

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with The Honorable Vanzetta Penn McPherson

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	McPherson, Vanzetta Penn, 1947-
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Vanzetta Penn McPherson,
Dates:	March 19, 2007
Bulk Dates:	2007
Physical Description:	7 Betacame SP videocassettes (3:23:10).
Abstract:	Entrepreneur and federal judge The Honorable Vanzetta Penn McPherson (1947 -) served as a United States magistrate judge for the Middle District of Alabama and co-founded the African American cultural bookstore, Roots & Wings. McPherson was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on March 19, 2007, in Montgomery, Alabama. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2007_099
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Vanzetta Penn McPherson is a retired United States magistrate judge in her hometown of Montgomery, Alabama. McPherson was born on May 26, 1947, to Sadie and Luther Penn. McPherson received her B.A. degree in speech pathology and audiology from Howard University in 1969, her M.A. degree in 1971 from Columbia University, and her J.D. degree, also from Columbia, in 1974.

McPherson began practicing law as an associate at Hughes Hubbard & Reed, a Wall Street law firm. She stayed there until 1975, when she became an assistant attorney general for the State of Alabama. In 1978, McPherson began practicing law in Montgomery, focusing on family and constitutional law. McPherson was appointed United States magistrate judge for the Middle District of Alabama in 1992 and was re-appointed in 2000; she retired from the bench in 2006.

One of the most notable rulings for McPherson was a discrimination case involving the Alabama Two-Year College System. Three females at two different Alabama colleges were denied promotions because they were women and because of their age. McPherson ruled in favor of these women and ordered the college system to give them the promotions; she also ordered back pay for the women.

In 1989, McPherson and a fellow lawyer founded and built Roots & Wings, a cultural bookstore that serves as a showcase for black history, art and literature. McPherson holds life memberships of the National Bar Association and the American Bar Association. McPherson also served on Alabama's Federal Judicial Nominating Commission, the Eleventh Circuit Advisory Council, and several advisory committees to the Alabama Supreme Court; she is also a past president and vice president of the Alabama Lawyers Association, past president of the Montgomery Chapter of the Federal Bar Association and chair of the Family Law Section of the Alabama State Bar.

McPherson has received awards from the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the Women of Distinction, South Central Alabama Girl Scout Council, and Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc.

McPherson and her husband, Thomas, have raised four children.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with The Honorable Vanzetta Penn McPherson was conducted by Denise Gines on March 19, 2007, in Montgomery, Alabama, and was recorded on 7 Betacame SP videocassettes. Entrepreneur and federal judge The Honorable Vanzetta Penn McPherson (1947 -) served as a United States magistrate judge for the Middle District of Alabama and co-founded the African American cultural bookstore, Roots & Wings.

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:

McPherson, Vanzetta Penn, 1947-

Gines, Denise (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

McPherson, Vanzetta Penn, 1947- --Interviews

African American women judges--Interviews

African American businesspeople--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Entrepreneur

Federal Judge

HistoryMakers® Category:

CivicMakers|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 Vanzetta Penn McPherson, March 19, 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).

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 Vanzetta Penn McPherson, Section A2007_099_001_001, TRT: 0:30:20 ?

Vanzetta Penn McPherson was born on May 26, 1947 in Montgomery, Alabama. She traces her maternal family back to her great great-grandmother, Peggy Williams, who was born in slavery. Her daughter, Mary Williams Sanders, was born in 1874 and was part Cherokee. McPherson's maternal grandmother, Luvenia Sanders Gardner, was born in Burkville, Alabama in 1899 and attended Tuskegee Institute in Tuskegee, Alabama before she met McPherson's maternal grandfather, Monroe James Gardner, who was born in 1892 to Monroe James Gardner and Sylvia Gardner. McPherson's maternal great great-grandfather was white. McPherson's mother, Sadie Gardner Penn, was born in 1919. Two of her sisters, Wilma and Ceola Gardner, were born with learning disabilities. McPherson was raised by her maternal grandparents while her mother was a Jeanes Supervisor and her father, Luther Lincoln Penn, was a principal in Shelby County. Luther Penn was born on May 29, 1912 in Bullock County, Alabama to Sydney Washington Penn and Ella Pickett Penn.

African American women judges--Interviews.

African American businesspeople--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Vanzetta Penn McPherson, Section A2007_099_001_002, TRT: 0:28:20 ?

Vanzetta Penn McPherson traces her paternal family history back to her grandfather's parents, Sydney Penn and Larcenia Penn, who lived in Union Springs, Alabama. Sydney Penn was part Cherokee. Their son, McPherson's paternal grandfather Sydney Washington Penn, was married to Ella Pickett Penn, whose father was Bill Pickett. McPherson's parents, Sadie Gardner Penn and Luther Lincoln Penn, met after her mother graduated from Alabama State College in Montgomery, Alabama with a teaching degree and became a teacher in Bullock County, Alabama. McPherson recalls the neighborhood where both her parents and grandparents lived, and attending Alabama State College Laboratory High School in Montgomery, Alabama from age two until the end of high school. In 1955, McPherson experienced the Montgomery Bus Boycott as an eight year old. She recalls how the boycott affected the women who lived in her neighborhood who worked as domestics. She also remembers her nursery kindergarten teacher, Willette McGinty (ph.).

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Vanzetta Penn McPherson, Section A2007_099_001_003, TRT: 0:29:00 ?

Vanzetta Penn McPherson attended Alabama State College Laboratory High School in Montgomery, Alabama, located on the campus of Alabama State College. She describes the appearances and personalities of her teachers from first through tenth grade, including prim and proper Cleonia Taylor (ph.), Dorothy Draper (ph.), Nell Rice (ph.), Effie Frances Wheat (ph.), and Maddie Gilcrest (ph.), who taught her students the poem "What I Live For." McPherson's seventh-grade teacher, Ollie Phillips (ph.), encouraged her to attend science summer camp at Virginia State College in Petersburg, Virginia in 1960. McPherson's eighth-grade teacher was Clara Davey (ph.), a grammarian who required students to write surprise compositions. In ninth grade, McPherson had Etta Alexander (ph.) as a home economics teacher, and in tenth grade she had Faustine Dunn (ph.) as a homeroom teacher. McPherson remembers the

influx of students from Loveless Junior High School in tenth grade, as well as the assassination of President John F. Kennedy.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Vanzetta Penn McPherson, Section A2007_099_001_004, TRT: 0:28:30 ?

Vanzetta Penn McPherson remembers the March on Washington in 1963 and reflects on how the Civil Rights Movement affected the atmosphere of Montgomery, Alabama and how some people like Rosa Parks were taken for granted. McPherson attended Alabama State College Laboratory High School in Montgomery, Alabama, where her eleventh-grade teacher was Murillo Garner and her twelfth-grade teacher was Annetta Baugh (ph.). She reflects on the class dynamics of two prominent organizations for African Americans in Montgomery, Jack and Jill of America and National Tots and Teens. McPherson graduated from high school in 1965 and enrolled at Hampton Institute in Hampton, Virginia for pre-college during the summer. In the fall, she enrolled at Howard University in Washington, D.C. to study speech pathology, where she met Stokely Carmichael, Phylicia Rashad, Debbie Allen, Roberta Flack, Jessye Norman, and HistoryMaker Maulana Karenga. McPherson was a dorm counselor and pledged, but did not join, the Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Vanzetta Penn McPherson, Section A2007_099_001_005, TRT: 0:28:40 ?

Vanzetta Penn McPherson recalls discrimination by class and skin color at Howard University in Washington, D.C., including Robin Gregory being named the first Ms. Howard to have an afro in 1968. Inspired by her aunts Wilma Gardner and Ceola Gardner, McPherson majored in speech pathology, and her professors included William Bonner and Sadanand Singh. At Howard University, McPherson worked as a dorm counselor and as secretary to the Student Bar Association, and her tuition and boarding were paid for by a National Achievement Scholarship. McPherson received her bachelor's degree in 1969 and enrolled at Columbia University in New York City, New York to study speech pathology and audiology. She received her master's degree from Columbia in 1971 and briefly worked at the Association for the Help of Retarded Children (AHRC) before enrolling at Columbia Law School that September. Her classmates included Bill Lann Lee, Mary Jo White, Ellen Futter, John Shutkin, and Laurance Rockefeller, Jr.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Vanzetta Penn McPherson, Section A2007_099_001_006, TRT: 0:30:00 ?

Vanzetta Penn McPherson met her first husband, Winston Mortimer Dansford Durant, while attending Howard University in Washington, D.C. The two were married in August of 1968 and had their first son, Reagan Winston Durant, in 1974, shortly after McPherson received her J.D. from Columbia Law School in New York City, New York. From September of 1974 until October of 1975, McPherson worked at the law firm of Hughes Hubbard and Reed. In 1975, McPherson and Durant moved to Montgomery, Alabama and worked as lawyers for Attorney General's office. In 1978, she started her private law practice, where her biggest case was a class action lawsuit against the Montgomery County Sheriff Department in 1987. McPherson and Durant divorced in 1979 and McPherson married Thomas McPherson, Jr., a mediator for the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, after they met in 1982. In 1992, McPherson was selected by HistoryMaker Myron Thompson to serve as a United States Magistrate Judge for the Middle District of Alabama.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Vanzetta Penn McPherson, Section A2007_099_001_007, TRT: 0:28:20 ?

Vanzetta Penn McPherson reflects on the African American community in Montgomery, Alabama and organizations she is involved in, including the Urban League, Lighthouse Counseling Center, Carver Creative and Performing Arts Center, and the Alabama Shakespeare Festival. In 1989, McPherson and Delores Boyd started Roots and Wings, a bookstore on the campus of Alabama State University in Montgomery, Alabama that specializes in books by and about African Americans. Authors who have visited the bookstore include Alex Haley and Alice Walker as well as HistoryMakers John Hope Franklin, Sonia Sanchez, Marian Wright Edelman, and Pearl Cleage. McPherson reflects on her life after retirement, her messages for future generations, her hopes, and how she would like to be remembered. She concludes the interview by talking about her marriage to Thomas McPherson, Jr. and narrating her photographs.