

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Leon DeCosta Dash

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Dash, Leon
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Leon DeCosta Dash,
Dates:	July 13, 2008
Bulk Dates:	2008
Physical Description:	18 Betacame SP videocassettes (8:44:12).
Abstract:	Journalism professor and newspaper reporter Leon DeCosta Dash (1944 -) won the Pulitzer Prize for Explanatory Reporting, for his Washington Post article on a woman's experiences of poverty and crime in Washington, D.C. He was a professor at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and a founder of the National Association of Black Journalists. Dash was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on July 13, 2008, in Chicago, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2008_081
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Journalist Leon DeCosta Dash has captured the struggles, triumphs, and human spirit of his subjects through his written work. Dash was born on March 16, 1944 in New Bedford, Massachusetts to Leon Dash, Sr., a postal clerk, and Ruth, an administrator for the health department. The family moved to New York City, and Dash grew up in the boroughs of Harlem and the Bronx, New York. As a college student at Lincoln University, he served as the editor for the school newspaper, the *Lincolnian*. It was not until he transferred to Howard University where he received a paying position in journalism. That year, in 1966, *The Washington Post* hired Dash as a journalism intern and a cub reporter. Two years later, he graduated from Howard University with his B.A. degree in history. After graduating, Dash joined the United States Peace Corps in Kenya.

Upon his return, Dash began working full-time for *The Washington Post*. In 1972, Dash along with Ben Bagdikian, wrote *The Shame of the Prisons*, which exposed problems within the American correctional system. In the following year, 1973, Dash embedded himself with Angolan rebel forces and then again from October 1976 through May 1977. This work earned him the George Polk Award from the Overseas Press Club and the prize in International News Reporting given by the Washington-Baltimore Newspaper Guild, both in 1974. In 1975, Dash along with forty-three other journalists, co-founded the National Association of Black Journalists (NABJ).

In 1979, Dash took the position of Bureau Chief of West Africa, covering stories in the region including, the Nigerian civil war, the Liberian and Ghanaian coups and the refugee crisis, until he left the post in 1984. In that year, he joined the investigative desk at *The Washington Post*. In 1986, Dash published his "At Risk" series and won numerous prizes including the Distinguished Service Award from the Social Services Administration of Maryland. He then developed this series into *When Children Want Children*, published in 1989. This critically acclaimed book garnered Dash numerous awards including the Washington Independent Writers President's

Award. In 1995, Dash and *The Washington Post* photographer, Lucian Perkins, won the Pulitzer Prize for Explanatory Journalism on their report of a District of Columbia woman's struggle with poverty, crime and drug use. In 1996, the article was turned into a best-selling book, *Rosa Lee*. Dash also received an Emmy Award from the National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences based on the documentary.

In 1998, Dash took a professorship at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. The following year, New York University named the “Rosa Lee’s Story” series as one of the best one hundred works in twentieth century American journalism. In 2000, Dash received the Swanlund chair, the highest endowed chair position at the University of Illinois, and in 2003, he became a permanent faculty member. Dash has received his honorary Doctorate in Humane Letters from Lincoln University. He has two daughters, Darla and Destiny.

Dash was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on July 13, 2008.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Leon DeCosta Dash was conducted by Larry Crowe on July 13, 2008, in Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on 18 Betacame SP videocassettes. Journalism professor and newspaper reporter Leon DeCosta Dash (1944 -) won the Pulitzer Prize for Explanatory Reporting, for his Washington Post article on a woman's experiences of poverty and crime in Washington, D.C. He was a professor at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and a founder of the National Association of Black Journalists.

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:

Dash, Leon

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews
Dash, Leon--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Washington Post Company

Occupations:

Newspaper Reporter

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 Leon DeCosta Dash, July 13, 2008. 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 Leon DeCosta Dash, Section A2008_081_001_001, TRT: 0:29:17 ?

Leon DeCosta Dash was born on March 16, 1944 in New Bedford, Massachusetts to Ruth Kydd Dash and Leon DeCosta Dash, Sr. Dash traced his maternal lineage to 1833, when his great-great-great-grandfather, James Yates, was born into slavery in Westmoreland County, Virginia. Dash's great-grandmother, Elizabeth Hall Coblins, was born in 1870 in Washington, D.C., and later worked as a domestic in Providence, Rhode Island. Her husband, Robert Coblins, who was from St. Eustatius, operated a boarding house for African American sailors, and later died in a railroad accident. Dash's grandfather, Lawrence Kydd, moved from Bequia, an island in the Grenadines, to New Bedford, where he worked in the whaling industry, and met Dash's grandmother, Ethel Coblins Kydd. They were both active in New Bedford's Universal Negro Improvement Association. Dash's mother was born in New Bedford in 1919, and grew up in the city's West End, a majority West Indian community.

Video Oral History Interview with Leon DeCosta Dash, Section A2008_081_001_002, TRT: 0:28:42 ?

Leon DeCosta Dash inherited his middle name from his paternal Jewish ancestors in Barbados. His paternal grandfather was born there in 1894, and moved to New Jersey, where he worked at a sugar manufactory. Dash's father, Leon DeCosta Dash, Sr., was born in 1916 in New York City. Two years later, when Dash's grandmother died of Spanish influenza, his father and paternal uncles moved to Barbados to live with Dash's great-grandmother. They later returned to the United States. During World War II, one of Dash's paternal uncles refused to join the U.S. Navy because of its discriminatory practices. Instead, he and Dash's father served in the U.S. Army, where his father befriended activist Timuel Black, and built the depot in Belgium that was targeted in the Battle of the Bulge. In New Bedford, Massachusetts, Dash's mother graduated from New Bedford High School. She then studied at the Lincoln School for Nurses, and initially worked as an in-home nurse, later joining the New York City Department of Health.

Video Oral History Interview with Leon DeCosta Dash, Section A2008_081_001_003, TRT: 0:29:49 ?

Leon DeCosta Dash's father, Leon DeCosta Dash, Sr., returned from his U.S. Army service in 1946. Dash and his parents then moved from New Bedford, Massachusetts to New York City, where they initially lived with Dash's great aunt in Brooklyn. Then, they moved into the newly built Riverton Houses, a segregated public housing complex managed by Clifford L. Alexander, Sr. in the East Harlem neighborhood. Dash's parents instilled in him the importance of hard work from an early age. In New York City, Dash began his education at P.S. 133. A mischievous student, he once lied to his teacher that his mother drove a taxi. When he fell behind in the fourth grade, another teacher, Miriam Sloan, helped him improve his reading skills. Outside of school, Dash frequented the Countee Cullen Library and the Harlem YMCA, where he

learned to swim. From 1946, Dash's father worked for the U.S. Post Office Department in New York City. He retired as a postal superintendent in the mid-1970s.

Video Oral History Interview with Leon DeCosta Dash, Section A2008_081_001_004, TRT: 0:29:24 ?

Leon DeCosta Dash's family was approved in 1947 to move into the newly built Riverton Houses in New York City's Harlem neighborhood. There, Dash watched serials like 'Batman' at the Lincoln Theater on Saturday afternoons; listened to 'The Shadow' radio program; and played basketball on a team called Snookie's Sugar Bowl 5. He also volunteered with Operation Crossroads Africa. With his parents, Ruth Kydd Dash and Leon DeCosta Dash, Sr., Dash attended Harlem's Church of the Master, a Presbyterian church pastored by James Herman Robinson. During this time, Dash questioned the church's teachings; and, after his confirmation, began attending other churches, including St. Luke's Episcopal Church in the Bronx, New York, where he led the Young People's Fellowship. Due to his father's dissatisfaction with New York City's public schools, Dash transferred from Harlem's J.H.S. 139 to Olinville Junior High School in the Bronx. Dash also recalls the first time he drank alcohol, and his introduction to rock and roll music.

Video Oral History Interview with Leon DeCosta Dash, Section A2008_081_001_005, TRT: 0:28:48 ?

Leon DeCosta Dash commuted to Olinville Junior High School, a majority white school in the Bronx, New York, from his family's home in New York City's Harlem neighborhood. Dash went on to attend the private Rhodes Preparatory School in Manhattan, where many of his peers, like actress Melodye Condos, came from wealthy, white families. Dash was among the highest scorers on the state Regents Examinations, but a racist teacher prevented him from being photographed for an advertisement in The New York Times Magazine featuring the school's top students. During this period, Dash was drawn to Malcolm X's philosophy, and rejected the term Negro, calling himself black instead. He was also influenced by his maternal grandfather, Lawrence Kydd, who was a nonconformist. In New York City's Greenwich Village, Dash attended free poetry readings, although his friends from Harlem were not interested in accompanying him. Dash also recalls participating in a civil rights demonstration at a White Castle restaurant in the Bronx.

Video Oral History Interview with Leon DeCosta Dash, Section A2008_081_001_006, TRT: 0:30:51 ?

Leon DeCosta Dash's parents, Ruth Kydd Dash and Leon DeCosta Dash, Sr., were dissatisfied with New York City's public schools, and invested in private education for Dash and his younger brother, Alan Dash. In 1957, Dash matriculated at the elite Rhodes Preparatory School in Manhattan. There, he developed insecurities, and sometimes fought with his peers. During his junior year, an Irish American classmate accosted him, and he responded physically, frightening the student enough to prevent further attacks. Dash also developed his interests in history, culture and philosophy; and attended poetry readings in Greenwich Village. Inspired by leaders like his pastor James Herman Robinson, and African nationalists Nnamdi Azikiwe and Kwame Nkrumah, Dash applied to the historically black Lincoln University in Pennsylvania. While his school counselors encouraged him to apply to Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee, his friend's father, who was from New Orleans, dissuaded him from moving to the South.

Video Oral History Interview with Leon DeCosta Dash, Section A2008_081_001_007, TRT:

0:28:52 ?

Leon DeCosta Dash graduated from the Rhodes Preparatory School in New York City in 1961. He attended the Bernard M. Baruch School of Business and Public Administration in New York City for one year, and then matriculated to Lincoln University in Lincoln, Pennsylvania. There, he majored in English, and edited The Lincolnian student newspaper for two semesters. He also became aware of tensions between the African and African American students on campus. Unsatisfied with Lincoln's course offerings in black history, Dash transferred in 1965 to Howard University in Washington, D.C. There, he was influenced by scholars like Chancellor Williams and E. Franklin Frazier, whose book, 'Black Bourgeoisie,' inspired Dash's interest in class history. To pay for his tuition, Dash worked as a steam cleaner, and later as a copy aide at The Washington Post. During his first year of college, Dash learned that he had fathered a child, Darla Dash Washington, with whom he reunited in the late 1970s.

Video Oral History Interview with Leon DeCosta Dash, Section A2008_081_001_008, TRT: 0:28:23 ?

Leon DeCosta Dash majored in history with a minor in political science at Howard University in Washington, D.C. In the history department, he took courses on African American and African history from Elsie M. Lewis, Chancellor Williams and Harold Marcus. At this point in the interview, Dash talks about civil rights activists Cleveland Sellers and Stokely Carmichael, whom he met at a Howard University student party in the 1960s; Guinean President Ahmed Sekou Toure; Howard University President James M. Nabrit, Jr.; and the 1965 assassination of Malcolm X in New York City. In 1966, Dash advanced from his position as a copy aide to an internship at The Washington Post. His first news story covered SNCC chairman Marion Barry's community organizing. During this period, Dash decided to pursue a career as a civil rights journalist in lieu of studying law. He also remembers learning about the Cuban Revolution in the late 1950s, while a student at the Rhodes Preparatory School in New York City.

Video Oral History Interview with Leon DeCosta Dash, Section A2008_081_001_009, TRT: 0:28:16 ?

Leon DeCosta Dash was a student at Howard University while interning at The Washington Post. In this capacity, Dash reported on student activism, including the protests of the disciplinary hearings for Robin Gregory, the university's first homecoming queen to wear an afro. He also covered Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr.'s assassination in 1968. Upon graduating that year, Dash and his first wife, Dyann Waugh, applied to the Peace Corps. The New York City draft board attempted to stall Dash's plans and deploy him to Vietnam, but he secured a two-year deferment. Due to the lack of African Americans in the organization, the Peace Corps had intended to showcase Dash and his wife at the elite Starehe Boys' Centre and School in Nairobi, Kenya, but they insisted on an assignment in rural Kenya, where they lived amongst the pastoral Nandi people. There, Dash taught world history, and helped prepare his students for the Kenyan secondary school examinations.

Video Oral History Interview with Leon DeCosta Dash, Section A2008_081_001_010, TRT: 0:29:15 ?

Leon DeCosta Dash first met his wife, Dyann Waugh, at Lincoln University in Pennsylvania in 1963. After reconnecting at a party in Connecticut, the couple married in 1968, and served in the Peace Corps for two years, returning in 1971 to Washington, D.C. There, Dash continued to report for The Washington Post.

In 1972, dismayed by newspaper's inattention to black issues, he and his colleagues filed a complaint with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, which found The Washington Post to be a discriminatory employer. As a result, the organization increased the diversity of its coverage. During this time, Dash struggled with alcoholism, and separated from his wife. He also co-authored 'The Shame of the Prisons' with Ben H. Bagdikian, which addressed recidivism at the D.C. Central Detention Facility. While on assignment in Montgomery County, Maryland, Dash was invited to report on the liberation movement in Angola, and proposed the project to foreign editor Philip M. Foisie.

Video Oral History Interview with Leon DeCosta Dash, Section A2008_081_001_011, TRT: 0:29:47 ?

Leon DeCosta Dash first traveled on assignment to the Portuguese colony of Angola in 1973. Following negotiations with editors Philip M. Foisie and Howard Simons, The Washington Post financed his three-month trip, during which Dash reported on the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA), one of three Angolan liberation movements. In Angola, Dash competed with British journalist Bernard Rivers-Moore to secure an interview with UNITA leader Jonas Savimbi, who rarely spoke at length in public. With support from journalist Kevin Klose, Dash wrote the series 'The War in Angola,' which was published at the end of 1973. The following year, the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council orchestrated a coup in Portugal, and invited Dash to report on its impact in Angola. In addition, Dash was one of the forty-four founding members of the National Association of Black Journalists (NABJ) in 1975. He reflects upon the efficacy of NABJ, which became a model for other organizations of minority journalists.

Video Oral History Interview with Leon DeCosta Dash, Section A2008_081_001_012, TRT: 0:29:18 ?

Leon DeCosta Dash traveled for a second time to pre-independence Angola in 1974, following a coup in Portugal by the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council, a group of Portuguese military officers. On assignment for The Washington Post, Dash expanded his coverage to the National Liberation Front of Angola (FNLA) in the northern region, and the People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) in central Angola, in addition to the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) on the Bie Plateau. He also visited the birthplace of his great uncle, Robert Phillips. The Washington Post published Dash's series, 'A Long March in Angola,' just as President Richard Nixon resigned. Upon returning to the United States, Dash sought treatment for his alcoholism, and then resumed his role at The Washington Post, writing about drug trafficking in Washington, D.C. In 1976, Dash again traveled to Angola to report on the civil war between the MPLA and UNITA. He also remembers UNITA leader Jonas Savimbi.

Video Oral History Interview with Leon DeCosta Dash, Section A2008_081_001_013, TRT: 0:29:14 ?

Leon DeCosta Dash reported for The Washington Post on the Angolan Civil War in 1976. On this trip, he accompanied guerillas from the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) through areas held by the People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola, and was allowed uncensored access to UNITA meetings. Dash describes UNITA leader Jonas Savimbi and his treatment of dissidents, including Dash's translator, Mateus Katalayo, whose family Savimbi burned at the stake. He also recalls Savimbi's assassination by the Angolan government in 2002, which ended the civil war. In 1977, Dash

returned to Washington, D.C.; and, in 1978, was assigned to cover Marion Barry's mayoral campaign against incumbent Walter Washington and city council chairman Sterling Tucker. The Washington Post endorsed Barry's campaign, which was successfully managed by Ivanhoe Donaldson. Then, executive editor Ben Bradlee invited Dash to establish a bureau of The Washington Post's in Abidjan, Ivory Coast.

Video Oral History Interview with Leon DeCosta Dash, Section A2008_081_001_014, TRT: 0:28:19 ?

Leon DeCosta Dash established the West African bureau of The Washington Post in 1979. Based in Abidjan, Ivory Coast, the bureau covered much of West, Central and East Africa. That year, Ghanaian President Jerry Rawlings assumed power following a military coup. When Dash interviewed Rawlings at the Ghana Armed Forces' camp in Accra, Ghana, he found that Rawlings was a figurehead with limited authority. Later, while attempting to interview Rawlings a second time, Dash was forced to leave the country. Dash reported on the French overthrow of President Jean-Bedel Bokassa in the Central African Republic in 1979; and the coup in Liberia, where Samuel Doe led the indigenous Liberians to overthrow Americo-Liberian President William R. Tolbert, Jr. in 1980. Dash also recalls the Tanzania People's Defence Force's ousting of Ugandan President Idi Amin. From 1979 to 1983, Dash lived in Abidjan with his wife and oldest daughter, Darla Dash Washington. He also reflects upon the American perceptions of Africa.

Video Oral History Interview with Leon DeCosta Dash, Section A2008_081_001_015, TRT: 0:29:09 ?

Leon DeCosta Dash served as The Washington Post's West African bureau chief for four years, and then returned to Washington, D.C. in 1984. Concerned about the increase in teenage pregnancies, Dash transitioned from the foreign desk to the newspaper's investigative unit. For his project, 'At Risk: Chronicles of Teenage Pregnancy,' Dash moved to the Washington Highlands, a poor community in Washington, D.C. There, he interviewed six families about their experiences of adolescent childbearing, and found that young women sought out pregnancy in the absence of other forms of achievement. When the 'At Risk' series concluded in 1987, Dash began a project on recidivism at the D.C. Central Detention Facility. However, while investigating the prison, he noticed lesions on some officers' hands, as well as other evidence of intravenous drug abuse. As a result, Dash shifted his attention from the inmates to the officers, and wrote 'Drugs in the Ranks: Getting High in D.C. Jail.'

Video Oral History Interview with Leon DeCosta Dash, Section A2008_081_001_016, TRT: 0:28:41 ?

Leon DeCosta Dash wrote two investigative series based on his research at the D.C. Central Detention Facility. In 1990, The Washington Post published 'Drugs in the Ranks,' which resulted in a federal investigation of drug use among correctional officers. Two years prior, case officer Francis Henderson had introduced Dash to Rosa Lee Cunningham, who became the primary subject of Dash's study of intergenerational poverty. Cunningham's parents were sharecroppers in North Carolina and Maryland, and moved to Washington, D.C., where she was born in 1936. She began her education at the segregated Joshua R. Giddings Elementary School, and was promoted to Randall Junior High School despite her illiteracy, but expelled from school after becoming pregnant. Cunningham began shoplifting at an early age. She later sold heroin while working as a nightclub waitress; and, after the birth of her eighth child, engaged in sex work for the first time. 'Rosa Lee's Story' was published in The

Washington Post in 1994.

Video Oral History Interview with Leon DeCosta Dash, Section A2008_081_001_017, TRT: 0:29:34 ?

Leon DeCosta Dash became close to Rosa Lee Cunningham and her family while interviewing them for his study of intergenerational poverty from 1988 to 1994. At this point in the interview, Dash describes his methods as an immersion journalist. During his second interview with Cunningham's oldest daughter, Patty Cunningham, Dash learned that Cunningham had prostituted her daughter from a young age. For two years, Cunningham denied that this occurred, but eventually admitted it during a recorded session. On the day it was announced that 'Rosa Lee's Story' had won the Pulitzer Prize for Explanatory Reporting, Dash learned that Cunningham's grandson, Rico Leon Cunningham, had died in a drug deal. Dash's final investigative series, 'Young Male Killers: America's Urban Street Wars,' was published in 1998. The previous year, Dash had joined the journalism faculty of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, after changes in the news industry lessened the demand for long form journalism.

Video Oral History Interview with Leon DeCosta Dash, Section A2008_081_001_018, TRT: 0:28:33 ?

Leon DeCosta Dash traveled to Cape Town, South Africa in 1991 to interview activist Allan Boesak about the anti-apartheid movement. Simon and Schuster, Inc. had offered Dash the assignment; but, after organizational changes, decided not to publish his manuscript. In 1998, Dash accepted a joint faculty appointment in African American studies and journalism at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. By 2001, he exclusively taught journalism, including a methodological course in immersion journalism, which also attracted law students. At the time of the interview, Dash had two daughters, Darla Dash Washington and Destiny Dash, and three grandsons. He reflects upon his life and legacy; his concerns for the African American community; and his friendship with Rosa Lee Cunningham, the subject of his Pulitzer Prize-winning project, 'Rosa Lee's Story.' Dash concludes the interview by describing how he would like to be remembered.