

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Malvyn Johnson

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Johnson, Mal, 1924-
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Malvyn Johnson,
Dates:	January 31, 2006 and September 20, 2005
Bulk Dates:	2005 and 2006
Physical Description:	8 Betacame SP videocassettes (3:37:07).
Abstract:	Media consultant and television and radio correspondent Malvyn Johnson (1924 - 2007) was the first female reporter for Cox Radio and Television News Bureau in Washington, D.C. and the second African American female White House correspondent. In 2000, Johnson founded Medialinx International, a media consulting firm. Johnson was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on January 31, 2006 and September 20, 2005, in Alexandria, Virginia. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2005_219
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Journalist and civil rights activist Malvyn “Mal” Johnson was born July 4, 1924, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Johnson and her four siblings, Alice, Artie, Harvey and Norma, were primarily raised by their mother, Johnnie Reeves Taft, because their father left the family when Malvyn was still young; her mother would later remarry. Johnson attended Temple University, where she earned her B.A. degree while working to pay her own way through school as a riveter in the naval yards, among other jobs.

After graduation, Johnson began working for Veterans Affairs before moving on to become the program director for the local YWCA. Johnson soon married her husband, Frank Benjamin Johnson, whom she had known since she was twelve years old; the couple moved to California until the Korean War separated them, and Johnson was forced to return to her hometown. Because of her husband's service in the Air Force, Johnson and her husband traveled extensively beginning in the mid-1950s, including periods in Redding, England, Maine, and Wyoming. While traveling, Johnson began to teach.

Johnson returned to the United States to attend Springfield University in Massachusetts, where she received her M.A. degree in intergroup relations and community dynamics. Johnson’s husband tragically died at the Westover Air Force Base during the Vietnam War, and Johnson continued teaching. Prior to moving back to Philadelphia, Johnson got a job at the Philadelphia Inquirer as the assistant to the editor; at this time, she also became heavily involved in the Civil Rights Movement.

Johnson eventually left the Philadelphia Inquirer to work with the North City Congress, a Civil Rights organization in Philadelphia, where she worked for two years alongside such luminaries as C. Delores Tucker; she also served as a co-chair of the local NAACP chapter with Tucker. In 1964, Johnson became director of community affairs for

WKBS-TV, and worked as the "Cash for Trash" girl. Johnson soon became a news anchor and wrote as a columnist for the Philadelphia Tribune.

In 1969, Johnson was offered a job at Cox Broadcasting Corporation in Washington, D.C. after Barbara Walters and Jim Vance, both close colleagues of Johnson, encouraged her to take the position; she stayed with this organization for twenty-seven years. Johnson was the first female reporter employed by Cox and became the second African American female White House correspondent. Johnson covered five different United States Presidents, as well as Capitol Hill and the State Department. In 1980, Johnson became the Senior Washington Correspondent and the National Director of Community Affairs. Johnson also served as a representative of the United Nations International Association of Women in Radio and Television. Johnson also helped to found the National Association of Black Journalists, and the National Broadcast Association for Community Affairs. In 2000, Johnson left Cox to create her own media consulting firm, Medialinx International.

Malvyn "Mal" Johnson passed away on November 7, 2007, at the age of eighty-five.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Malvyn Johnson was conducted by Paul Brock on January 31, 2006 and September 20, 2005, in Alexandria, Virginia, and was recorded on 8 Betacame SP videocassettes. Media consultant and television and radio correspondent Malvyn Johnson (1924 - 2007) was the first female reporter for Cox Radio and Television News Bureau in Washington, D.C. and the second African American female White House correspondent. In 2000, Johnson founded Medialinx International, a media consulting firm.

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:

Johnson, Mal, 1924-

Brock, Paul (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews
Johnson, Mal, 1924---Interviews

African American women civil rights workers--Interviews

African American women journalists--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Media Consultant

Television and Radio Correspondent

HistoryMakers® Category:

MediaMakers

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 Malvyn Johnson, January 31, 2006 and September 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 Malvyn Johnson, Section A2005_219_001_001, TRT: 0:28:31 ?

Malvyn Johnson was born on July 4, 1924 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania to Johnnie Reeves Arnold. Her maternal grandmother, Mary Reeves, and grandfather, John Reeves, were born in Guthrie, Kentucky where her grandfather was a coal miner. Johnson's mother was born in Louisville, Kentucky in 1905, but raised in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. After Johnson's parents married, they moved to Philadelphia, where her father worked at the Pennsylvania Railroad. When Johnson was seven years old, her father left the family, and her mother became a seamstress. Johnson started school a year early while her mother worked, but had to repeat kindergarten. She attended the diverse James Elverson, Jr. School, and watched movies at the New Jewel movie theater. When Johnson was fourteen years old, her mother married Arnold Taft, a former carnival worker at the Ringling Bros. and Barnum and Bailey Circus. He took her and her five siblings to the circus each year. He was born in South Carolina, and worked at Horn and Hardart restaurant.

African American women civil rights workers--Interviews.

African American women journalists--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with Malvyn Johnson, Section A2005_219_001_002, TRT: 0:29:20 ?

Malvyn Johnson attended James Elverson, Jr. School in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania where she won a citywide writing contest sponsored by the Pennsylvania Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. At the award ceremony, the presenter refused to believe that she was the contest winner because of her race. As a teenager, Johnson worked with her mother, Johnnie Reeves Arnold, at a garment factory. At the predominately white Philadelphia High School for Girls, Johnson faced racial prejudice from her classmates, but she received encouragement from her teachers. After graduation, she attended Temple University. Johnson worked at Sears, Roebuck and Co., and as a riveter at the Philadelphia Naval Shipyard to pay for school. Upon graduating, Johnson became the program director at the Young Women's Christian Association, and married Frank Johnson who served in the U.S. Army Air Corps. They lived on Hamilton Air Force Base in California where Johnson worked as a housekeeper even though she did not know how to cook.

Video Oral History Interview with Malvyn Johnson, Section A2005_219_001_003, TRT: 0:31:11 ?

Malvyn Johnson worked as a housekeeper at the Hamilton Air Force Base in California, while her husband worked as a bartender. There, Johnson learned to cook foods like artichokes, and how to frost a birthday cake. Then, her husband was reassigned to the Royal Air Force Greenham Common in Reading, England,

where she taught elementary school on base. At the end of the tour, they moved to Westover Air Reserve Base in Massachusetts. While there, Johnson's husband passed away, and she returned to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, where she learned to drive and provide for herself. She secured a position at the Philadelphia Inquirer, and became involved with the Civil Rights Movement as the head of the North City Congress. She coordinated the group's transportation to the March on Washington in 1963, and met Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Johnson then became the director of community affairs at WKBS-TV, where she fundraised and hosted the television show, 'Let's Talk About It.'

Video Oral History Interview with Malvyn Johnson, Section A2005_219_001_004, TRT: 0:27:40 ?

Malvyn Johnson worked as the director of community affairs at WKBS-TV in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Initially, she was assigned a co-director, due to the network executives' racial and gender biases. However, the co-director was soon fired, and Johnson proved she could manage alone. Through her work with the American Women in Radio and Television, Johnson met author Pearl Buck, and fellow journalists Barbara Walters and Jim Vance. Impressed by her credentials, J. Leonard Reinsch offered Johnson a position with Cox Broadcasting Corporation in Washington, D.C. She was then trained as a White House correspondent, and became the sole woman and African American working on Capitol Hill. One of Johnson's first interviews was with Senator Richard B. Russell, Jr. She later taught journalism at the University of Nairobi in Kenya; travelled with columnist Ethel Payne; and accompanied President Richard Nixon to Russia, where she was arrested as a suspected terrorist.

Video Oral History Interview with Malvyn Johnson, Section A2005_219_002_005, TRT: 0:29:30 ?

Malvyn Johnson met politician C. Delores Tucker in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania during the Civil Rights Movement. Together, they worked with Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and were co-chairs of the NAACP chapter in Philadelphia. During the 1970s, Johnson worked as a journalist for Cox Broadcasting Corporation in Washington, D.C., which was owned by James M. Cox. She became a White House correspondent, interviewing members of the Congressional Black Caucus such as Yvonne Brathwaite Burke and Andrew Young. She often entertained politicians at her home in the Watergate Complex, where she often assigned Donald Rumsfeld to wash the dishes, and James Brady cooked chili for her guests. Johnson and her fellow journalists founded the Washington Association of Black Journalists; and, from that organization, the National Association of Black Journalists was formed, with Johnson serving as their treasurer for several years. She also remembers her mentors, reporters Helen Thomas and Sarah McClendon.

Video Oral History Interview with Malvyn Johnson, Section A2005_219_002_006, TRT: 0:29:30 ?

Malvyn Johnson worked as a White House correspondent from the 1970s to the 1990s. While covering Richard Nixon's presidential campaign, Johnson travelled with Vice President Spiro Agnew to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, where they were met by protestors. She reported on the Watergate scandal and United Airlines Flight 553 crash in 1972, and was also assigned to interview Admiral Elmo Zumwalt and U.S. Secretary of State Alexander Haig regarding their role in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. While reporting on the White House, Johnson became acquainted with first ladies Rosalynn Carter, Betty Ford, Nancy Reagan and Barbara Bush. She also recalls her first meeting with President James Earl "Jimmy" Carter, Jr., which took place at a press dinner while he was the governor of Georgia. In addition to her career as a political journalist, Johnson curated art exhibitions with social themes, and served as president of the Washington, D.C. chapter of the American Women in Radio and Television

organization.

Video Oral History Interview with Malvyn Johnson, Section A2005_219_002_007, TRT: 0:31:10 ?

Malvyn Johnson was a member of several women's rights organizations, including the American Women in Radio and Television organization; and also served on the United Nations' media committee. She represented the International Association of Women in Radio and Television at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, China, which was attended by Hillary Rodham Clinton, Barbara Bush and Noeleen Heyzer, who was the executive director of the United Nations Development Fund for Women. During 1990s and 2000s, Johnson worked to improve women's working conditions in the federal government and Corporate America, through collaborations with politician Hillary Rodham Clinton; the National Council of Women's Organizations; and the Communications Consortium Media Center in Washington, D.C. Johnson reflects upon her hopes and concerns for the African American community, and how she would be remembered. She also narrates her photographs.

Video Oral History Interview with Malvyn Johnson, Section A2005_219_002_008, TRT: 0:10:15 ?

Malvyn Johnson narrates her photographs.