

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Useni Eugene Perkins

Overview of the Collection

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| Repository: | The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com |
| Creator: | Perkins, Useni Eugene |
| Title: | The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Useni Eugene Perkins, |
| Dates: | March 10, 2003 |
| Bulk Dates: | 2003 |
| Physical Description: | 6 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:59:02). |
| Abstract: | Poet and writer Useni Eugene Perkins (1932 - 2023) wrote several sociological books on African American youth. Eugene also founded the Association for the Positive Development of African American Youth in 1991. Perkins was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on March 10, 2003, in Chicago, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview. |
| Identification: | A2003_039 |
| Language: | The interview and records are in English. |

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Useni Eugene Perkins was a distinguished poet, playwright and youth worker. Born in Chicago on September 13, 1932, he was the son of Marion Perkins, a sculptor, and Eva Perkins. Being exposed to the arts at a young age through his father would prove to be a major influence on his later years.

He attended Chicago's Wendell Phillips High School, where he developed an early interest in writing. Graduating in January 1950, he stayed in the city for his college education, earning a B.S. in group work from George Williams College in 1963. After graduation, he worked as the program director for the Henry Horner Chicago Boys Club. It was during this time that he also pursued an M.S. in administration, which he received in 1966.

In that year, Perkins became the executive director of the Better Boys Foundation of Chicago, a social agency involved in community, social, educational and cultural development. Raised in the housing projects of Chicago, and having established a career as a sociologist dealing with troubled youth, he authored the 1976 book *Home Is A Dirty Street: The Social Oppression of Black Children*.

Upon leaving his post with the Better Boys Foundation in 1982, Perkins became an executive consultant in Chicago with INESU Consultants, where he stayed for two years. He was still very active in writing, penning several sociological books on African American youth, as well as publishing books of poetry and authoring various plays that were produced in theaters in Chicago.

In 1986, he became the social director for the Chicago Urban League, and two years later became the chief executive officer of the Urban League of Portland, Oregon. Returning to Chicago in 1990 as the interim president of the DuSable Museum of African American History, Perkins founded the Association for the Positive Development of African American Youth in 1991, which he served as president, and became the

project director of the Family Life Center at Chicago State University. February 25, 1999, was proclaimed Useni Eugene Perkins Day in Chicago. He was a married father of three, and lived in Chicago.

Useni Eugene Perkins passed away on May 7, 2023 at the age of 90.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Useni Eugene Perkins was conducted by Larry Crowe on March 10, 2003, in Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on 6 Betacame SP videocassettes. Poet and writer Useni Eugene Perkins (1932 - 2023) wrote several sociological books on African American youth. Eugene also founded the Association for the Positive Development of African American Youth in 1991.

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:

Perkins, Useni Eugene

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Perkins, Useni Eugene--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Poet

Writer

HistoryMakers® Category:

ArtMakers

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 Useni Eugene Perkins, March 10, 2003. The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

Processing Information

This interview collection was processed and encoded on 7/20/2023 by The HistoryMakers® staff. The finding aid was created adhering to the following standards: DACS, AACR2, and the Oral History Cataloging Manual (Matters 1995).

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 Useni Eugene Perkins, Section A2003_039_001_001,
TRT: 0:29:45 ?

Useni Eugene Perkins was born on September 13, 1932 in Chicago, Illinois. His mother, Eva Gillon Perkins, was born in Shreveport, Louisiana in 1902 and his father, Marion Perkins, was born in Marche, Arkansas. His mother was primarily a housewife but she also held jobs cleaning airports at Midway Airport and being a housemother at the University of Chicago. His father was a laborer, ran a newsstand, and was a talented sculptor. Perkins was born during the Great Depression and grew up on Chicago's South Side where he attended Raymond Elementary School, Oakland Elementary School, and Doolittle Elementary School. His family lived in the housing projects. They first lived at the Cranford Building and then moved to the newly built Ida B. Wells Homes where he fought with kids at school who envied that he lived there. He recalls playing with his cousins, watching celebrities enter the Grand Terrace Ballroom on 35th and King Drive, and the vendors scalding live chickens outside of the Mecca Building on State Street.

Video Oral History Interview with Useni Eugene Perkins, Section A2003_039_001_002,
TRT: 0:29:10 ?

Useni Eugene Perkins talks about his early interest in poetry and reading detective stories. His father, Marion Perkins, was active in the black artists' community in the 1930s and 1940s on the South Side of Chicago and joined the Communist Party where he befriended Ishmael Flory and Claude Lightfoot. Later in life, Perkins joined the U.S. Air Force and was subject to a hearing due to his father's ties to Communism. As a boy, Perkins met many of his father's black artist friends including Ted Ward, Paul Robeson, Charles White, and Richard Wright. He also frequented South Side cultural institutions, such as the Abraham Lincoln Center, the Southside Arts Center, Southside Boys Club and HistoryMaker Margaret Burroughs' home which developed into the DuSable Museum of African American History. His brother Toussaint Perkins became a talented artist. Perkins attended Wendell Phillips High School and worked with Alfreda Duster, Ida B. Wells' granddaughter, on the school newspaper and worked as a flower deliveryman.

Video Oral History Interview with Useni Eugene Perkins, Section A2003_039_001_003,
TRT: 0:29:50 ?

Useni Eugene Perkins describes the prevalence of drugs and gangs in his South Side Chicago neighborhood during the 1940s and how his brother Robert Perkins briefly succumbed to these influences before joining the U.S. Navy. After graduating from Wendell Phillips High School in 1950, Perkins spent a year attending Winston-Salem Teachers College in North Carolina and Knoxville College in Tennessee before joining the U.S. Air Force. Perkins trained at Lockland Air Force Base in San Antonio, Texas and Keesler Air Force Base in Biloxi, Mississippi where he experienced racism. After being cleared at the hearing on his father's ties to Communism, Perkins was at Biggs Air Force Base in El Paso, Texas until he was honorably discharged. Perkins held a variety of jobs including as a milkman and bus driver while developing his writing and attending George Williams College. Perkins comments on his father's artistic legacy and how the Civil Rights Movement inspired his poetry.

Video Oral History Interview with Useni Eugene Perkins, Section A2003_039_001_004,
TRT: 0:30:15 ?

Useni Eugene Perkins earned his B.S. degree from George Williams College in 1963. He worked for the Woodlawn Boys Club and the Furman Settlement House and was program director for the Henry Horner Chicago Boys Club. Perkins earned his M.S. degree in administration from George Williams College in 1966 and then became the executive director of the Better Boys Foundation of Chicago, a social agency involved in community, educational and cultural development. While there, Perkins started the LeMont Zeno Theater, named after one of the four of his staff members killed in a plane crash, and created African American programs with HistoryMakers Lerone Bennett and Sonia Sanchez. In 1961, Perkins published his book of poetry entitled "An Apology To My African Brother." Perkins recalls the suspicious death of Ruwa Chiri that was ruled a suicide. Perkins describes the political activity on Chicago's West Side during the 1960s and the unrest following Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s assassination in 1968.

Video Oral History Interview with Useni Eugene Perkins, Section A2003_039_001_005, TRT: 0:28:35 ?

Useni Eugene Perkins describes his writing career. Perkins recites his most famous poem, "Hey Black Child" and describes his noted play "Image Makers" which was a satire of black exploitation films. Perkins remembers when his father, Marion Perkins, took him to see Othello starring Paul Robeson. He credits Shakespeare, Anton Chekov, and Leroy Jones as influencing his playwriting. Many of Perkins' plays feature notable black historical figures such as W.E.B DuBois, Fred Hampton, and Jean Baptiste Point DuSable. Perkins was also instrumental in developing programs in Chicago, Illinois to nurture black artistic talent, including the Afro Arts Theater with HistoryMaker Philip Cohran, the Black Theater Alliance, and Artists for Washington. In 1974, Perkins published "Home Is a Dirty Street" writing about the lives of urban, black youth. In the book, he describes the social institutions that fail young men and how the juvenile legal system serves as an incubator for prison. He then published "Harvesting New Generations."

Video Oral History Interview with Useni Eugene Perkins, Section A2003_039_001_006, TRT: 0:31:27 ?

Useni Eugene Perkins talks about starting "The Black Child Journal," a scholarly journal featuring articles on black youth. In 1982, Perkins was an executive consultant in Chicago with INESU Consultants. In 1986, he became the social director for the Chicago Urban League, and two years later became the chief executive officer of the Urban League of Portland, Oregon. Returning to Chicago in 1990 as the interim president of the DuSable Museum of African American History, Perkins founded the Association for the Positive Development of African American Youth in 1991. Working with HistoryMaker Dolores Cross, Perkins became the project director of the Family Life Center at Chicago State University. Perkins' greatest concern for the black community is the rising number of incarcerated young people and he stresses the importance of strengthening educational programs for black youth. Perkins wants to be remembered as a good person. Perkins reflects upon his legacy and concludes by narrating his photographs.