

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Bryan Stevenson

---

## 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>	Stevenson, Bryan
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Bryan Stevenson,
<b>Dates:</b>	September 30, 2016
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2016
<b>Physical Description:</b>	4 uncompressed MOV digital video files (1:51:55).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Lawyer and nonprofit executive Bryan Stevenson (1959 - ) devoted his life to criminal justice reform at the Southern Center for Human Rights, and then founded the Equal Justice Initiative, a non-profit law center in Montgomery, Alabama. Stevenson was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on September 30, 2016, in Montgomery, Alabama. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2016_063
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

---

## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Lawyer and nonprofit executive Bryan Stevenson was born on November 14, 1959 in Milton, Delaware to Alice Gertrude Golden Stevenson and Howard Carlton Stevenson, Sr. In 1977, Stevenson graduated from Cape Henlopen High School in Lewes, Delaware. He went on to earn his B.A. degree in philosophy from Eastern University in St. David, Pennsylvania in 1981. In 1985, Stevenson received both his M.A. degree in public policy from Harvard University's Kennedy School and his J.D. degree from Harvard Law School, and worked as an intern at the Southern Center for Human Rights in Atlanta, Georgia.

Stevenson returned to the Southern Center for Human Rights as an attorney upon graduating in 1985. He worked on the infamous *McClesky v. Kemp* (1987) case, in which the U.S. Supreme Court upheld Warren McClesky's death penalty sentence. In 1989, the Southern Center for Human Rights appointed Stevenson as its director. When government funding for the Southern Center for Human Rights was reduced in 1994, Stevenson founded the Equal Justice Initiative, a non-profit law center in Montgomery, Alabama funded by Stevenson's MacArthur Fellowship. Stevenson's work focused on eliminating the death penalty and life-without-parole sentencing for minors. He became a clinical professor at New York University School of Law in 1998, achieving full-time status in 2002. Stevenson's 2012 TED talk, and eventual memoir *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption* (2014), catapulted him to fame. In 2013, he placed markers commemorating slave trading sites in Montgomery, despite resistance from the state government. Stevenson expanded the Equal Justice Initiative to erect memorials to lynchings in Alabama, and founded the From Slavery to Mass Incarceration museum that opened in Montgomery in 2017.

Stevenson successfully argued a number of cases before the U.S. Supreme Court, and received many honors for his work in prison reform. In 2000, he won the Olof Palme Prize, and in 2009, Stevenson received the Gruber Justice Prize from the Peter and Patricia Gruber Foundation. Stevenson was a recipient of the Four Freedoms Award from the Roosevelt Institute in 2011 and in 2014, he won the Andrew Carnegie Medal for Excellence in Fiction and

Nonfiction from the American Library Association, for his memoir *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption*. Stevenson was a recipient of the Dayton Literary Peace Prize for Nonfiction in 2015.

Bryan Stevenson was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on September 30, 2016.

---

## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Bryan Stevenson was conducted by Larry Crowe on September 30, 2016, in Montgomery, Alabama, and was recorded on 4 uncompressed MOV digital video files. Lawyer and nonprofit executive Bryan Stevenson (1959 - ) devoted his life to criminal justice reform at the Southern Center for Human Rights, and then founded the Equal Justice Initiative, a non-profit law center in Montgomery, Alabama.

---

## 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:

Stevenson, Bryan

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

### Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Stevenson, Bryan--Interviews

---

## Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

---

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

---

## Occupations:

Lawyer

---

Nonprofit Legal Director

---

## 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 Bryan Stevenson, September 30, 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 6/7/2022 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 Bryan Stevenson, Section A2016\_063\_001\_001, TRT: 1:31:51  
2016/09/30

Bryan Stevenson was born on November 14, 1959 in Milton, Delaware to Alice Golden Stevenson and Howard Stevenson. His maternal great-grandfather, John Baylor, was born a slave in Bowling Green, Virginia, but nevertheless learned to read, and taught Stevenson's maternal grandmother, Victoria Baylor Golden, to read as well. As an adult, she married Clarence Golden, and they moved to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania to escape the racial violence in Virginia. Stevenson's grandparents enrolled his mother at the Philadelphia High School for Girls, but could not afford to send her to college. Stevenson's paternal grandparents met on the Eastern Shore of Maryland; and, after marrying, moved to Georgetown, Delaware, where Stevenson's father was born. He was drafted into the Korean War just after graduating from high school; and, upon his return, found work in Philadelphia, where he met and married Stevenson's mother. They moved to southern Delaware, where they raised three children, and attended the Prospect A.M.E. Church.

Video Oral History Interview with Bryan Stevenson, Section A2016\_063\_001\_002, TRT: 2:28:05  
2016/09/30

Bryan Stevenson grew up in rural Sussex County, Delaware, where racial discrimination was common. He began his education at H.O. Brittingham Elementary School in Milton, Delaware. The school was nominally integrated, but Stevenson was assigned to an all-black vocational class until his mother, Alice Golden Stevenson, advocated for his transfer to a white classroom. Stevenson excelled in English, and played the piano at the Prospect A.M.E. Church from the age of ten years old. He went on to attend Cape Henlopen High School, where he performed as Walter Lee Younger in 'A Raisin in the Sun,' and entered speech contests with the help of his theater teacher, Harriet Jeglum. In 1976, Stevenson's maternal grandfather, Clarence Golden, was murdered by burglars in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Two years later, Stevenson graduated from high school, and matriculated at Eastern College in St. Davids, Pennsylvania, where he studied philosophy and led the student choir.

Video Oral History Interview with Bryan Stevenson, Section A2016\_063\_001\_003, TRT: 3:33:19  
2016/09/30

Bryan Stevenson graduated from Eastern College in St. Davids, Pennsylvania, and continued his education at the Harvard Law School, where he had difficulty adjusting. There were few African Americans among his peers, who were mostly wealthy and interested in corporate law. During Stevenson's second year of law school, he enrolled in a litigation course with Professor Elizabeth Bartholet. Through the class, which focused on race and poverty, Stevenson was assigned to work under Director Steve Wright at the Southern Prisoners Defense Committee (SPDC) in Atlanta, Georgia. There, Stevenson assisted with an appellate case for an inmate on death row, whose gratitude and relief inspired Stevenson to continue working for the organization. In 1985, Stevenson skipped his law school graduation ceremony to move to Atlanta, Georgia, where he became a full time attorney at the SPDC. Stevenson also describes his experiences of police brutality in Atlanta and Delaware, and talks about the history of capital punishment.

Video Oral History Interview with Bryan Stevenson, Section A2016\_063\_001\_004, TRT: 4:18:40  
2016/09/30

Bryan Stevenson graduated from the Harvard Law School in 1985, and became an attorney at the Southern Prisoners Defense Committee (SPDC) in Atlanta, Georgia. There, he litigated appellate cases on behalf of indigent death row

inmates, many of whom were people of color. Stevenson began working on the case of Walter McMillian in Monroeville, Alabama in 1988, and moved to Alabama the following year. In addition, Stevenson talks about the U.S. Supreme Court decision of *McCleskey v. Kemp* in 1987, when the majority of the justices upheld the death penalty, stating that racially biased sentencing was inevitable. He also describes his experience of police brutality in Atlanta; where, after arriving home from work, he was held at gunpoint outside his apartment by two white police officers. Stevenson defused the situation and filed a complaint; but, rather than punish the white officers for misconduct, the police department sent an African American community relations officer to apologize.