

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with The Honorable Ronald L. Ellis

---

## 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>	Ellis, Ronald Louis, 1950-
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Ronald L. Ellis,
<b>Dates:</b>	November 11, 2016 and October 27, 2016
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2016
<b>Physical Description:</b>	7 uncompressed MOV digital video files (3:26:54).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Judge Ronald L. Ellis (1950 - ) worked at the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, and served as a magistrate judge for the United States District Court for the Southern District of New York. Ellis was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on November 11, 2016 and October 27, 2016, in New York, New York. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2016_056
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

---

## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Judge Ronald L. Ellis was born on July 4, 1950 in Lafourche Parish, Louisiana to Ella Mae Ellis and Herman Ellis. In search of better job prospects, Ellis' father moved the family to New York City, where Ellis graduated from Cardinal Spellman High School in 1968. Ellis earned his B.Ch.E. degree in chemical engineering from Manhattan College in 1972, and entered New York University School of Law as a recipient of the prestigious Root-Tilden-Kern public interest scholarship.

During his second and third years of law school, Ellis became interested in the civil rights mission of the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc. (NAACP LDF). After obtaining his J.D. degree, he worked briefly as a patent attorney for Exxon before joining the NAACP LDF in 1976, where he specialized in fair employment class action litigation. From 1984 to 1990, Ellis served as the organization's Fair Employment Program director. Ellis went on to serve as the NAACP LDF's Poverty & Justice Program director, where he worked on the landmark civil rights case *Sheff v. O'Neil*. In 1993, Ellis was sworn in as a magistrate judge for the United States District Court for the Southern District of New York. As a magistrate judge, Ellis handled pre-trial matters, including arraignment and determining bail. Ellis drew public criticism in 2009 for deciding not to remand fraudulent investor Bernie Madoff, in light of allegations that he had violated the terms of his bail. He also ruled on the City of New York's lawsuit against documentary filmmaker Ken Burns, and refused to suppress a subpoena demanding that the BBC release unaired footage from its documentary *Arafat Investigated*.

In addition to his courtroom duties, Ellis mentored many law clerks, and served as an adjunct law professor at New York University School of Law, New York Law School and Columbia School of Law, often teaching courses on race and the law. He co-authored the chapter "Achieving Race and Gender Fairness in the Courtroom" in *The Judge's Book*, and was a member of the Federal Bar Council and the Metropolitan Black Bar Association.

Ellis and his wife, Kathleen, have two sons, Jamil and Jelani, and a granddaughter, Alexandra.

Judge Ronald L. Ellis was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on October 27, 2016.

---

## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with The Honorable Ronald L. Ellis was conducted by Harriette Cole on November 11, 2016 and October 27, 2016, in New York, New York, and was recorded on 7 uncompressed MOV digital video files. Judge Ronald L. Ellis (1950 - ) worked at the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, and served as a magistrate judge for the United States District Court for the Southern District of New York.

---

# 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:

Ellis, Ronald Louis, 1950-

Cole, Harriette (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

### Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

## **Organizations:**

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

---

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

---

## **Occupations:**

Circuit Court Judge

---

Lawyer

---

## **HistoryMakers® Category:**

LawMakers

---

## **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 Ronald L. Ellis, November 11, 2016 and October 27, 2016. 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 The Honorable Ronald L. Ellis,  
Section A2016\_056\_001\_001, TRT: 1:28:26 2016/10/27

The Honorable Ronald L. Ellis was born on July 4, 1950 in Lafourche Crossing, Louisiana to Ella Moore Ellis and Herman Ellis, Sr. His mother was also a native of Lafourche Crossing, and the oldest of thirteen children. To supplement the family's income, she did domestic work, and styled hair at home. Ellis' father was born in a nearby town, and raised by his father, Samuel Ellis, after the death of his mother, Jeanetta Ellis. Ellis' parents married when they were twenty years old, and lived briefly in Lafourche Crossing before moving to an all-black neighborhood in Thibodaux, Louisiana. Ellis grew up there as the second oldest of five children. During his early years, he battled several illnesses, including polio and scarlet fever. Ellis developed into a curious student, and excelled at St. Luke School. When Ellis was eleven years old, his father decided to move to New York City on his own to find better work opportunities as a mechanic, and the rest of the family joined him shortly thereafter.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Ronald L. Ellis,  
Section A2016\_056\_001\_002, TRT: 2:31:58 2016/10/27

The Honorable Ronald L. Ellis moved with his family to Harlem in New York City in 1962. He completed his

elementary education at St. Thomas the Apostle School, and graduated to Cardinal Spellman High School. At the prestigious and integrated Catholic school, Ellis was one of the few African American students in his classes. During this time, Malcolm X became a civil rights icon in Harlem, and the community discussions centered on empowerment. Although he had wanted to study engineering at Harvard University, Ellis opted to enroll at New York City's Manhattan College on a full scholarship instead. At this time, Ellis met his wife, Kathleen Ellis, who attended the nearby Elizabeth Seton College, and they married in 1973. Upon graduating, Ellis worked briefly as a computer programmer. Motivated by the discriminatory policing in his community, Ellis aspired to a career as a criminal defense lawyer. He was awarded the Root-Tilden-Kern Public Interest Scholarship to attend New York University School of Law in 1973.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Ronald L. Ellis,  
Section A2016\_056\_001\_003, TRT: 3:30:17 2016/10/27

The Honorable Ronald L. Ellis pursued his law degree at New York University School of Law. During the summer of his first year, he worked at a criminal defense firm that served Native American and African American clients in Minnesota. Next, he interned with the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund, Inc. (LDF) under the tutelage of director Jack Greenberg. He also worked with Deval L. Patrick, Lani Guinier and James M. Nabrit, Jr. In 1975, Ellis graduated from law school, and was hired as a patent attorney at Exxon Research and Engineering Company. Six months later, the LDF offered him a full time position, and he joined the staff officially in 1976. There, he worked primarily on fair employment class action lawsuits. His first case was against the steel industry, which had a long history of discriminating against African Americans. In the following years, Ellis challenged employment practices that discouraged or prohibited African Americans from achieving the same advancement opportunities as whites.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Ronald L. Ellis,  
Section A2016\_056\_001\_004, TRT: 4:32:27 2016/10/27

The Honorable Ronald L. Ellis was named director of the

NAACP Legal Defense Fund, Inc.'s fair employment program in 1984. At this time, the federal government began filing reverse discrimination cases, which threatened to undermine important civil rights advancements. In response, Ellis and his team fought to keep key civil rights decisions from being overturned by the U.S. Supreme Court. In 1989, Ellis litigated the Sheff v. O'Neill school equity lawsuit, which became a landmark civil rights case. In 1990, Ellis was appointed director of the poverty and justice program, where he tackled the wide-ranging issues concerning poverty in the United States. Three years later, Ellis was confirmed as a magistrate judge for the U.S. District Court the Southern District of New York. In this role, he ruled on a broad spectrum of cases, including police misconduct, contract and unemployment. In 2008, Ellis was criticized for granting bail for financial fraudster Bernard Madoff.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Ronald L. Ellis, Section A2016\_056\_002\_005, TRT: 5:28:39 2016/11/11

The Honorable Ronald L. Ellis was one of the presiding judges for fraudulent investor Bernie Madoff's bail hearing in 2009. He gained national notoriety for his decision to release Madoff on bail. As a magistrate judge, one of his responsibilities was ruling on pretrial motions and settlements. Like many other judges, Ellis sought to distance himself from partisan politics to remain neutral in court. In an effort to keep trials balanced, Ellis rejected motions that gave unequal advantage to one side as well as any motions that were unnecessary for the case. He also ensured that people without legal representation were not taken advantage of in the courtroom. Ellis employed a large support staff, which included two law clerks, a courtroom deputy and a number of interns. While the law clerks briefed him on motions, the interns drafted opinions that were then reviewed and rewritten by the law clerks before being given to Ellis for his final assessment.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Ronald L. Ellis, Section A2016\_056\_002\_006, TRT: 6:27:50 2016/11/11

The Honorable Ronald L. Ellis taught at New York University School of Law from 1986 until 1994. He also served as a professor at New York Law School and

Columbia University Law School, where he taught about the intersections of race and law in America. At this point in the interview, Ellis describes his approach to teaching about the challenges faced by underprivileged individuals and people of color in the criminal justice system. In 2013, Ellis presided over the lawsuit between the City of New York and the wrongfully convicted defendants of the 1989 Central Park jogger case. During the trial, the city subpoenaed the complete original footage from 'The Central Park Five,' a documentary produced by Ken Burns. However, Ellis denied the request, ruling that access to the footage would not advance the city's case. Ultimately, the case was settled. At the time of the interview, Ellis was tasked with determining which of the sealed documents from the Central Park jogger case could be released to the public.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Ronald L. Ellis,  
Section A2016\_056\_002\_007, TRT: 7:27:17 2016/11/11

The Honorable Ronald L. Ellis acted as a mentor to many young people throughout his legal career. While serving as a magistrate judge for the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of New York, he employed and mentored two hundred interns and forty law clerks. Ellis ate lunch with his interns and clerks often to discuss legal matters. At this point in the interview, Ellis talks about the detriments of the stop and frisk policy, and how economic status influences one's outcome in the criminal justice system. He also talks about his family, and shares his advice for Americans and for young people. Ellis concludes the interview by reflecting upon his life and legacy.