

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Deborah Roberts

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Roberts, Deborah, 1960-
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Deborah Roberts,
Dates:	February 26, 2008 and July 26, 2007
Bulk Dates:	2007 and 2008
Physical Description:	9 Betacame SP videocassettes (3:47:10).
Abstract:	Television news reporter and television news correspondent Deborah Roberts (1960 -) worked for the news magazines Dateline NBC and 20/20. She also served as substitute anchor on ABC's Good Morning America and World News Weekend. Roberts was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on February 26, 2008 and July 26, 2007, in New York, New York. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2007_213
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

One of the top black women in broadcast journalism, Deborah Roberts has worked as an anchor, a talk show host, and a reporter. Born on September 20, 1960 in the small town of Perry, Georgia, Roberts was one of nine children. Her father, Ben Roberts, owned a carpet installation business. Even as a girl, Roberts admired television newscasters and dreamed of making it big. She attended the University of Georgia and graduated in 1982 with her B.A. degree in journalism.

After graduating from college, Roberts began working at WTVM-TV in Columbus, Georgia. She later worked in Knoxville, Tennessee for a time, and then, in 1987, moved to WFTV-TV, ABC-TV's Orlando affiliate. In Orlando, Roberts became a bureau chief and served as the station's field anchor at NASA during shuttle launches. She also co-anchored the weekend news. The *Orlando Sentinel* named Roberts the top local female anchor.

In 1990, Roberts began working for NBC news as a general assignment reporter for the Atlanta and Miami bureaus. She traveled to the Middle East in the wake of the Gulf War. In 1992, she went to Barcelona to cover the Summer Olympics and her coverage later garnered her a Sports Emmy. Later that year, when NBC started the newsmagazine *Dateline NBC*, Roberts was picked as a reporter for the show. She also worked as substitute anchor on the evening news. After five years at NBC, three of them with *Dateline NBC*, Roberts returned to ABC, as a correspondent for *Dateline NBC*'s rival show, *20/20*. In her time on *20/20*, Roberts has reported on such varied topics as sexual abuse in the Amish community, the plight of refugees in Rwanda and manic depression in young children. She did a segment on the emotional journey of African Americans returning to the places in Africa where their ancestors were held as slaves as well as an interview with baseball's Darryl Strawberry exploring the destructiveness of alcohol abuse. She has also worked as a substitute anchor on other ABC shows, including *Good Morning America* and *World News Weekend*. Roberts' work is widely acclaimed, and she has received the Clarion Award for excellence in communications.

Roberts married NBC weatherman Al Roker in 1995. The couple now lives in New York City with their children.

Roberts was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on July 26, 2007.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Deborah Roberts was conducted by Julieanna L. Richardson and Tonya Lee on February 26, 2008 and July 26, 2007, in New York, New York, and was recorded on 9 Betacame SP videocassettes. Television news reporter and television news correspondent Deborah Roberts (1960 -) worked for the news magazines Dateline NBC and 20/20. She also served as substitute anchor on ABC's Good Morning America and World News Weekend.

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:

Roberts, Deborah, 1960-

Lee, Tonya (Interviewer)

Richardson, Julieanna L. (Interviewer)

Burghelea, Neculai (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Roberts, Deborah, 1960---Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Television News Reporter

Television News 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 Deborah Roberts, February 26, 2008 and July 26, 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 Deborah Roberts, Section A2007_213_001_001, TRT: 0:30:53 ?

Deborah Roberts was born on September 20, 1960 in Perry, Georgia to Ruth Kaigler Roberts and Benjamin Roberts, Sr. Roberts' father was born in Houston County, Georgia. His mother passed away when he was a boy, so his older sisters helped raise him. Roberts' maternal grandmother died when Roberts' mother was an infant. As a result, Roberts' mother was raised by her father, an entrepreneur, and her stepmother, with whom she had a strained relationship. Both of Roberts' parents had children from previous marriages before they met and married in Perry, where Roberts grew up in a low income, tightly-knit household, with her eight siblings. She felt closest to her brother, Benjamin Roberts, Jr., and her two younger sisters, Bonita Jackson and Belinda Spellman. In Perry, she was a member of New Hope Baptist Church, where she sang in the choir. She attended the all-black Houston County Training School, until the district integrated. As a young girl, Roberts was introspective; and aspired to leave small town Georgia.

Video Oral History Interview with Deborah Roberts, Section A2007_213_001_002, TRT: 0:31:12 ?

Deborah Roberts integrated Perry Elementary School in Perry, Georgia in 1969, after four years at the all-black Houston County Training School. She admired her fifth grade teacher, Dorothy Hardy, whose high standards inspired Roberts to excel in class. At Perry Junior High School, Roberts was one of few African American students who joined the cheerleading squad; and she continued to cheerlead at Perry High School. She recalls instances of interracial dating; and being teased about her darker skin color. In 1978, she matriculated at the University of Georgia in Athens, Georgia where she experienced racism. Although she considered majoring in drama, Roberts fell in love with broadcast journalism. She was inspired by anchorwoman Carole Simpson and Atlanta journalist Monica Pearson, who spoke to one of Roberts' classes at the university's Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communication.

Video Oral History Interview with Deborah Roberts, Section A2007_213_001_003, TRT: 0:24:51 ?

Deborah Roberts interned for Georgia Public Television while enrolled at the Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Georgia in Athens, Georgia. Upon graduating, Roberts was hired as a reporter for WTVM-TV in Columbus, Georgia. After two years there, she moved to WBIR-TV in Knoxville, Tennessee; then joined the news team at the ABC affiliate, WFTV-TV, in Orlando, Florida, where she covered NASA space shuttle launches. Then, she was hired by NBC's talent and recruitment director, Elena Nachmanoff, as an NBC News correspondent at the NBC bureau in Miami, Florida, where she reported on issues affecting the nation's Southeast region. In 1991, Roberts went on assignment to Kuwait, where she spent a month covering the Persian Gulf War. As a result, she earned more respect as a news correspondent. Roberts also worked on 'Dateline NBC'; and with Tom Brokaw on 'NBC Nightly News.' In the mid-1990s, Barbara Walters hired her on the ABC News program, '20/20.'

Video Oral History Interview with Deborah Roberts, Section A2007_213_001_004, TRT: 0:14:40 ?

Deborah Roberts went on assignment to Kuwait as an NBC News correspondent to cover the Persian Gulf War in 1991. Along with her producer and film crew, Roberts traveled to Kuwait by way of Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, the location of NBC's Middle Eastern bureau. In Kuwait, they stayed in a dilapidated hotel, without electricity or running water. During her month-long stay in the Middle East, Roberts gathered compelling stories, such as the lack of medical care for

people who were affected by the war and the state of an abandoned zoo, which were featured in on 'The Today Show.' She also attended a news conference held by Emir Jaber al-Ahmad al-Sabah. As a person of color, Roberts felt more accepted by Kuwaitis. Roberts concludes this part of the interview by describing the management hierarchy of television networks, where the president of news oversees the executive staff comprised of bureau chiefs and producers.

Video Oral History Interview with Deborah Roberts, Section A2007_213_002_005, TRT: 0:27:41 ?

Deborah Roberts attended the University of Georgia in Athens, Georgia, where she befriended students at the Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communication. NBC Vice President Don Browne hired her as an NBC News correspondent in 1990, after she worked as a reporter for WTVM-TV in Columbus, Georgia; WBIR-TV in Knoxville, Tennessee; and WFTV-TV in Orlando, Florida. During her first year there, she went on assignment to Kuwait to cover the Persian Gulf War. Upon returning to the United States, she worked on a series about middle-class America for 'NBC Nightly News' with Tom Brokaw. She also worked on the news program 'Dateline NBC,' which competed with CBS' '60 Minutes' and ABC's '20/20.' While filling in on the news desk at 'The Today Show' with Deborah Norville, Roberts met her future husband, weatherman Al Roker, who was substituting for Willard Scott. She recalls her first impression of Roker, who was friendlier than other network television journalists she had previously met.

Video Oral History Interview with Deborah Roberts, Section A2007_213_002_006, TRT: 0:31:11 ?

Deborah Roberts worked as an NBC News correspondent in the early 1990s when she met weatherman Al Roker. They developed a friendship, and eventually married in 1995, just as Roker joined 'The Today Show' full-time. Their daughter, Leila Roker, was born in 1998. In 1995, Barbara Walters hired Roberts as a correspondent with the ABC News magazine show, '20/20,' which showcased more human interest stories than the hard news show, 'Dateline NBC,' where she had worked previously. Roberts went on to interview civil rights icon Rosa Parks; and reported on the Rwandan genocide and its aftermath. In 1999, Meredith White, an ABC producer, offered Roberts the opportunity to cover Lydia Dawson's journey to find her mother, Asha, in Ethiopia. For the story, Roberts spent several days in an Ethiopian village, where her team communicated with the locals to locate Asha. Roberts received an Emmy Award for the resulting '20/20' segment, "Her Lost World."

Video Oral History Interview with Deborah Roberts, Section A2007_213_002_007, TRT: 0:29:21 ?

Deborah Roberts was an ABC News correspondent for the news magazine show '20/20' when she reported on Lydia Dawson's journey to locate her mother, Asha, in Ethiopia. The resulting '20/20' segment, "Her Lost World," earned Roberts an Emmy Award in the early 2000s, just after the birth of Nicholas Roker, Roberts and weatherman Al Roker's second child. In addition to her role as a news magazine correspondent, Roberts worked as an anchor on shows like the weekend edition of 'World News Tonight' and 'Good Morning America.' Roberts describes how she balanced motherhood with her career, her and Roker's parenting styles, and their hectic work schedules. She and Roker socialize with a small group of friends, which includes Tonya Lewis Lee and Spike Lee. Roberts also talks about her fundraising campaigns for charities, such as United Cerebral Palsy and Women in Need, although she expressed her intention to prioritize time with her children.

Video Oral History Interview with Deborah Roberts, Section A2007_213_002_008, TRT: 0:29:25 ?

Deborah Roberts joined the ABC News magazine program '20/20,' where she began to notice how news media was increasingly focused on celebrities. In

addition to her work on '20/20,' Roberts began filling in for anchors on ABC News programs like 'World News Tonight' and 'Good Morning America. Roberts and her husband, weatherman Al Roker, had two children, Leila Roker and Nicholas Roker. She talks about the importance of hands-on parenting, and her attempts, as a public figure in the media, to protect her family's privacy. She describes Roker's gastric bypass surgery, as well as his decision to reveal it on 'The Today Show.' At the time of the interview, she frequently hosted webcasts for ABC, which the network developed to connect with younger, Internet savvy audiences. She talks about fellow journalist Katie Couric, and her transition to the 'CBS Evening News.' Roberts concludes this part of the interview by reflecting upon her career, and the possibility of retirement.

Video Oral History Interview with Deborah Roberts, Section A2007_213_002_009, TRT: 0:07:56 ?

Deborah Roberts shares advice for young African American aspiring journalists. She also reflects upon her hopes for the African American community and her legacy; and concludes the interview by describing how she would like to be remembered.