

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Maurice Ashley

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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>	Ashley, Maurice
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Maurice Ashley,
<b>Dates:</b>	September 18, 2007
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2007
<b>Physical Description:</b>	8 Betacame SP videocassettes (3:40:35).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Chess grandmaster Maurice Ashley (1966 - ) was the first African American to earn the title of International Grandmaster of Chess. He was an advocate for chess education as a means to improve the lives of at-risk youth. Ashley was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on September 18, 2007, in New York, New York. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2007_266
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

International Grandmaster of Chess Maurice Ashley was born on March 6, 1966, in St. Andrew, Jamaica. When Ashley was twelve years old he moved with his family moved to the Brownsville section of Brooklyn, New York. With instruction from his older brother, Ashley began to play chess. During his high school years at Brooklyn Tech in the early 1980s, Ashley failed to make the chess team, but despite this setback, he resolved to compete in local tournaments. Ashley joined the Black Bear School of Chess, a local group of African American chess enthusiasts from Brooklyn, and by the time he graduated from high school in 1984, Ashley had determined to attain the highest possible chess player ranking of Grandmaster.

Within two years, Ashley had become a National Master; he also became the captain of the City College of New York's chess team, which competed in the Pan-American Intercollegiate Championship in 1987. Ashley studied English in college, and in his free time coached the Raging Rooks chess team at Harlem's Junior High School #43. In 1991, at the age of twenty-five, Ashley led the Rooks to victory in the National Junior High School Championships in Dearborn, Michigan. Eventually Ashley would lead the Rooks to a total of two state championships and one national championship.

In 1991 Ashley became the Harlem Educational Activities Fund's chess director after realizing how much he enjoyed coaching the game. Two years later Ashley became an International Master of Chess, the first African American in U.S. history to obtain this ranking; he also finished in first place at the esteemed Enhance International Chess Tournament and became champion of Manhattan's Marshall Chess Club Championship. 1993 also marked Ashley's first year as coach of Mott Hall Elementary's Dark Knights Chess Team, a group that would go on to win two consecutive championships on the national level.

In 1995 Ashley's daughter Nia was born; that same year Ashley became a commentator for the World Championship between Kasparov and Anand. In 1996, Ashley would serve as a commentator for Kasparov's

legendary Man vs. Machine match against the computer Deep Blue. The following year, Ashley left his coaching work to focus his efforts on becoming an International Grand Master of Chess.

At age thirty-three, Ashley became the first African American to attain the rank of International Grand Master of Chess in 1999, joining a list of approximately 800 chess players worldwide to have obtained the title. This achievement was reported in a variety of publications across the globe, including *The New York Times* and *Sports Illustrated*. That September, Ashley opened the Harlem Chess Center, which offered classes and computer chess training. In 2000 and 2001, Ashley became the first consecutive winner at the Foxwoods Open, and in 2003 Ashley became the U.S. Chess Federation's Grandmaster of the Year. Ashley runs the Maurice Ashley Foundation, an organization which he hopes will establish chess as a significant tool for developing young people's educational growth. In addition to his work with the Foundation, Ashley has produced an assortment of educational tools to spread his message about the positive benefits of chess; these include the book *Chess for Success: Using an Old Game to Build New Strengths in Children and Teens*, the DVD *Speed Chess*, and the CD ROM *Maurice Ashley Teaches Chess*.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Maurice Ashley was conducted by Adrienne Jones on September 18, 2007, in New York, New York, and was recorded on 8 Betacame SP videocassettes. Chess grandmaster Maurice Ashley (1966 - ) was the first African American to earn the title of International Grandmaster of Chess. He was an advocate for chess education as a means to improve the lives of at-risk youth.

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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:

Ashley, Maurice

Jones, Adrienne (Interviewer)

Burghelea, Neculai (Videographer)

## Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews  
Ashley, Maurice--Interviews

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Chess players--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:

Chess Grandmaster

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## HistoryMakers® Category:

SportsMakers

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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 Maurice Ashley, September 18, 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 Maurice Ashley, Section A2007\_266\_001\_001, TRT: 0:30:14 ?

Maurice Ashley was born on March 6, 1966 in Saint Andrew Parish, Jamaica to Thelma Cormack and Frank Ashley. His maternal grandmother, Irma Cormack, was born in 1904 in Saint Ann Parish, Jamaica. She became a teacher, and had seven children, including Ashley's mother, who grew up in Saint Ann Parish before moving to Kingston, Jamaica. Ashley's father was also born in Jamaica, and had two children from a previous relationship. He and Ashley's mother were together only briefly before separating. He then immigrated to the United States; where, as a dancer, he toured internationally with the Martha Graham Dance Company. From 1968, Ashley's mother lived in New York City, while Ashley's maternal grandmother raised Ashley and his siblings, Alicia Ashley and Devon Cormack, in Jamaica. He remembers moving to her home on Allamanda Avenue in Kingston, and visiting his paternal grandmother. He also remembers the American immigration policies of the 1960s, and learning to play Ludi, a Jamaican board game.

Chess players--Interviews

Video Oral History Interview with Maurice Ashley, Section A2007\_266\_001\_002, TRT: 0:29:06 ?

Maurice Ashley and his siblings, Alicia Ashley and Devon Cormack, were raised in Kingston, Jamaica by their maternal grandmother, Irma Cormack, after their mother, Thelma Cormack, immigrated to the United States. They were unable to travel to New York City, so their mother visited them in Jamaica. In Kingston, Ashley played games and sports, and attended Sunday school. He began his education at Seaward Primary and Junior High School, where he was rarely challenged by his schoolwork. Ashley went on to be admitted to Wolmer's Trust High School for Boys, a private, British-style school in Kingston, where he studied for one year. In 1978, he and his siblings immigrated to Brooklyn, New York, and moved into their mother's home. Ashley remembers his expectations of New York City, where he assumed he would live in a luxurious apartment building; and his impressions upon arriving in Brownsville, their neighborhood in Brooklyn, where crime and poverty were prevalent.

Video Oral History Interview with Maurice Ashley, Section A2007\_266\_001\_003, TRT: 0:29:13 ?

Maurice Ashley immigrated with his siblings to the United States in 1978. At this point in the interview, he describes the political violence he witnessed in Jamaica, and the drug-related violence in Brownsville, his neighborhood in Brooklyn, New York. There, Ashley enrolled at Arthur S. Somers Junior High School, where he qualified for the accelerated track. He recalls his math teacher, who brought the top students, including Ashley, to eat at Burger King as reward for solving difficult problems. Ashley had some difficulty adjusting at the school, as his peers considered him too deferential to the teachers. He went on to attend Brooklyn Technical High School, where he began playing chess with his Haitian friend, Clotaire Colas, who invited him to join the chess club. Although Ashley did not score well enough to play on the team, he improved his skills

with consistent practice; and, from the tenth grade, aspired to play chess professionally.

Video Oral History Interview with Maurice Ashley, Section A2007\_266\_001\_004, TRT: 0:30:35 ?

Maurice Ashley was a student at Brooklyn Technical High School in Brooklyn, New York during his brief involvement with the Jehovah's Witnesses. At that time, Ashley took a nine-month hiatus from playing chess. Later, Ashley was introduced to Willie Johnson, one of the founders of Brooklyn's Black Bear School of Chess. He describes the history of the group, which studied chess strategies; and its players, including William Morrison, Ernest "Steve" Colding, Ronald Simpson and Chris Welcome, who adapted the group's name from a Russian chess school. While the organization's members mostly competed against one another, Ashley aspired to become a chess grandmaster, and began playing in tournaments. During this time, at his mother's insistence, Ashley enrolled at the City College of New York, where he majored in English. While in college, he began coaching the Raging Rooks chess team at New York City's P.S. 123 through the American Chess Foundation.

Video Oral History Interview with Maurice Ashley, Section A2007\_266\_001\_005, TRT: 0:30:47 ?

Maurice Ashley began coaching the Raging Rooks chess team at P.S. 123 in New York City's Harlem neighborhood in 1989. As an all-black team, they often faced racial discrimination, including at a tournament in Tempe, Arizona, where Jonathan Nock, one of Ashley's black students, was called a racial slur by a white competitor. Ashley continued coaching the Raging Rooks at J.H.S. 43, although he encountered resistance from the American Chess Foundation. The organization discouraged coaches from remaining with one team until 1991, when the Raging Rooks won the National Junior High Chess Championship, garnering publicity for the foundation. Ashley also started the Dark Knights chess team at Harlem's Mott Hall School. He trained under international chess master Vitaly Zaltsman; and, in 1993, became an international master himself. Ashley reflects upon his time as a chess coach and player, including his experiences of discrimination at professional tournaments, which became more frequent with his growing success.

Video Oral History Interview with Maurice Ashley, Section A2007\_266\_001\_006, TRT: 0:31:12 ?

Maurice Ashley met his wife, teacher Michele Ashley-Johnson, while coaching chess at a school in Brooklyn, New York. They had two children, Nia Ashley and Jayden Ashley. Ashley describes the parenting challenges they faced due to his professional chess career, which required frequent travel. In 1994, during a tournament at the Moscow Kremlin in Russia, Bob Rice of the Professional Chess Association invited Ashley to provide the English commentary. Due to his dynamic style as a commentator, he was invited to commentate the World Chess Championships, and Garry Kasparov's match with the IBM Deep Blue computer. Then, director Daniel Rose of the Harlem Educational Activities Fund, Inc. sponsored Ashley's efforts to become the first African American international grandmaster of chess. Ashley gained the title in 1999 after defeating Adrian Negulescu at a tournament in New York City. He recalls the media response to his victory, and the African Americans who inspired him, like tennis champion Arthur Ashe.

Video Oral History Interview with Maurice Ashley, Section A2007\_266\_001\_007, TRT: 0:29:31 ?

Maurice Ashley became the first African American international grandmaster of chess in 1999, when he beat international master Adrian Negulescu at a tournament in New York City. The next two black international grandmasters were Pontus Carlsson of Sweden, and Amon Simutowe of Zambia. In addition to playing chess, Ashley served as the commentator for championship chess

matches, including 'The Man vs. The Machine,' in which Garry Kasparov played against the IBM Deep Blue computer. At the time of the interview, Ashley planned to focus on his philanthropy with the Maurice Ashley Foundation, and to found chess centers throughout the United States. Ashley describes his hopes for the next generation of chess players, including Joshua Colas, who was the nephew of his former Brooklyn Technical High School classmate, Clotaire Colas. He also talks about the strenuous nature of chess competitions, and the impact of new technologies like the Internet upon the game.

Video Oral History Interview with Maurice Ashley, Section A2007\_266\_001\_008, TRT: 0:09:57 ?

Maurice Ashley authored 'Chess for Success: Using an Old Game to Build New Strengths in Children and Teens,' which described the benefits of chess for child development. He also marketed an instructional compact disc, 'Maurice Ashley Teaches Chess.' Ashley talks about the professional chess community, as well as the opportunities for African American chess players. He concludes the interview by reflecting upon his legacy.