4, 1964 in Hartford, Connecticut to Annie Lester Adams and Rudolph Adams. Simmons' maternal great-grandmother lived in Carrollton, Alabama, where she was a domestic worker

and skilled cook. She raised fourteen children, including Simmons' mother, who was the salutatorian of her class at the integrated Carrollton High School. After graduating, Simmons' mother joined her sister in Hartford, where she attended business school. Simmons' paternal grandfather was a carpenter and political leader in Georgetown, British Guiana, where her father was born. He graduated from the Cambridge Academy in Georgetown, and then moved with his brother to Brooklyn, New York. After struggling to find work, the two brothers moved to Hartford. There, Simmons' father and uncle met her mother and aunt, and the two couples married. Simmons was raised in East Hartford, Connecticut until the second grade. At that time, her family moved to Hartford, where she enrolled at Annie Fisher Elementary School.

Video Oral History Interview with Debra Simmons, Section A2014\_042\_001\_002, TRT: 2:29:22 ?

Debra Simmons grew up in a majority African American neighborhood near Blue Hills Avenue in Hartford, Connecticut. There, she attended the Faith Congregational Church, which was part of the Underground Railroad under Pastor James W.C. Pennington during the 19th century. Simmons attended Annie Fisher Elementary School in Hartford, where she joined the track team. She also became a double dutch champion, and competed throughout the state. As a child, Simmons often read the city's Hartford Courant and Northend Agent's newspapers, and developed an aspiration to become a journalist as a result. She attended the predominantly white South Catholic High School, where she excelled academically. After graduating in 1982, Simmons attended Syracuse University in Syracuse, New York, where she studied English and broadcast journalism. Upon graduating in 1986, she was offered a nine-month internship at the Syracuse Herald-Journal, and was promoted to a full-time position after two weeks.

Video Oral History Interview with Debra Simmons, Section A2014\_042\_001\_003, TRT: 3:29:08 ?

Debra Simmons' father, Rudolph Adams, died from a heart attack when she was twelve years old. To qualify for the social security benefits from his death, Simmons began college early, enrolling at the Hartford College for Women during her last semester at South Catholic High School in Hartford, Connecticut. After graduating in 1982, Simmons studied English and broadcast journalism at Syracuse University in Syracuse, New York. There, she was elected vice president of the Student Afro American Society (SAS), which invited speakers like Maya Angelou and Stokely Carmichael to campus. Through SAS, Simmons also served as editor of The Black Voice and protested against South African apartheid. After graduating in 1986, Simmons was offered an internship at the Syracuse Herald-Journal, and was soon promoted to a full-time position. She remained there until 1989, when she accepted a position at the Hartford Courant. At this point, Simmons talks about the Janet Cooke controversy and how it affected her career.

Video Oral History Interview with Debra Simmons, Section A2014\_042\_001\_004, TRT: 4:28:49 ?

Debra Simmons left her position at the Hartford Courant in 1992 to become the public school reporter for the Detroit Free Press, which was a Knight Ridder publication. While living in Detroit, Michigan, Simmons met her husband, Jonathan Simmons, who was working for Dennis Archer's mayoral campaign. In 1995, Detroit's newspaper guild went on strike. At that time, Simmons decided to accept the position of education editor and metro editor at The Virginian-Pilot in Norfolk, Virginia, while her fiancé remained in Detroit. While living in Detroit, Simmons married and had her first child, which prompted her return to the Detroit Free Press in 1998. She remained there until 2000, when she went back to The Virginian-Pilot as the deputy managing editor. In this role, she

oversaw the local news for the entire Tidewater region. Wanting to return to a Knight Ridder publication, Simmons accepted the position of managing editor at the Akron Beacon Journal, and moved to Akron, Ohio in 2003.

Video Oral History Interview with Debra Simmons, Section A2014\_042\_001\_005, TRT: 5:30:03 ?

Debra Simmons served as the managing editor of the Akron Beacon Journal, a Knight Ridder publication in Akron, Ohio. In 2006, Knight Ridder was acquired by The McClatchy Company, which sold the Akron Beacon Journal to Black Press Group Ltd. Following this change in ownership, over a quarter of the staff at the Akron Beacon Journal were terminated, including Simmons. In 2007, Simmons accepted the position of managing editor at The Plain Dealer in Cleveland, Ohio. She was named editor three years later in 2010. Under her leadership, The Plain Dealer shifted much of its distribution from newsprint to a digital news platform. Simmons talks about the major stories covered by The Plain Dealer, including the exposure of corruption within the government of Cuyahoga County, Ohio. Simmons also talks about the City of Cleveland, including its professional sports teams and its redevelopment projects, which were ongoing at the time of the interview.

Video Oral History Interview with Debra Simmons, Section A2014\_042\_001\_006, TRT: 6:26:41 ?

Debra Simmons was the senior editor of The Plain Dealer in Cleveland, Ohio. In this role, she formed relationships with the city's leadership, including U.S. Representative Marcia Fudge and businessman Christopher Conner, who was the executive chairman of the Sherwin-Williams Company. At this point in the interview, Simmons talks about the news stories in The Plain Dealer, and remembers covering the serial killer Anthony Sowell, and the discovery of three kidnapped women in 2013. She talks about the staff and distribution of The Plain Dealer, as well as the newspaper's future and her struggle to create a diverse workplace. Simmons was recognized for her work at The Plain Dealer by organizations like the National Association of Black Journalists and the National Coalition of 100 Black Women. She shares her hopes and concerns for the Cleveland community, and reflects upon her life and legacy. Simmons concludes the interview by describing how she would like to be remembered.