

Biographical Description for The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Bezelee Martin

PERSON

Martin, Bezelee, 1932-

Alternative Names: Bezelee Martin;

Life Dates: September 29, 1932-July 27, 2021

Place of Birth: Dumas, Arkansas, USA

Residence: Mequon, WI

Occupations: Retail Entrepreneur

Biographical Note

Head of the Black family-owned Lena's Food Market, Bezelee Martin was born on September 29, 1932, in Dumas, Arkansas, to Tom Martin and Ruthie Hall Martin. He was named by an aunt who found "Bezelee" in the Bible. Martin's aggressive mother reared him with strict rules of behavior and taught him to always be on time. He was raised mainly in Boley, Oklahoma – an all Black town. Being raised in this independent African American environment influenced Martin's world view. As a child, he went into the lawn mowing business, employing other children as workers. Martin always had a pop and chicken concession stand at baseball games and sold Blair's products. He attended Rust School in Boley, Boley Grade School, and Boley High School.

Martin attended Milwaukee Area Technical College where he took business and bookkeeping while working at a tannery. By 1950, he was the first black licensed car dealer in Wisconsin. By 1957, he was selling his own brand of stockings, Martin Hosiery, to women, and by 1958, Martin was operating his own trucking company. In 1960, Martin and his wife, Lena, opened a store in the Harambee section of Milwaukee, and by 1965, they owned a 3,000 square foot location. Martin purchased Milwaukee's 13,000 square foot Kohl Food Store in 2001. During this period, Martin purchased four sites for Lena's Food Market giving it a square footage of 87,000 to utilize.

Martin's family is deeply involved with the businesses, especially three of his four sons, Anthony, Derrick, and Gregory (his oldest son, Eric, is not involved in the business), and his brother, Bruce. Ownership and distribution make it possible for Martin to serve the specific product requests from the African American community. In 2005, Martin used \$3.7 million in New Market Tax Credits through the Wisconsin Housing and Urban Development Authority to open a more spacious store. That made Lena's Food Market the first minority owned business to receive these credits. In 2007, Lena's Food

Market purchased two new locations raising the total to six stores employing 600 people.

Martin passed away on July 27, 2021.

Related Entries

Boley High School [STUDENTOF]
[from ? to ?]

Boley Grade School [STUDENTOF]
[from ? to ?]

Rust School [STUDENTOF]
[from ? to ?]

Milwaukee Area Technical College [STUDENTOF]
[from ? to ?]

Martin Wholesale [EMPLOYEEOF]
[from ? to ?]

Owner

Lena's Food Market [EMPLOYEEOF]
[from ? to ?]

Owner

Ford Motor Company [EMPLOYEEOF]
[from ? to ?]