

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Soledad O'Brien

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## Overview of the Collection

<b>Repository:</b>	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
<b>Creator:</b>	O'Brien, Soledad, 1966-
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Soledad O'Brien,
<b>Dates:</b>	February 21, 2014
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2014
<b>Physical Description:</b>	6 uncompressed MOV digital video files (2:42:12).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Broadcast journalist Soledad O'Brien (1966 - ) founded the Starfish Media Group, and anchored national television news programs like NBC's The Site and American Morning, and CNN's In America. O'Brien was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on February 21, 2014, in New York, New York. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2014_055
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Broadcast journalist Soledad O'Brien was born on September 19, 1966 in Saint James, New York. Her father, Edward, was a mechanical engineering professor; her mother, Estela, a French and English teacher. O'Brien graduated from Smithtown High School East in 1984, and went on to attend Harvard University from 1984 to 1988, but did not graduate until 2000, when she received her B.A. degree in English and American literature.

In 1989, O'Brien began her career at KISS-FM in Boston, Massachusetts as a reporter for the medical talk show *Second Opinion* and of *Health Week in Review*. In 1990, she was hired as an associate producer and news writer for Boston's WBZ-TV station. O'Brien then worked at NBC News in New York City in 1991, as a field producer for *Nightly News* and *Today*, before being hired at San Francisco's NBC affiliate KRON in 1993, where she worked as a reporter and bureau chief and co-hosted the Discovery Channel's *The Know Zone*. Then, in 1996, O'Brien returned to New York to host MSNBC's new weekend morning show and technology program *The Site*. Although *The Site* was cancelled one year later, O'Brien continued to work as a reporter and anchor for a number of shows, including MSNBC's *Morning Blend* and NBC News' *Weekend Today* until 1999, when she was named permanent co-anchor of *Weekend Today*.

In 2003, O'Brien left NBC and joined CNN as the co-anchor of the network's flagship morning program, *American Morning*. In 2007, she moved to CNN's documentary division, where she primarily worked on *Special Investigations Unit* and *In America*. From 2007 to 2013, O'Brien hosted a number of CNN documentary shows, including the *Black in America* series, the *Latino in America* series, and numerous *Special Investigations Unit* episodes. From 2012 to 2013, she anchored CNN's *Starting Point*; and, in 2013, she established the Starfish Media Group production company, which has produced segments for CNN, HBO and Al Jazeera America. O'Brien was also hired by Al Jazeera America in 2013 as a special correspondent to the network's *America Tonight*.

O'Brien has authored two books: 2009's *Latino in America*, and the 2010 memoir, *The Next Big Story: My Journey*

*through the Land of Possibilities*. In addition, she and her husband founded the Soledad O'Brien and Brad Raymond Starfish Foundation. O'Brien is a member of the board of directors of The After-School Corporation, the Harlem School of the Arts and the Foundation for the National Archives. She also served on the advisory board of Cyberangels, an internet safety organization.

O'Brien has received numerous awards, including the Emmy, the NAACP's President's Award, the George Foster Peabody Award, an Alfred I. du Pont Award, and the Gracie Allen Award. In 2008, she was the first recipient of the Soledad O'Brien Freedom's Voice Award from the Morehouse School of Medicine, and was the first recipient of The Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health's Goodermote Humanitarian Award. O'Brien received the 2009 Medallion of Excellence for Leadership and Community Service Award from the Congressional Hispanic Caucus Institute. In 2010, she was named Journalist of the Year by the National Association of Black Journalists.

Soledad O'Brien was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on February 21, 2014.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Soledad O'Brien was conducted by Julieanna L. Richardson on February 21, 2014, in New York, New York, and was recorded on 6 uncompressed MOV digital video files. Broadcast journalist Soledad O'Brien (1966 - ) founded the Starfish Media Group, and anchored national television news programs like NBC's *The Site* and *American Morning*, and CNN's *In America*.

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## 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®.

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## 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.

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## Controlled Access Terms

This interview collection is indexed under the following controlled access subject terms.

### Persons:

O'Brien, Soledad, 1966-

Richardson, Julieanna L. (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

## Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews  
O'Brien, Soledad, 1966---Interviews

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## Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

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The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

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## Occupations:

Broadcast Journalist

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## HistoryMakers® Category:

MediaMakers

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## 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 Soledad O'Brien, February 21, 2014. 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).

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## 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 Soledad O'Brien, Section A2014\_055\_001\_001, TRT: 1:30:37 ?

Soledad O'Brien was born on September 19, 1966 in St. James, New York to Estela Marquetti y Mendieta O'Brien and Edward O'Brien. Her mother had African and Latina heritage, and was born in Havana, Cuba. She later immigrated to Baltimore, Maryland. O'Brien's paternal grandparents, Muriel Wightman O'Brien and Thomas O'Brien, emigrated from Ireland to Australia, where O'Brien's father was born. In 1958, he moved to Baltimore to begin a Ph.D. degree at Johns Hopkins University. He met O'Brien's mother at a Catholic church. They faced discrimination as an interracial couple, and were often denied service at restaurants. After marrying, they moved to Long Island, where they raised six children in the majority-white community of Smithtown. Her father was an engineering professor at the State University College on Long Island, while her mother taught at Smithtown High School West. O'Brien attended St. James Elementary School and Nesaquake Middle School, and was often ostracized because of her mixed race background.

Video Oral History Interview with Soledad O'Brien, Section A2014\_055\_001\_002, TRT: 2:30:35 ?

Soledad O'Brien excelled academically at Smithtown High School East in Smithtown, New York. She was encouraged by her parents to embrace her Afro-Latina identity, but still experienced discrimination in the majority-white community. On one occasion, she developed a crush on a white classmate, whose mother snubbed her and made rude comments about her hair. Upon graduating in 1984, O'Brien enrolled in the premedical program at Harvard University. She eventually decided she was unsuited to medicine, and left school at the end of her junior year. At that time, O'Brien remained in Boston, Massachusetts, where she interned for the Spanish language show 'Centro' on WBZ-TV. She was soon promoted to production assistant under reporter Jeanne Blake, and completed the minority writer training program. O'Brien then became a field producer for NBC News in 1991. Two years later, she joined the reporting staff of KRON-TV in San Francisco, California. Within three months, O'Brien became the chief of the East Bay bureau.

Video Oral History Interview with Soledad O'Brien, Section A2014\_055\_001\_003, TRT: 3:30:19 ?

Soledad O'Brien began her career as a newscaster at KRON-TV in San Francisco, California, where she was mentored by black broadcast journalist Belva Davis. During her tenure in San Francisco, O'Brien also anchored 'The Know Zone' on the Discovery Channel. In 1996, she left to anchor MSNBC's 'The Site,' a newscast focused on the growth of the Internet. She also worked on the news magazine show, 'Imaging America,' which profiled American cities. After 'The Site' was cancelled in 1997, O'Brien moved to New York City. There, she worked at NBC News on the weekdays, and anchored MSNBC's weekend morning show, 'Morning Blend.' From 1999, she co-anchored the 'Weekend Today' show with David Bloom. At this point in the interview, O'Brien describes her marriage to investment banker Bradley Raymond in 1995, and the challenges of balancing her career and family. O'Brien also talks about her public speaking skills, and remembers the death of her 'Weekend Today' co-host, David Bloom.

Video Oral History Interview with Soledad O'Brien, Section A2014\_055\_001\_004, TRT: 4:33:57 ?

Soledad O'Brien completed her degree at Harvard University while anchoring

for 'Weekend Today.' In 2003, she joined CNN's 'American Morning' show as a co-host with Miles O'Brien. At this point in the interview, O'Brien describes the challenges she faced at CNN, where she was frequently undermined by her white male superiors because of her gender and race. In 2004, her boss encouraged her not to return to work after her pregnancy. Later that year, while O'Brien was covering the tsunami in Southeast Asia, her colleagues implied she was incapable of performing her job because she was a mother. In 2005, O'Brien reported on Hurricane Katrina, and insisted on covering the disaster's disproportionate impact on African Americans. In 2006, she objected to the demographics of CNN's election team, which consisted of four white male anchors. In 2007, O'Brien anchored the CNN documentary series 'Black in America,' where she clashed with the producers over their biased depiction of African American life.

Video Oral History Interview with Soledad O'Brien, Section A2014\_055\_001\_005, TRT: 5:29:20 ?

Soledad O'Brien served as the host of the CNN documentary series 'Black in America,' which reached an audience of over 13 million people. She also anchored the CNN documentaries 'Latino in America,' 'Muslim in America' and 'Gay in America: Gary and Tony Have a Baby.' Frustrated by CNN's disinterest in accurately representing minority communities, O'Brien secured the distribution rights to her documentaries, and then left the network in 2013. That year, she founded the Starfish Media Group with the mission of representing minority voices. O'Brien also went on to serve as a special correspondent for Al Jazeera America and HBO's 'Real Sports with Bryant Gumbel.' At this point, O'Brien talks about the representation of African Americans in the news, and the importance of nuanced storytelling. She reflects upon her life and career, as well as the changes in the media industry. O'Brien concludes this part of the interview by describing her hopes and concerns for the African American community.

Video Oral History Interview with Soledad O'Brien, Section A2014\_055\_001\_006, TRT: 6:07:24 ?

Soledad O'Brien and her husband, investment banker Bradley Raymond, established the Starfish Foundation in 2011 to provide financial assistance and mentorship to young female scholars. The foundation hosted over one hundred girls at a motivational summit in New York City, which featured inspirational speakers like Iyanla Vanzant. O'Brien and her husband later renamed the organization the PowHERful Foundation. They sponsored the college tuition of twenty-five young women in 2014. O'Brien reflects upon her legacy, and concludes the interview by sharing a message to future generations.