

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Lester "Les" N. Coney

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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>	Coney, Les N., 1958-
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Lester "Les" N. Coney,
<b>Dates:</b>	February 15, 2007
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2007
<b>Physical Description:</b>	6 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:36:55).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Civic leader Lester "Les" N. Coney (1958 - ) worked for Mesirow Financial and was the first African American Chairman of the Board of Chicago's Goodman Theatre. Coney was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on February 15, 2007, in Chicago, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2007_070
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Civic leader Lester Norman Coney was born on April 28, 1958 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Coney attended George Williams College in Downers Grove, Illinois, graduating with a B.A. degree in 1980.

In 1981, Coney taught at Potential Elementary School on Chicago's Southside. Resigning in 1982 to accept a position as Account Representative with Travelers Insurance, Coney remained with the insurance company through the merger with United Health Care in 1994. Coney served as Director of Key Accounts and National Sales Director. In 1996, Coney joined AON Insurance as Senior Managing Director and became active in Chicago's civic community. In 2006, Coney accepted the position of Executive Vice President and Senior Managing Director for Mesirow Financial.

Coney was the first African American to serve as Chairman of Chicago's Goodman Theater. He also served as Vice Chairman of the DuSable Museum of African American History and Founding Chair of the Congo Square Theater's Board and Chairman of City Year Chicago. Additionally, Coney served as a Trustee at Roosevelt University, the Kohl's Children's Museum, the Athletes Against Drugs organization, and as the Co-Chair of the Democratic National Committee. Coney's honors include the Leadership In Arts Award from the Business Council of Chicago in 2006; the Community Service Award by the 100 Black Men in 2005; and *Crain's Chicago Business*' Top 50 Minorities in Business in 2004. Lester N. Coney resides in Chicago's West Loop.

Lester Coney was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on February 15, 2007.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Lester "Les" N. Coney was conducted by Sasha Dalton on February 15, 2007, in Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on 6 Betacame SP videocassettes. Civic leader Lester "Les" N. Coney (1958 -

) worked for Mesirow Financial and was the first African American Chairman of the Board of Chicago's Goodman Theatre.

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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:

Coney, Les N., 1958-

Dalton, Sasha (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

### Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Coney, Les N., 1958- --Interviews

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African American executives--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:

Civic Leader

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# HistoryMakers® Category:

CivicMakers

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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 Lester "Les" N. Coney, February 15, 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).

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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.

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# Detailed Description of the Collection

## Series I: Original Interview Footage

Video Oral History Interview with Lester "Les" N. Coney, Section A2007\_070\_001\_001, TRT: 0:30:00 ?

Lester "Les" N. Coney was born on April 28, 1958 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania to Shirley White Coney and Homer Coney, Sr. His mother was born in Alabama, and raised in Philadelphia. There, she met Coney's father, who had moved from Virginia with his eleven brothers and sisters. They married, and raised four children, including Coney, in a three-story apartment on the north side of Philadelphia. There, they lived with Coney's maternal grandparents, Corrine White and Dennie White, who owned a Laundromat for a time, until his grandfather suffered paralytic stroke and sold the business. Coney's father was a

deliveryman for Tose Inc., while his mother worked in a garment factory, and later became a school coordinator at Grover Cleveland Elementary School. Coney often visited his father's relatives in the predominantly Italian neighborhood of South Philadelphia, where the city's sports arenas were located. He also frequented the Nicetown Boys Club, and was honored with the organization's Boy of the Year award.

African American families--Pennsylvania--Philadelphia.

African American children--Pennsylvania--Philadelphia.

African American neighborhoods--Pennsylvania--Philadelphia.

Video Oral History Interview with Lester "Les" N. Coney, Section A2007\_070\_001\_002, TRT: 0:29:30 ?

Lester "Les" N. Coney grew up in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. There, he belonged to the Abyssinian Church, where his parents, Shirley White Coney and Homer Coney, Sr., sang in the choir. Coney began his education at Grover Cleveland Elementary School, where his mother worked as the school coordinator. He went on to attend Philadelphia's Warren G. Harding Junior High School, where he began participating in sports, and excelled at basketball. Coney's basketball team at Frankford High School was among the best in Philadelphia, and competed against future professional athletes Gene Banks and Lewis Lloyd. Their games were often attended by Wilt Chamberlain of the Philadelphia 76ers, whose nephew was also on the team. Upon graduating from high school, Coney planned to join his father as a deliveryman at Tose Inc.; but received a college scholarship from the Nicetown Boys Club, and decided to attend George Williams College in Downers Grove, Illinois.

Education, Primary--Pennsylvania--Philadelphia.

George Williams College (Downers Grove, Ill.).

African American teachers--Pennsylvania--Philadelphia.

Boys and Girls Clubs of America--Pennsylvania--Philadelphia.

Video Oral History Interview with Lester "Les" N. Coney, Section A2007\_070\_001\_003, TRT: 0:29:30 ?

Lester "Les" N. Coney rarely left his hometown of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, prior to enrolling at George Washington College in Downers Grove, Illinois. There, he dated Dawn Worthy Coney, whom he later married. Her family introduced him to fine dining, and told him stories of their road trips across the country. Coney proposed to his wife during his junior year of college, and began pumping gas and modeling to earn an income. He graduated in 1980 with a degree in business administration and mathematics, and aspired to become the administrator of a boys club. In 1982, Coney's mother and father traveled by plane for the first time in order to attend his wedding in Chicago, Illinois. Afterwards, Coney and his wife briefly lived Hartford, Connecticut, where he trained to work for The Travelers Indemnity Company. Then, they returned to Chicago, and moved to the South Side neighborhood of Hyde Park. Coney's long work hours strained his marriage, which ended in divorce in 1987.

African Americans--Marriage.

Education, Higher--Illinois.

George Williams University (Downers Grove, Ill.).

African American couples.

Video Oral History Interview with Lester "Les" N. Coney, Section A2007\_070\_001\_004, TRT: 0:30:00 ?

Lester "Les" N. Coney founded a small African American fraternity while a

student at George Williams College in Downers Grove, Illinois. Upon graduating in 1980, he taught briefly at the Potential School for Exceptional Children in Chicago, Illinois. While working between semesters at Marshall Field and Company, Coney met the head of human resources at The Travelers Indemnity Company, who encouraged him to apply for a corporate insurance sales position. Coney was hired, and moved with his wife to Hartford, Connecticut to complete the company's training program. Upon returning to Chicago, he became an account representative, and purchased his first suit. He initially sold insurance products to small businesses; and, because of the company's prestige, rarely faced discrimination from his clients. As Coney progressed at the firm, he was invited to conferences at destinations such as Palm Springs, California. Later, The Travelers Indemnity Company was acquired by Sandy Weill, the chief executive of Citibank, N.A.

Travelers Insurance Companies--Employees

Employment--Insurance agents

Insurance companies--Connecticut

Video Oral History Interview with Lester "Les" N. Coney, Section A2007\_070\_001\_005, TRT: 0:31:05 ?

Lester "Les" N. Coney continued working for The Travelers Indemnity Company after it was acquired by the United Healthcare Corporation. He left to become a senior managing director at the Aon Corporation, where he worked for ten years, securing accounts with The Boeing Company and Excelon Corporation. Coney then joined Mesirow Financial, where his clients included Loop Capital Markets, LLC and the Alter Group Ltd. At a reception for playwright August Wilson in Chicago, Illinois, Coney met the board members of the Goodman Theatre. They invited Coney to join the board, where he later served as chairman, thus becoming the first African American chairperson of a major cultural institution in Chicago. Later, he was invited to develop the board of the Congo Square Theatre Company. Coney talks about his children, Javon Coney and Chanel Coney; and describes his advice to African American youth. He also reflects upon his life, including his career and awards.

Insurance companies--Illinois--Chicago.

Aon Investment Consulting

African Americans--Employment--Illinois.

Goodman Theatre (Chicago, Ill.).

Travelers Insurance Companies.

Video Oral History Interview with Lester "Les" N. Coney, Section A2007\_070\_001\_006, TRT: 0:06:50 ?

Lester "Les" N. Coney describes his values, and how he would like to be remembered. He concludes the interviewing by explaining why he wanted to share his story with The HistoryMakers.

Photographs.