

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with George N'Namdi

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	N'Namdi, George R.
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with George N'Namdi,
Dates:	January 18, 2005 and January 20, 2005
Bulk Dates:	2005
Physical Description:	9 Betacame SP videocassettes (4:25:52).
Abstract:	Art gallery owner George N'Namdi (1946 -) founded with his wife the Nataki Talibah Schoolhouse, an independent school in Detroit that emphasized transcendental meditation and the arts. In 1992, N'Namdi opened the G.R. N'Namdi Gallery in Detroit that later expanded to Chicago and New York. N'Namdi was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on January 18, 2005 and January 20, 2005, in Detroit, Michigan. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2005_018
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Art dealer and educator George R. N'Namdi was born September 12, 1946, in Columbus, Ohio; his grandfather, Rev. Langdon E. Johnson was a noted businessman and “race man” in West Virginia. N'Namdi's father, George R. Johnson, a postal worker, helped N'Namdi’s mother, Ima Jo Winson Johnson, open three beauty shops. Fascinated by earning money, N'Namdi worked several jobs while attending Felton Elementary School, and Franklin and Champion Junior High Schools. N'Namdi graduated from Columbus East High School in 1965. Changing his major from accounting to education, N'Namdi graduated from Ohio State University in 1970; he earned his master’s degree in education and another in psychology before obtaining his Ph.D. in psychology from the University of Michigan in 1974.

In 1970, N'Namdi was appointed regional education director for Head Start in Southwestern Ohio. When he moved to Ann Arbor in 1972 to work on his graduate degrees in psychology, N'Namdi became involved with the Black Student Psychological Association and cultural thinkers such as Geneva Smitherman and Niara Sudarkasa. During this period, N'Namdi and his wife changed their surnames to N'Namdi, which means “father’s name lives on” in the Ibo language of Eastern Nigeria. In the mid seventies, N'Namdi served as a therapist at Milan Federal Prison and taught courses at the University of Michigan. In 1978, N'Namdi and his wife Carmen founded the Nataki Talibah School House; the Detroit based independent grade school, named for their late daughter, consistently outperformed local and state schools while teaching transcendental meditation and emphasizing the arts.

N'Namdi began collecting art in 1968; with a partner, in 1981, he opened Jazzonia Gallery. In 1982 N'Namdi launched his family based G.R. N'Namdi Gallery; he later expanded his holdings to include galleries in Chicago and in New York City. N'Namdi’s son, Jumaane, manages the Chicago gallery and his daughter, Kemba, helps with the Detroit site. While exhibiting the works of artists Hughie Lee Smith, James VanDerZee, Allie McGhee,

and Barbara Chase Riboud, N'Namdi is creating a \$3 million dollar complex in Detroit's Cultural Center arts district.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with George N'Namdi was conducted by Larry Crowe on January 18, 2005 and January 20, 2005, in Detroit, Michigan, and was recorded on 9 Betacame SP videocassettes. Art gallery owner George N'Namdi (1946 -) founded with his wife the Nataki Talibah Schoolhouse, an independent school in Detroit that emphasized transcendental meditation and the arts. In 1992, N'Namdi opened the G.R. N'Namdi Gallery in Detroit that later expanded to Chicago and 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:

N'Namdi, George R.

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

N'Namdi, George R.--Interviews

Art--Collectors and collecting--Interviews

Art dealers--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Art Gallery Owner

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 George N'Namdi, January 18, 2005 and January 20, 2005. 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).

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 George N'Namdi, Section A2005_018_001_001, TRT: 0:29:29 ?

George N'Namdi was born on September 12, 1946 in Columbus, Ohio. His mother, Ima Jo Winson Johnson, was born in Wichita Falls, Texas and her family was from Louisiana. Johnson worked in the government in Columbus, Ohio before opening her own beauty parlor. N'Namdi's father, George Richard Johnson, was born on July 27, 1918 in Rand or Charleston, West Virginia. Johnson's father, Langdon Elwood Johnson, was born in 1872 in Syracuse, Ohio and graduated from Wilberforce University in 1898 with a degree in ministry. His father was named Rush Johnson. Langdon Johnson opened a shoe repair business in West Virginia in 1905. N'Namdi's father had a philosophical personality, attended West Virginia State University in Institute, West Virginia, and joined the U.S. Army. N'Namdi's uncle, Langdon Johnson, II, was a Tuskegee Airman who was shot down during World War II. N'Namdi's parents met while his father was stationed in Texas, and they moved to Columbus, Ohio to the house N'Namdi's family owned for five generations.

Art--Collectors and collecting--Interviews

Art dealers--Interviews

Video Oral History Interview with George N'Namdi, Section A2005_018_001_002, TRT: 0:29:41 ?

George N'Namdi reflects on his parents' personalities. His father, George Richard Johnson, was serious and philosophical. Once he started his family, he gave up smoking and drinking. Johnson was an avid churchgoer, reader, and baseball player who worked as a lineman for the railroad and at the post office. N'Namdi's mother, Ima Jo Winson Johnson, worked for the government before opening her own hair salon, Ima's Beauty Shop. By the 1960s, she owned two separate locations in Columbus, Ohio. N'Namdi reflects on how his mother's example encouraged his own entrepreneurship. He also recalls watching his father play baseball, the food his family ate, listening to blues music, taking food to the mental institution on Saturdays, and the plots of land his family owned around the city. N'Namdi is the third of his parents' eight children, who are named Sandra, Langdon, Patricia, Jackie, Larry, Kathy, and Rita.

Video Oral History Interview with George N'Namdi, Section A2005_018_001_003, TRT: 0:29:29 ?

George N'Namdi grew up in Columbus, Ohio as one of eight siblings. He recalls forming a small group with his siblings to play mischievous pranks in their neighborhood. N'Namdi attended Felton Elementary School, and in the second or third grade he began to earn money by going to the store for his neighbors and the customers in his mother's beauty shop. He also earned money by collecting bottles, having a paper route, and shoveling snow. When he was ten years old, N'Namdi became interested in fashion and decided to wear suits and nice Italian clothes instead of jeans. N'Namdi attended Franklin Junior High School and Champion Junior High School, where he became rebellious and was mentored by a teacher named Mert Woods. He also attended Columbus East High School, where he focused less and less on his studies. While in high school, N'Namdi was a successful entrepreneur and was able to purchase a diamond ring that led to his nickname, "Seven Rock."

Video Oral History Interview with George N'Namdi, Section A2005_018_001_004, TRT: 0:28:51 ?

George N'Namdi attended Columbus East High School where he was known as the "money" person. He would spend time listening to The Impressions. He did not play sports, but often clashed with the wrestling coach who wanted N'Namdi to join the team. N'Namdi made seventy-five dollars per week in 1964 working at the A&P grocery store and running a janitorial business. During his senior

year of high school, N'Namdi began taking business and accounting classes and became a better student with plans to attend college at Tennessee A and I University in Nashville, Tennessee. N'Namdi's mentor, Mert Woods, convinced him to instead move to Milwaukee, Wisconsin to live with and work for professor Ernest Spaight, who tutored him in English, arts, and history. N'Namdi graduated from high school in 1965 and attended the Milwaukee Institute of Technology. After a year, N'Namdi decided to move back to Ohio; and, in 1966, he enrolled at The Ohio State University in Columbus, Ohio.

Video Oral History Interview with George N'Namdi, Section A2005_018_001_005, TRT: 0:29:27 ?

George N'Namdi enrolled at The Ohio State University in Columbus, Ohio in 1966. In high school, N'Namdi and two of his friends ran a business called "The Elegants", hosting dances at the Neil House in Columbus. N'Namdi recalls negotiating with the hotel over a dance they claimed had not been booked and the pride he felt in convincing them to honor their commitment. He continued to host dances in college, including one for the Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity where the O'Jays performed. After a few years studying accounting, N'Namdi became an education major and began teaching night school. He reflects on racism and the African American community at The Ohio State University and in Columbus. N'Namdi received his bachelor's degree in 1970 and became the regional education director for the Head Start Program in Columbus, Ohio. He worked his way up to Assistant State Training Officer for the program at the University of Cincinnati before returning to The Ohio State University and receiving his master's degree in 1972.

Video Oral History Interview with George N'Namdi, Section A2005_018_002_006, TRT: 0:29:43 ?

George N'Namdi married Carmen Kiner in 1971 and received his master's degree in counseling education from The Ohio State University in Columbus, Ohio in 1972. In September of 1972, N'Namdi enrolled at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, Michigan to study for his Ph.D. in psychology, where his professors included Klaus Riegel and HistoryMaker Niara Sudarkasa. He was also advised by Geneva Smitherman, a professor from Wayne State University in Detroit, Michigan. N'Namdi was active in the Black Student Psychological Association, through which he volunteered as a therapist at Milan Federal Prison. N'Namdi compares the environments of Ohio State University and the University of Michigan, which he felt was more encouraging to its students. N'Namdi's dissertation research focused on how two-parent families with two children communicate, spend time with, and pass on information to each other. N'Namdi also taught and designed classes for the Department of Psychology.

Video Oral History Interview with George N'Namdi, Section A2005_018_002_007, TRT: 0:29:08 ?

George N'Namdi and his wife, Carmen N'Namdi, decided to create a school in memory of their daughter, Nataki Talibah, who died accidentally on a playground in November of 1974. Their school would be centered on N'Namdi's philosophy of "the norm," which would treat African Americans, rather than European-Americans, as the norm rather than subordinate to white American culture. After searching for a location for their school, N'Namdi moved to Detroit, Michigan, where he and his wife opened the Nataki Talibah Schoolhouse in 1978. N'Namdi explains the school's relationship to the Council of Independent Black Institutions at that time and how it has become a charter school. He elaborates on the philosophy behind the school, including how the school would teach racism and the Montgomery Bus Boycott. While starting the school, N'Namdi taught at Wayne State University in Detroit, Michigan while driving the school's van.

Video Oral History Interview with George N'Namdi, Section A2005_018_002_008, TRT: 0:28:52 ?

George N'Namdi founded the Natakih Talibah Schoolhouse in Detroit, Michigan in 1978 with his wife, Carmen N'Namdi. He talks about the changes in the school as it has grown, attracted new students, and become a charter school. N'Namdi also describes the opportunities that students have at the school to take trips to Chicago, Illinois and Washington, D.C., as well as to interact with cultural figures like Romare Bearden, Lois Mailou Jones, and HistoryMaker Diahann Carroll. N'Namdi describes the school's practice of "age grading," where different rights and responsibilities are given to students depending on their grade level, and how the school prepares students for high school. N'Namdi also comments his appointment at Wayne State University in Detroit, Michigan and his history as an art and antiques collector at The Ohio State University in Columbus, Ohio.

Video Oral History Interview with George N'Namdi, Section A2005_018_002_009, TRT: 0:31:12 ?

George N'Namdi opened the Jazzonia Gallery in Detroit, Michigan in 1981 with his business partner Rosalind Reed. In 1983, the gallery changed its name to the G.R. N'Namdi Gallery. The gallery grew into two locations in Detroit before moving to Birmingham, Michigan and later opening locations in Chicago, Illinois and New York City, New York. The gallery acquired a reputation for abstract art by African American artists. Artists who have been featured in the gallery include Al Loving, Allie McGhee, Nanette Carter, Vicente Pementel, Tyrone Mitchell, James Little, and William T. Williams, as well as HistoryMakers Edward Clark, Howardena Pindell, Richard Hunt, and Artis Lane. Most of the art in the gallery is on consignment and the exhibitions travel among the gallery's locations in different cities. N'Namdi reflects on the market for African American art and the success of his galleries. He ends the interview by reflecting on his legacy, his parents, his lack of regrets, and how he would like to be remembered.