

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Edward Lewis

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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>	Lewis, Edward, 1940-
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Edward Lewis,
<b>Dates:</b>	October 7, 2014
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2014
<b>Physical Description:</b>	7 uncompressed MOV digital video files (3:27:48).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Magazine publishing chief executive and entrepreneur Edward Lewis (1940 - ) cofounded Essence Communications, Inc., where he served as the CEO and publisher of Essence magazine. Lewis was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on October 7, 2014, in New York, New York. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2014_224
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Magazine publisher and entrepreneur Edward Lewis was born on May 15, 1940, in the Bronx, New York. His father was a night shift janitor at City College; his mother a factory worker and beautician. Lewis attended De Witt Clinton High School, where he excelled academically and was a star fullback on the football team. Upon graduating from high school in 1958, he earned a football scholarship to the University of New Mexico. Lewis received his B.A. degree in political science in 1964 and his M.A. degree in political science and international relations in 1966, both from the University of New Mexico. He later graduated from Harvard University's Small Business Management Program.

Lewis worked first as an administrative analyst for the City Manager's Office in Albuquerque, New Mexico from 1964 to 1965, and then as a financial analyst at First National City Bank in New York City from 1965 to 1969. In 1969, he co-founded *Essence*, a magazine specifically targeted to black women, and went on to serve as CEO and publisher of Essence Communications, Inc. for three decades. In the 1980s and 1990s, Lewis expanded Essence Communications to include a weekly television show, fashion line and mail order catalogue, as well as an annual awards show and Essence music festival. In 1992, Lewis acquired *Income Opportunities* from Davis Publishing; and, in 1995, he co-founded *Latina* magazine, a bilingual publication geared toward Hispanic women.

In 1997, Lewis became the first African American chairman of the Magazine Publishers of America. In October 2000, Lewis engineered a partnership with Time, Inc. and Essence Communications was sold to Time in 2005. He later joined the private equity firm Solera Capital as a senior adviser and published a memoir, *The Man from Essence: Creating a Magazine for Black Women*, in 2014.

Lewis has sat on the boards of TransAfrica, the Rheeland Foundation, New York City Partnership, the Central Park Conservancy, A&P, Jazz at Lincoln Center, the Teachers College of Columbia University, Spelman College, Tuskegee University and the Harlem Village Academy; and served as chairman of Latina Media Ventures. He also served on President Barack Obama's Board of Advisors for the Initiative on Historically Black Colleges and Universities.

*Essence* magazine ranked seventh on *Advertising Age's* 2003 "A-List," which was the first time that an African American targeted publication received the honor. Lewis's personal awards include the Entrepreneur of the Year Award for Publishing from Ernst & Young; the President's Award from One Hundred Black Men of America, Inc.; the Frederick Douglass Award from the New York Urban League; the United Negro College Fund's Lifetime Achievement Award; the American Advertising Federation Diversity Achievement Award; the Henry Johnson Fisher Lifetime Achievement Award; and the Henry Luce Lifetime Achievement Award. He was inducted into the Advertising Hall of Fame in 2014.

Edward Lewis was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on October 7, 2014.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Edward Lewis was conducted by Julieanna L. Richardson on October 7, 2014, in New York, New York, and was recorded on 7

uncompressed MOV digital video files. Magazine publishing chief executive and entrepreneur Edward Lewis (1940 - ) cofounded Essence Communications, Inc., where he served as the CEO and publisher of Essence magazine.

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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:**

Lewis, Edward, 1940-

Richardson, Julieanna L. (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

## **Subjects:**

African Americans--Interviews  
Lewis, Edward, 1940---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:**

Entrepreneur

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Magazine Publishing Chief Executive

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## **HistoryMakers® Category:**

BusinessMakers|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 Edward Lewis, October 7, 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 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 Edward Lewis, Section  
A2014\_224\_001\_001, TRT: 1:29:54 2014/10/07

Edward Lewis was born on May 15, 1940 in the Bronx, New York to Jewell Spencer Clarke and Edward Lewis. His mother was born in 1917 in Farmville, Virginia to Charles Spencer and Mary Spencer Croner. After her father died in a mill accident, her mother used the wrongful death settlement to buy land in Darlington Heights, Virginia, and later remarried. In the 1930s, Lewis' mother moved to New York City, where she met Lewis' father. He was born in the city, and had roots in Virginia. He worked as a janitor at the City College of New York. As an only child, Lewis was close with his mother. He and his parents initially lived with his paternal grandparents on Brook Avenue in the Bronx, and later moved into their own apartment. In 1951, Lewis' maternal cousin, Barbara Johns, led a walkout at Robert Russa Moton High School in Farmville, which contributed to the Brown v. Board of Education decision. His maternal aunt, Matilene Spencer Berryman, served as an oceanographer

for the U.S. Navy, and later practiced law.

Video Oral History Interview with Edward Lewis, Section  
A2014\_224\_001\_002, TRT: 2:27:59 2014/10/07

Edward Lewis was raised in a diverse community in the Bronx, New York, where he initially lived in an apartment on Brook Avenue with his parents and paternal grandparents. As a child, Lewis aspired to play Major League Baseball, and sang in the choir at Gethsemane Baptist Church. He also visited his maternal family in Darlington Heights, Virginia, where his grandmother, Mary Spencer Croner, owned a 110-acre farm. There, he enjoyed assisting his uncle, Tracy Spencer, who worked as a logger. Lewis began his education at P.S. 2 Morrisania School in the Bronx. After his parents divorced, he lived with relatives in Brooklyn, New York, where he attended P.S. 35 in Bedford-Stuyvesant. At this point in the interview, Lewis describes his relationship with his father, who initially refused to pay child support for him. Lewis' mother married George Clarke in 1960, and they remained together until his death in 1985. Lewis later helped care for his paternal grandmother, Alice Lewis, who outlived all three of her children.

Video Oral History Interview with Edward Lewis, Section  
A2014\_224\_001\_003, TRT: 3:29:03 2014/10/07

Edward Lewis attended the majority-white DeWitt Clinton High School in the Bronx, New York, where he received support from his teachers. During this time, he lived with his mother and stepfather, Jewell Spencer Clarke and George Clarke, in the St. Mary's Park Houses at 671 Westchester Avenue. Lewis was recruited by Coach Marv Levy to play football at the University of New Mexico (UNM) in Albuquerque. One year later, Levy accepted the head coach position at the University of California, Berkeley, and Lewis lost his athletic scholarship. Instead, he obtained a National Defense Loan to continue his education at UNM, where he developed an interest in Russian history under the instruction of Henry J. Tobias. Lewis was active in the U.S. National Student Association, where he advocated to fund the civil rights efforts in Prince Edward County, Virginia. He also joined UNM's Jocks Before Civil Rights group and the Omega

Psi Phi Fraternity. Lewis went on to study at Georgetown Law School in Washington, D.C.

Video Oral History Interview with Edward Lewis, Section  
A2014\_224\_001\_004, TRT: 4:30:36 2014/10/07

Edward Lewis obtained his bachelor's degree and master's degree in political science and international relations from the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque. He went on to attend Georgetown Law School in Washington, D.C. However, he was forced to quit school after losing his scholarship due to low grades. Returning home to New York City, Lewis joined the First National City Bank, where he learned the principles of finance. In 1968, he was one of several aspiring black entrepreneurs who were invited by Russell L. Goings, Jr. to attend a meeting on Wall Street at Shearson, Hammill and Co. There, Lewis partnered with Clarence Smith, Cecil Hollingsworth and Jonathan Blount to form The Hollingsworth Group, which became Essence Communications, Inc. In its early years, the company received financial support from investors like Shearson, Hammill and Co. and banking executive William Hudgins. In May of 1970, the first issue of Essence magazine was published under editor in chief Ruth Ross.

Video Oral History Interview with Edward Lewis, Section  
A2014\_224\_001\_005, TRT: 5:27:04 2014/10/07

Edward Lewis was a founding partner of The Hollingsworth Group in 1968. The company, which soon became Essence Communications, Inc., initially recruited journalist Bernadette Carey to serve as the editor of Sapphire magazine. In 1970, the inaugural issue was published under the editorship of Ruth Ross, who changed the magazine's name to Essence. Then, Ida E. Lewis took over as editor in chief, followed by Marcia Ann Gillespie in 1971. Early on, the majority of the magazine's advertisers were other black-owned businesses, like the Johnson Products Company and Burrell Advertising Agency. Essence was also secured an advertising contract with Playboy Enterprises, Inc., which installed executive Robert Gutwillig on the Essence board of directors. At this point in the interview, Lewis talks about the company's early overhead costs in printing and postage. In the mid-

1970s, Lewis dismissed Cecil Hollingsworth and Jonathan Blount from the partnership. They later sued for control of the company, but were unsuccessful.

Video Oral History Interview with Edward Lewis, Section  
A2014\_224\_001\_006, TRT: 6:30:34 2014/10/07

Edward Lewis and his business partner, Clarence O. Smith, selected Susan Taylor to become the editor in chief of Essence magazine in 1981. In the subsequent decades, Essence Communications, Inc. expanded its scope to include services like the Essence by Mail catalog. The company also faced challenges from corporations like Philip Morris Inc., which wanted to use the Essence name for a new tobacco product. John H. Johnson of the Johnson Publishing Company also attempted a hostile takeover of Essence Communications, Inc. In 1994, Lewis met with jazz promoter George Wein, who encouraged Lewis to found the Essence Music Festival in New Orleans, Louisiana. Lewis' first wife, actress Michele Shay, introduced him to Camille Cosby, who became member of Essence's board of directors, along with Frank Savage and J. Bruce Llewellyn. At this point, Lewis talks about Black Enterprise magazine, and the state of the magazine industry at the time of the interview.

Video Oral History Interview with Edward Lewis, Section  
A2014\_224\_001\_007, TRT: 7:32:38 2014/10/07

Edward Lewis sold 49 percent ownership of Essence Communications, Inc. to Time Inc. in 2000. Four years later, he sold the remaining 51 percent, and resigned his position as chief executive officer. During the negotiations, Lewis met frequently with Time Warner, Inc. CEO Richard Parsons, who helped assuage his concerns about the transition. Editor in chief Susan Taylor also left the magazine at this time, and went on to found the National CARES Mentoring Movement. At this point, Lewis talks about the future of Essence magazine, and his book, 'The Man from Essence: Creating a Magazine for Black Women.' Following his marriage to Carolyn Wright Lewis, Lewis became the father of two stepdaughters, who went on to work in advertising and film. He reflects upon his hopes and concerns for the African American community, as well as his legacy and how he would like to



be remembered. At the time of the interview, Lewis aspired to become a blues singer.