

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with The Honorable Vaino Spencer

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Spencer, Vaino, 1920-2016
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Vaino Spencer,
Dates:	November 22, 2006
Bulk Dates:	2006
Physical Description:	8 Betacame SP videocassettes (3:37:28).
Abstract:	State superior court judge The Honorable Vaino Spencer (1920 - 2016) served as a Municipal Court Judge for the Los Angeles Judicial District, and was the first African American woman to be appointed as the Los Angeles County Superior Court Judge. She also co-founded the National Association of Women Judges, and later served as the presiding Judge of the Division One California Court of Appeal, Second Appellate District. Spencer was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on November 22, 2006, in Los Angeles, California. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2006_149
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Superior Court Judge Vaino Hassan Spencer was born on July 22, 1920 in Los Angeles, California to Ada Nona and Abdul Hassan. Spencer graduated from Polytechnic High School in Los Angeles in 1938, and went on to receive her A.A. degree from Los Angeles City College in 1949. Spencer earned her L.L.B. degree from Southwestern University School of Law in 1952.

After obtaining her law degree, Spencer worked as a general practice attorney at law in Los Angeles until 1961. She then became the first African American woman to serve on the bench in California as the Municipal Court Judge for the Los Angeles Judicial District. Spencer served in this capacity until 1976, then was appointed as the Los Angeles County Superior Court Judge, a position she held until 1980.

In 1979, Spencer and fellow presiding justice Joan Dempsey Klein, founded the National Association of Women Judges, an organization intended to help promote women candidates on the bench. Spencer and Klein traveled around the country and met with judges, bar leaders, politicians and journalists to discuss the need for more women in the court room. The organization eventually set up a lecture series and established an annual conference for the association's growing membership.

In 1980, Spencer began serving as the Presiding Judge of the Division One California Court of Appeal, Second Appellate District, a position she held for over twenty years.

Throughout her career, Spencer served on a number of judicial and law oriented boards, including the Judicial Council Justice Planning Committee, the Judicial Council of California, the Los Angeles County Commission on Justice and the California Law Revision Committee. Additionally, Spencer received various accolades for her

groundbreaking law work, including the Outstanding Jurist Award in 2001, Metropolitan News-Enterprise' Person of the Year Award in 1991, and the 1985 Trailblazer Award from the National Association of Business and Professional Women.

Spencer was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on November 22, 2006.

Spencer passed away on October 25, 2016.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with The Honorable Vaino Spencer was conducted by Paul Brock on November 22, 2006, in Los Angeles, California, and was recorded on 8 Betacame SP videocassettes. State superior court judge The Honorable Vaino Spencer (1920 - 2016) served as a Municipal Court Judge for the Los Angeles Judicial District, and was the first African American woman to be appointed as the Los Angeles County Superior Court Judge. She also co-founded the National Association of Women Judges, and later served as the presiding Judge of the Division One California Court of Appeal, Second Appellate District.

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:

Spencer, Vaino, 1920-2016

Brock, Paul (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews
Spencer, Vaino, 1920-2016 --Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

California

Occupations:

State Superior Court Judge

HistoryMakers® Category:

LawMakers

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 The Honorable Vaino Spencer, November 22, 2006. 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 The Honorable Vaino Spencer, Section A2006_149_001_001, TRT: 0:29:00 ?

The Honorable Vaino Spencer was born on July 22, 1920 in Los Angeles, California to Ada Taylor Hassan and Abdul Hassan. Her father was born in Sri Lanka, and was raised in a Buddhist temple after his parents' death. He also supported Mahatma Gandhi in the Indian independence movement. Spencer's mother, a Protestant, was born in 1893 in Salt Lake City, Utah. Her parents settled in Los Angeles, where they raised Spencer and her siblings, including Alfred Hassan, a college track star and civil engineer; and Cecelia Hassan, who was born with a mental disability and died young. In Los Angeles, Spencer's mother was active in campaigns for women's suffrage and prohibition, while her father worked as a lingerie manufacturer, and then a technical advisor in the film industry. Spencer grew up in a diverse community, where her neighbors included Norman O. Houston, the president of Golden State Mutual Life Insurance Company. Spencer attended Wadsworth Avenue Elementary School, and ran for student body president.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Vaino Spencer, Section A2006_149_001_002, TRT: 0:29:20 ?

The Honorable Vaino Spencer attended Thomas Alva Edison Junior High School in Los Angeles, California, where she was one of two black students. In the eighth grade, she was elected to serve as student body secretary. Spencer then enrolled at John H. Francis Polytechnic High School, where she became editor of the student newspaper. She was mentored by journalism teacher Frances Hov, and successfully petitioned her principal to install a telephone in Hov's classroom. In 1937, Spencer applied for summer jobs at the Los Angeles Times and Los Angeles Examiner, but was rejected due to her race. She graduated valedictorian in 1938, and planned to study journalism at the University of Southern California. However, Spencer worked that summer for Sidney Dones, an African American real estate broker in Val Verde, California, who convinced her to remain with his firm. In 1940, Spencer and her father opened their own real estate office on Los Angeles' Main Street, where they were the first black business owners.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Vaino Spencer, Section A2006_149_001_003, TRT: 0:29:21 ?

The Honorable Vaino Spencer entered the real estate industry in 1938, under the tutelage of Sydney Dones in Los Angeles, California. In 1940, she opened a real estate firm with her father, Abdul Hassan. In Los Angeles, Spencer often encountered restrictive covenants barring African Americans from living in certain neighborhoods. Several of her clients were harassed for moving into white areas, and one family was murdered in Fontana, California. In 1946, Spencer resolved to study law, and enrolled at Los Angeles City College. She graduated with a bachelor's degree in 1949, and was admitted to Southwestern Law School in Los Angeles. There, Spencer organized and served as secretary of a student bar association. The association affiliated with student groups at other California law schools, and petitioned the State Bar of California with concerns over the bar exam's failure rate. Upon graduating in 1952, Spencer completed review courses with Professors G. Richard Wicks and Forrest Cool, and passed the bar.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Vaino Spencer, Section A2006_149_001_004,
TRT: 0:30:00 ?

The Honorable Vaino Spencer married real estate broker Lorenzo Spencer in 1949. In 1952, she began practicing law with George Edward Cannady in Los Angeles, California, and specialized in real estate, family and personal injury law. Spencer represented the Consolidated Realty Board in its racial discrimination lawsuit against the Los Angeles Breakfast Club. Since African Americans were denied entry to the American Bar Association and the Los Angeles County Bar Association, she joined the John M. Langston Bar Association, but was later accepted to the former two associations through the intercession of Archibald M. Mull. Jr. Spencer talks about black male attorneys who became judges in California during the 1950s, like Edwin Jefferson and Thomas L. Griffith, Jr. In 1961, Governor Pat Brown appointed Spencer to serve as a judge on the municipal court of Los Angeles. In the 1970s, Spencer cofounded the Black Women Lawyers Association of Los Angeles at the request of politician Yvonne Brathwaite Burke.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Vaino Spencer, Section A2006_149_001_005,
TRT: 0:29:20 ?

The Honorable Vaino Spencer worked with Augustus F. “Gus” Hawkins, one of two black men in the California State Assembly, to found the Democratic Minority Conference in 1957. The conference supported Eddie Atkinson, Tom Bradley and Mervyn M. Dymally for political office, which put them in conflict with Democratic power broker Jesse M. Unruh. Unruh initially blocked Spencer’s appointment as a judge, but after they made peace, Pat Brown appointed her to the municipal court of Los Angeles in 1961. She often served on the city’s traffic court, where her presumption of defendants’ innocence put her at odds with police chief William H. Parker, but gained the respect of politicians Evelle J. Younger and Jerry Brown. She was promoted by Pat Brown to the Los Angeles County Superior Court in 1976, and then to the California Court of Appeals for the Second District in 1980. Spencer recalls her friend Joan Dempsey Klein, with whom she served on all three courts and founded the National Association of Women Judges in 1979.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Vaino Spencer, Section A2006_149_001_006,
TRT: 0:28:20 ?

The Honorable Vaino Spencer ran for reelection to the Los Angeles County Superior Court in 1978. Her opponent was Virginia Chernack, an ally of a court administrator with whom Spencer clashed. Aided by campaign managers Geraldine Pate Branton and Hallie Tenner, Spencer defeated Chernack by sixty thousand votes. In 1980, Governor Jerry Brown appointed her to serve as the presiding justice of the California Court of Appeals for the Second District. On the court, she wrote a dissenting opinion in the case of *Mary M. v. City of Los Angeles*, holding that the city was liable for damages to a woman who was raped by a police officer. Her opinion was later adopted as law by a ruling of the Supreme Court of California in 1991. Spencer was also part of a panel that reviewed the trial of Black Panther Geronimo Pratt, who had been convicted of murder. Pratt was represented by attorney Johnnie Cochran. Finding that the prosecution concealed evidence, Spencer ruled that Pratt was wrongfully imprisoned. He was freed in 1997.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Vaino Spencer, Section A2006_149_001_007,
TRT: 0:31:07 ?

The Honorable Vaino Spencer was among the founders of the Democratic Minority Conference, an organization with the mission of electing more African

Americans to public office. She also founded the National Association of Women Judges with Joan Dempsey Klein in 1979. The association began with 150 members; and, by 2006, included over 1500 judges, one of whom was Justice Sandra Day O'Connor of the U.S. Supreme Court. Spencer was also involved in founding the International Association of Women Judges, an organization with chapters in dozens of countries on six continents. Spencer advocated for an independent judiciary, and supported lifetime judicial appointments to insulate judges from special interest groups. She opposed the Federalist Society for Law and Public Policy Studies and other organizations that she saw as inimical to judicial independence. Spencer reflects upon her career; her plans for the future; and how she would like to be remembered. She concludes the interview by narrating her photographs.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Vaino Spencer, Section A2006_149_001_008, TRT: 0:11:00 ?

The Honorable Vaino Spencer narrates her photographs.