

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Debra Lee

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Lee, Debra, 1955-
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Debra Lee,
Dates:	June 14, 2012 and March 5, 2012
Bulk Dates:	2012
Physical Description:	8 uncompressed MOV digital video files (3:31:03).
Abstract:	Media company chief executive Debra Lee (1955 -) is distinguished as being an African American woman chief executive officer and chairman of BET Networks, a division of Viacom. Lee was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on June 14, 2012 and March 5, 2012, in Washington, District of Columbia. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2012_076
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Media company chief executive Debra L. Lee was born on August 8, 1955 in Fort Jackson, South Carolina to Richard and Delma Lee. In 1972, Lee graduated from Greensboro-Dudley High School and later moved to the East Coast where she attended Brown University. During her junior year, Lee spent a year studying abroad in Southeast Asia in Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia. In 1976, after receiving her B.A. degree in political science with an emphasis in Asian politics, Lee attended Harvard University. She simultaneously earned her M.A. degree in public policy from the John F. Kennedy School of Government and her J.D. degree from Harvard Law School in 1980.

Shortly after, Lee moved to Washington to complete a clerkship with the late Honorable Barrington Parker of the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia. In 1981, she worked at the law firm, Steptoe & Johnson, as a regulatory lawyer. Five years later, Lee joined Black Entertainment Television (BET Networks) and created its legal department. During her tenure, Lee has played pivotal roles in the company's history, including executive vice president and general counsel of the legal affairs department; corporate secretary; and president and publisher of the publishing division. In 1996, Lee became president and chief operating officer; and, in 2005, she was named chairman and chief executive officer. During her tenure, BET enjoyed some of its most explosive growth in ratings, revenue and popularity. She led the network's evolution beyond its successful music programming into original movies, documentaries, concert specials, news, late-night talk shows and public policy coverage. Lee has also substantially expanded investment in marketing, advertising, digital, research and development.

Lee has been regarded as one of the country's top female executives and served on the corporate board of directors of global businesses including Marriott International, Revlon and Eastman Kodak Company. She has also been affiliated with several professional and civic organizations including the National Board of Directors for National Symphony Orchestra, the National Women's Law Center and the Alvin Ailey Dance Theater. Lee was also named Trustee Emeritus at Brown University, her alma mater. Lee's honors include the 2001 Woman of the Year Award from Women in Cable and Telecommunications and the 2003 Distinguished Vanguard Award for Leadership from

the NCTA, a first for an African American female executive. Outside of the cable industry, Lee has also received special recognition, including the 2005 Madame C. J. Walker Award from *Ebony* magazine for best exemplifying the entrepreneurial spirit of the pioneering Black businesswoman.

Debra L. Lee was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on March 5, 2012.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Debra Lee was conducted by Deborah Lathen on June 14, 2012 and March 5, 2012, in Washington, District of Columbia, and was recorded on 8 uncompressed MOV digital video files. Media company chief executive Debra Lee (1955 -) is distinguished as being an African American woman chief executive officer and chairman of BET Networks, a division of Viacom.

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:

Lee, Debra, 1955-

Lathen, Deborah (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Lee, Debra, 1955- --Interviews

African American chief executive officers--Interviews.

African American lawyers--Interviews.

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Black Entertainment, Inc.

Occupations:

Media Company Chief Executive

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 Debra Lee, June 14, 2012 and March 5, 2012. 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 Debra Lee, Section A2012_076_001_001, TRT: 1:30:13 ?

Debra Lee talks about her family. Her mother, Delma Louise Taylor Lee, was born on October 1, 1924, in Hopkinsville, Kentucky, and grew up in Chicago, Illinois. She spent most of her career working as a ward clerk in hospitals. Lee's father, Richard McLeish Lee, served in the U.S. Army and retired as a major. Lee talks about her parents, her grandparents, and spending her early childhood in Germany, Washington, D.C., and Los Angeles, while her father served in the Army. She describes the sights, smells, and sounds of her childhood, and living in Los Angeles during the Watts Riots, in the adjacent neighborhood of Compton, California. She also talks about her relatives in Los Angeles. After her father's retirement, Lee's family moved to Greensboro, North Carolina, when she was in sixth grade. She recalls segregation in Greensboro, where she attended Buford Elementary School and Lincoln Junior High School, which were all-black schools.

African American families.

African American mothers.

African American fathers.

United States--Armed Forces--African Americans.

Watts Riot, Los Angeles, Calif., 1965.

Childhood and youth.

Segregation in education--North Carolina--Greensboro.

Video Oral History Interview with Debra Lee, Section A2012_076_001_002, TRT: 2:29:34 ?

Debra Lee spent a large part of her childhood in Greensboro, North Carolina, where she attended Lincoln Junior High School and James P. Dudley High School from 1969 to 1972. She describes her experience in school, her social life, and the social norms there. Lee discusses her interest in music and television as a child, her earliest jobs, her awareness of the Civil Rights Movement, the riots at her high school, and her desire to pursue journalism and law. She did not agree with the forced busing of black students to white schools, and participated in the "Save the Black School Days" at her high school.

Childhood and youth--Activities--North Carolina--Greensboro.

African Americans--Education--North Carolina--Greensboro.

Busing for school integration.

Riots--North Carolina--Greensboro.

Video Oral History Interview with Debra Lee, Section A2012_076_001_003, TRT: 3:31:11 ?

Debra Lee talks about the integration of schools in Greensboro, North Carolina, her opposition to the forced busing of black students to white schools, and her father's support of integration. Upon graduating from James D. Dudley High School in 1972, Lee enrolled at Brown University, where she studied political science. She describes her experience at Brown, the de facto social segregation on campus in the 1970s, being discriminated against in Providence, Rhode Island, her academics, and her parents' support of her studies. Lee's interest in the Communist philosophy led to her joining a study abroad program in Southeast Asia during her junior year in college. She describes her experience in Thailand and Indonesia, and their perception of Americans. In 1976, Lee

graduated from Brown University with her B.A. degree in political science with an emphasis in Asian politics. She talks about applying to law school and her decision to attend Harvard Law School.

Busing for school integration.

Brown University.

Discrimination.

Foreign study--Asia.

Harvard Law School.

Video Oral History Interview with Debra Lee, Section A2012_076_001_004, TRT: 4:17:57 ?

In 1976, Debra Lee began to pursue a law degree at Harvard Law School. She describes her decision to attend Harvard Law School, and her trip there with Thomas Motley, who is now a close friend. Lee recalls the segregation and racial tension in the City of Boston in the late 1970s, describing it as a hateful place. During her first year at Harvard Law School, Lee did not feel like she fit in as a female African American student and had difficulty finding community in an intensely competitive atmosphere. Her struggles led her to apply to Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government. In 1977, Lee enrolled in a dual degree program at Harvard Kennedy School of Government and Harvard Law School, finding her niche among classmates who wanted to change the world.

Harvard Law School.

Segregation--Massachusetts--Boston.

John F. Kennedy School of Government.

Motley, Thomas John, 1954-.

Video Oral History Interview with Debra Lee, Section A2012_076_002_005, TRT: 5:28:38 ?

In 1980, Debra Lee graduated with her J.D. degree from Harvard Law School and her M.A. degree in public policy from Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government. She declined employment at the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC), to take a clerkship with Judge Barrington Parker in the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia. In 1981, she joined Steptoe & Johnson LLP, a law firm in Washington, D.C. She describes her experience there, her growing interest in communications, and her decision to forgo becoming a partner at the firm to pursue a career at Black Entertainment Television (BET). In 1986, Lee became the first general counsel at BET. She describes her early years there, the staff, revenue and programming at BET, and her growing responsibilities as corporate secretary and in charge of publications as well as BET's decision to go public. Lee also talks about her marriages and the birth of her son, Quinn, shortly after she oversaw the construction of BET's first studio in Washington, D.C.

Parker, Barrington D. (Barrington Daniels), 1944-

Black Entertainment Television.

African American children.

Marriage.

Steptoe & Johnson.

Video Oral History Interview with Debra Lee, Section A2012_076_002_006, TRT: 6:29:27 ?

Debra Lee talks about her increasing leadership at Black Entertainment Television (BET) where she played important roles in taking BET public in 1991 and launching 'YSB' magazine. In 1996, Lee was appointed as the COO of BET. She discusses the process of taking BET private again in 1998, their talks

with Viacom, and the acquisition of BET by Viacom in 2000. Lee describes the African American community's complaints against BET's programming, and their reception towards BET's sale to Viacom. She also talks about transitioning into a division of Viacom, BET founder Robert L. Johnson's departure from the company, becoming the CEO of BET in 2005, her father's death, the birth of her daughter, Ava, and her vision for BET.

Black Entertainment Television.

Viacom Inc.

African American fathers--Death.

African American children.

Going public (Securities).

Video Oral History Interview with Debra Lee, Section A2012_076_002_007, TRT: 7:29:50 ?

In 2005, Debra Lee was appointed as the CEO of Black Entertainment Television (BET). She discusses her vision for programming changes for BET, the success of BET's first sitcom, 'The Game,' the challenges that she faced from audiences, and her decision to censor some of BET's programming in response to the audience's complaints. Lee has guided BET's growth since Viacom's acquisition. She also reflects upon her philanthropic and political involvement in the community in Washington, D.C., her opportunities in life, and the progress made by the African American community.

Black Entertainment Television.

Censorship--United States.

Situation comedies (Television programs).

Political participation.

Video Oral History Interview with Debra Lee, Section A2012_076_002_008, TRT: 8:14:13 ?

In this closing section of the interview, Debra Lee reflects upon her legacy, the progress of the African American community, the significance of the integration of schools as mandated by the U.S. Supreme Court's 1954 ruling on Brown vs. Board of Education, and the election of President Barack Obama as the first African American president of the United States. She also describes her experience on election night at Grant Park in Chicago, Illinois, in 2008. Lee closes the interview by describing her photographs.

Obama, Barack.

Photographs.

School integration--United States.