

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Jeff Henderson

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Henderson, Jeff
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Jeff Henderson,
Dates:	April 7, 2007
Bulk Dates:	2007
Physical Description:	5 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:20:51).
Abstract:	Chef and nonprofit chief executive Jeff Henderson (-) was a convicted drug dealer that became a head chef at Caesars Palace in Las Vegas, Nevada. He also founded a non-profit organization called The Westside Group. Henderson was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on April 7, 2007, in Las Vegas, Nevada. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2007_128
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Chef Jeffery Henderson was born in 1964 in the Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles, California to June Marie Giles, a welder, and Charles Henderson, Jr. Raised by a singer mother, Henderson was born months before the Watts Riots of 1965. Henderson attended several elementary and junior high schools including Toluca Lake Elementary School in North Hollywood, California and Hamilton Junior High School in Long Beach, California. While attending John Muir Junior High in Burbank, California, he met a cousin who was a drug dealer and started selling drugs.

Henderson grew up on the tough streets of South Central, Los Angeles and San Diego in areas where local gangs battled daily. In the early 1980s, Henderson moved to San Diego, along with his mother and sister, and his drug dealing habits increased. He earned as much as \$35,000 a week dealing cocaine in San Diego. Then, in 1988, when Henderson was twenty four years old, the police arrested one of his couriers with \$40,000 in cash and a large amount of cocaine. The paperwork led them directly to Henderson, who received a sentence of ten years and seven months in prison. In 1989, Henderson entered prison. While incarcerated, Henderson developed a passion for cooking and was committed to turning his life around. He watched news programs on television, read the "L.A. Times," "USA Today," self-help books and took business courses. He also worked in prison kitchens, starting as a dishwasher and eventually preparing meals as a chef. In 1992, Henderson was transferred to Nellis Air Force Base and worked in the dining hall. Henderson was accepted into the Culinary Training School for inmates at Maxwell Air Force Base in Alabama.

In 1997, Henderson left prison and his attempt to find employment proved fruitless. Henderson was hired as a dishwasher, and then was promoted to line cook. He moved on to other Los Angeles area restaurants, studying menus and books, and ultimately he was hired at the Ritz-Carlton in Marina Del Rey, Hotel Bel-Air in Los Angeles and the L'Ermitage Hotel in Beverly Hills. Soon, he moved to Las Vegas, and after numerous rejections won a job with Caesars Palace. Within the year, Henderson was promoted to head chef. He became Executive Chef at Café

Bellagio in Las Vegas. By 2001, Henderson was honored as Chef of the Year by the American Food and Wine Tasting Federation, and soon established The Westside Group, a non-profit organization to help troubled kids. In 2007, he published his memoir, "Cooked: From the Streets to the Stove, from Cocaine to Foie Gras." Henderson focuses on giving back to his community with "The Chef Jeff Project," in which he takes six at-risk young adults and commits to turning their lives around by putting them to work in his catering company, Posh Urban Cuisine.

Jeff Henderson resides in Las Vegas with his wife and three children. Jeff Henderson was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* April 7, 2007.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Jeff Henderson was conducted by Paul Brock on April 7, 2007, in Las Vegas, Nevada, and was recorded on 5 Betacame SP videocassettes. Chef and nonprofit chief executive Jeff Henderson (-) was a convicted drug dealer that became a head chef at Caesars Palace in Las Vegas, Nevada. He also founded a non-profit organization called The Westside Group.

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:

Henderson, Jeff

Brock, Paul (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews
Henderson, Jeff--Interviews

African American cooks--Interviews.

African American authors--Interviews.

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Nonprofit Executive

HistoryMakers® Category:

CivicMakers

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 Jeff Henderson, April 7, 2007. 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 Jeff Henderson, Section A2007_128_001_001, TRT: 0:28:19 ?

Jeff Henderson was born in 1964 in Los Angeles, California to June Giles Henderson and Charles Henderson, Jr. His parents were both born in New Orleans, Louisiana. There, Henderson's mother was raised by her aunt, because her father was abusive and her mother had poor mental health. After Henderson's mother was molested by a teacher, her aunt arranged for her to marry Henderson's father and move to Los Angeles. There, they had two children, including Henderson; and eventually divorced because of his mother's alcoholism. After the separation, Henderson and his sister, Junell Henderson, lived in North Hollywood, where their mother worked as a home health aide for a white woman. They began their education as the only African American students at the wealthy Toluca Lake Elementary School. After Henderson's maternal uncle was deployed to serve in the U.S. Navy, Henderson's mother brought him and his sister to live with their aunt and cousins in San Diego, California.

African American children--Social life and customs.

African American children--Education (Elementary)--California--Los Angeles.

African American families--California--Los Angeles.

African American neighborhoods--California--Los Angeles--History--20th century.

African American single mothers.

African American neighborhoods--California--San Diego--History--20th century.

Public housing.

Video Oral History Interview with Jeff Henderson, Section A2007_128_001_002, TRT: 0:29:02 ?

Jeff Henderson moved as a young teenager to his father's home in the Culver City neighborhood of Los Angeles, California. There, he enrolled at Palms Junior High School, and was expelled for stealing twenty dollars. His family then moved to Long Beach, California, where he enrolled at Alexander Hamilton Junior High School. He excelled in drafting class, but was suspended for selling fireworks at school. After graduating to David Starr Jordan High School, Henderson began stealing bicycles and breaking into homes, and was arrested for the first time at fifteen years old. Eventually, Henderson was stabbed and his sister became pregnant, and they returned to live with their mother in San Diego, California. There, Henderson was mentored by local drug dealer Thess Good, and started selling marijuana at Abraham Lincoln High School. After receiving a certificate of completion there in 1982, Henderson began selling crack cocaine, and soon became a supplier for other dealers in the San Diego drug market.

African American fathers.

African Americans--California--Los Angeles--Social life and customs.

Violence--California--Los Angeles--History--20th century.

African American students.

Selling--Drugs.

Gang members--California--Los Angeles--Attitudes.

Los Angeles City School District.

Video Oral History Interview with Jeff Henderson, Section A2007_128_001_003, TRT: 0:28:54 ?

Jeff Henderson learned to cook crack cocaine, and cornered the drug market in San Diego, California by the age of twenty-one years old. He established good relations with the local gangs to promote his business, but never participated in gang-related violence. Henderson's mother, June Giles Henderson, was suspicious of his new wealth, but thankful for the financial assistance; and his sister, Junell Henderson, helped with his operations. Eventually, one of his associates was caught transporting drugs; and, in 1988, Henderson was sentenced to nineteen years in prison. He was sent to the Terminal Island Federal Correctional Institution in Los Angeles, California, where he reunited with numerous friends who were incarcerated. While in prison, Henderson was introduced to African American history through the Nation of Islam, and learned from white inmates who had worked in business. He spent much of his time in the law library, watching the news and reading books like Henry Kissinger's 'American Foreign Policy.'

Gang members--California--Los Angeles--Attitudes.

African American families--California--Los Angeles.

Drugs.

Prisons--United States.

Farrakhan, Louis.

African American Muslims--History--20th century.

African American children--Social life and customs--Nevada.

Nation of Islam (Chicago, Ill.)--History.

Imprisonment.

Video Oral History Interview with Jeff Henderson, Section A2007_128_001_004, TRT: 0:29:00 ?

Jeff Henderson began his prison sentence in 1988 at the Terminal Island Federal Correctional Institution, where he worked in the kitchen under an inmate named Big Roy. He was later sent to the Federal Prison Camp at Nellis Air Force Base in Las Vegas, Nevada, where he was mentored by the head cook, Friendly Womack, Jr. Henderson requested a transfer to the Maxwell Air Force Base, which offered a culinary program, but it was cancelled before he arrived. Instead, he attended a drug treatment program in Sheridan, Oregon. Henderson was released to a halfway house in Los Angeles in 1996; and married Womack's niece, Stacy Womack Henderson, the following year. Chef Robert Gadsby hired Henderson as a dishwasher, and taught him to succeed in the business world. Henderson was eventually promoted to line cook, and went on to secure a position at the Los Angeles Airport Marriott. After three months there, he was invited to help open Marriott's Altitude Sky Lounge in San Diego, California.

Prisons--United States.

Prisoners--United States.

Imprisonment--United States.

African American criminals--California--Los Angeles

African American cooks.

African American families--Nevada--Las Vegas.

Video Oral History Interview with Jeff Henderson, Section A2007_128_001_005, TRT: 0:25:36 ?

Jeff Henderson learned a variety of cuisines while working at The Ritz-Carlton, Hotel Bel-Air and Viceroy L'Hermitage Beverly Hills hotels in California. He then moved to Las Vegas, Nevada, where he had difficulty finding work because of his criminal record. Eventually, he was hired at Caesar's Palace; and, within

three months, became the restaurant's first African American chef de cuisine. Next, Henderson worked for a brief time as the first black chef of the steakhouse at the Hard Rock Hotel, and then became a personal chef to celebrity clients like Terry Lewis, Tavis Smiley and Tisha Campbell-Martin. He went on to work as the executive sous chef, and then executive chef of the Café Bellagio. Henderson recalls being approached by Will Smith about turning his memoir, 'Cooked,' into a movie; and talks about his plans for the future. He describes how he would like to be remembered, and concludes the interview by narrating his photographs.

African American cooks.

Hotel restaurants.

African American families--Nevada--Las Vegas.

African Americans--Nevada--Las Vegas--Social life and customs.

Ritz-Carlton Hotels (Firm).

African American authors.

Food Network (Firm).