Black Power Chronicles: Gaynelle Henderson

Gaynelle Henderson, Chair of Henderson Travel Service, discussed her family's pioneering role in African-American travel, starting with a 1954 tour to Paris for Christian Dior's fashion show. Her parents, pioneers in their own right, established Henderson Travel Service in 1955, organizing tours to Africa and Europe. Gaynelle recounted her experiences, including leading tours and working with notable figures like Martin Luther King Jr. and Jesse Jackson. She highlighted the African Diaspora Heritage Trail project, which promoted African heritage tourism. Despite challenges, Henderson remains committed to fostering African-American connections with the continent.

Greg Carr: Welcome to the Black Power Chronicles. My name is Greg Carr, I am an Associate Professor and Chair of the Department of Afro-American studies at Howard University and I'm honored to be here today with Ms. Gaynelle Henderson who continues her work at the helm of the Henderson Travel organization [Henderson Travel Service], an organization that is now in its 63rd year. We're going to have a conversation today about her life, her work and Black Power. So nice to be here with you.

Gaynelle Henderson: Oh, my pleasure Greg.

Greg Carr: Let's start from the beginning. Typically we have these grand tour questions, so we ask you how your childhood unfolded and how growing up, you began to interact with Black communities and developed a sense of community will ultimately empty into Black Power. Let's start at the beginning. Where are you from?

Gaynelle Henderson: I'm from Atlanta, Georgia.

Greg Carr: And you come from quite a prominent family. Your mother and father made a way for a whole lot of Africans to see the continent of Africa. Let's talk a little bit about that. Your parents, tell us a little bit about your folks.

Gaynelle Henderson: My mother and father are just pioneers in their own right. My father's originally from Hartsville, South Carolina. My mother originally from Franklinton, Louisiana, and they got together in Atlanta. My father attended [Clark] Atlanta University, and my mother came to Spelman after matriculating through college herself… came to Spelman to teach in

home economics. Actually, my father kind of convinced her to do that, I think. He convinced her to come to Atlanta. They married soon thereafter.

A few years later, she was very involved in establishing the National Association of Black fashion designers, NAFAD [National Association of Fashion and Accessory Designers], they were working with Mary McLeod Bethune. I think, actually, they were the first African-American group to host a conference or convention at the Waldorf Astoria in New York?

Greg Carr: No way.

Gaynelle Henderson: Absolutely.

Greg Carr: Your mother was an undergraduate at Southern University and then eventually goes to NYU [New York University]?

Gaynelle Henderson: Much later on, exactly.

Greg Carr: But they're developing this [organization]—and I think about Ms. Bethune with her sense of fashion, even at her house now you see these furs. But your mother is pioneering and bringing together folks who are doing that kind of work. This organizational work.

Gaynelle Henderson: She's one of the original members of NAFAD and actually NAFAD had a lot to do with her initial interest in traveling to Europe. That was the reason that—let me back up and give you a little more detail. What happened is Mrs. Roosevelt—

Greg Carr: Eleanor Roosevelt.

Gaynelle Henderson: Eleanor Roosevelt was very, very much the reason that NAFAD was the first African-American group to be able to hold a conference or a meeting at the Waldorf Astoria in New York. This was during segregation, and they did not allow African-American groups to meet there, and certainly not stay overnight. So although NAFAD held that first African-American meeting in the Waldorf Astoria, they were not allowed to stay in the hotel. They were not allowed to have accommodations at the hotel.

But at that meeting, my mother met a woman who ended up assisting her, saying, this group should really go to Paris for one of Christian Dior's spring fashion shows. You all should really go to Europe. And she said, in fact, "I'm going to help you do that." So she made the connection. She put my mother in contact with one of Christian Dior's main assistants at the time.

My mother ended up putting the first tour together of African-American women to travel to Paris for Christian Dior's spring fashion show in 1954. From there, she planned a trip for them to go on to Spain and they met with the designers at the time, I think the Amies brothers, or the Hardy [Hardy Amies] brothers. Then on to London for the designers fashion show there and came back.

Greg Carr: These are Black women.

Gaynelle Henderson: These are African-American women, and I have wonderful photos of them getting on Pan-American Airlines' propeller plane with their white gloves, their beautiful dresses and hats. And they were clean.

Greg Carr: Gotta love the swag.

Gaynelle Henderson: They were Black fashion designers back in 1954 and we have this great photo of them boarding that flight to take that inaugural flight over to Paris. My mother came back after the trip, which was very, very successful and just very enlightening for her and for the group. And she said to my father if more African-Americans were aware of how well received we are in Europe and how easy it is to travel. She said, "I'm sure they would travel." So that was the impetus for their starting Henderson Travel Service, opening the doors of Henderson Travel the very next year, in 1955. We opened the doors of Henderson Travel in Atlanta.

Greg Carr: And then two short years later, you're off to Ghana.

Gaynelle Henderson: In two short years, we pioneered tourism to Ghana. My mother and father literally had to organize a group that flew to Paris, and then they chartered a plane from Paris to Accra, Ghana for Ghana's independence celebration. The reason they had to charter a plane was that this was before commercial airlines were even flying to the continent of Africa. This was before Pan Am [Pan American Airlines], one of the first airlines to fly from the U.S. to the continent, and before KLM [Royal Dutch Airlines], Sabena [Société Anonyme Belge de Navigation Aérienne].

These are some of the very first airlines that flew to the continent. And in fact, with Pan Am, the first tour they put together to Africa, they had to come to Henderson Travel Service and ask for assistance with the ground operations. You know, how do we get from the airport to the hotel? What hotels do we book? What sightseeing should we see? All of that. So we have Pan Am 101 tours. I've got the brochure to this day of those first tours with Pan Am.

Greg Carr: In 1957 when we look at the footage, there's a musical documentary, *Satchmo The Great*, with Louis Armstrong performing in Ghana. And you see in other footage, Martin Luther King, Coretta Scott King, over there at the Ghanaian independence movement, the celebration.

When we see African-Americans in that footage, they probably flew over there, thanks to Henderson.

Gaynelle Henderson: They probably did early on. Absolutely. We were pioneers. That began our specialization in African tourism, and we're known for that. African tourism is our niche. By now, we've literally sent hundreds of thousands of African-Americans and people of other persuasions to Africa. But primarily our market is African-Americans and cultural heritage tours.

Greg Carr: At this time you're a little girl, and in the next decade, between [19]57 and [19]65, [19]67, there's going to be more and more trips to Africa and other places, and they're going to involve some of the names that you know, our young people, particularly read about in the history books. You're going to have another trip involving Martin Luther King, a major trip right to Oslo [Norway]. Tell us a little bit about that, because by that time you're on the scene. You're young, not sure if you remember that.

Gaynelle Henderson: When Martin Luther King received the Nobel Peace Prize [1964], Martin Luther King and Coretta King were dear friends of my mother and father in Atlanta. I remember one Thanksgiving, sitting right next to him at a Thanksgiving dinner in the basement of our house on Simpson Road in Atlanta.

Because of that closeness, and because at that time my mother and father were literally the only—or at least one of a handful of—African-American travel agencies at the time.

Greg Carr: The first licensed one.

Gaynelle Henderson: The first fully licensed African-American travel agency in the U.S. We had relationships with the airlines and could issue airline tickets. So, of course, Martin came to my mom and dad and said, "Look, you've got to plan this trip for us to go over to Oslo. I'm going to be receiving the Nobel Peace Prize." My mother and father put together a detailed itinerary, which I have copies of today.

There were two separate groups because Martin and Coretta believed in traveling on separate flights. They didn't want to travel together because of fear of something happening to him, probably. And they didn't want her to be on the same plane.

So, we had two separate groups of about 15 to 20 people each, including family members and people like Andy [Andrew] Young, Ralph Abernathy, and so many dear friends from Atlanta and the Civil Rights Movement who went over with him to receive the Nobel Peace Prize.

Greg Carr: My goodness. So then, after that trip, and even before, but certainly after that, the business just continued to flower. Now you're getting to the point where you're going to start thinking about college. Where'd you go to high school?

Gaynelle Henderson: I started off at Henry McNeal Turner [High School] in eighth grade.

Greg Carr: The Georgia Equal Rights League [laughs]. Henry McNeal Turner and Martin Luther King's grandfather were boys back in the 19th century.[1] And you went to a school named for Turner?

Gaynelle Henderson: My parents believed in sending all of us away to private prep schools.

Greg Carr: How many of you were there?

Gaynelle Henderson: There were four of us. I first went to a school in Asheville, North Carolina, called Allen School for Girls.

Greg Carr: A Black school?

Gaynelle Henderson: That was a Black school.

Greg Carr: Not named for Richard Allen?

Gaynelle Henderson: I don't know.

Greg Carr: Where was it?

Gaynelle Henderson: It was in Asheville, North Carolina,

Greg Carr: This is a Black boarding school?

Gaynelle Henderson: A Black boarding school. It's still there today.

Greg Carr: You know what, people don't know the history [of schools like those]. I know [The] Piney Woods [School], for example, in Mississippi, but I didn't know about Allen. And it was Black women?

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[1] The Georgia Equal Rights League was an organization that advocated for racial equality, particularly during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Henry McNeal Turner, who was a prominent leader in the African Methodist Episcopal Church and a civil rights activist, played a significant role in advocating for equal rights for African Americans. The statement about Turner and Martin Luther King Jr.'s grandfather being "boys" in the 19th century highlights the deep historical connections within Black leadership in Georgia, emphasizing how Turner and figures like King's family were part of a long tradition of activism.

Gaynelle Henderson: Black women, absolutely. An all African-American school.

Greg Carr: What's the sister's name that—she was a mentor of—I can't think of her name, it'll come to me in a minute. So you went to this school.

Gaynelle Henderson: For one year and then transferred to a prep school in Littleton, New Hampshire which was all girls, all white. I was the only Black student during my first year. In my second year, they brought in another Black student. I was in New Hampshire for the rest of my high school years.

Greg Carr: What was that like?

Gaynelle Henderson: That was interesting. I don't remember feeling any animosity whatsoever, but I was clearly a novelty in New Hampshire at the time. I remember walking into the little town of Littleton. The first time I walked into town, people were literally coming to their doors, sticking their heads out, and looking. I don't think they had ever seen an African-American person. This was in 1966, in Littleton, New Hampshire.

Another time, I remember being a receptionist at the school, and a little girl, probably six or seven years old, came up to me and rubbed my arm and said, "Does it wash off?"

Greg Carr: Oh Lord. I was hoping you weren't going to say that. Did she literally say that?

Gaynelle Henderson: She literally said that. This was before integration, before many people of our color moved to New Hampshire. Today, it's different thank goodness. But overall, the experience was not a bad one. It was very positive in many ways. We skied every day, very sports-oriented.

Greg Carr: So you decided maybe to continue that interaction with snow for your freshman year of college.

Gaynelle Henderson: Interestingly, I did for a hot second. When I graduated from St. Mary's in the Mountains, I was accepted at Syracuse University. Unbeknownst to me, I was not thinking. That particular year at Syracuse, they had the biggest snowfall—much more than usual. Syracuse is always known for its snow, and it snowed and it snowed.

I also realized there were only 100 Black students out of 28,000 students. I remember those numbers specifically. After my first year, I had the feeling that I wanted to go south and I wanted to be with my people.

On my own, I looked up Howard University, which I'd heard about, filled out the application on my own, and applied for a scholarship as well as an assistant position for the Graduate [School] Student Council as it turned out at Howard and transferred all on my own.

Greg Carr: What did your family say?

Gaynelle Henderson: They were fine with it. My parents were always very liberal and emphasized that we be independent and explore the world. So for them, it was no big thing. From New Hampshire to [Washington] DC, actually I was a little closer to them.

I arrived at Howard at just the right time. It was perfect for me. It was actually [19]67. I was at Syracuse in 1966–[19]67, so the timing worked out well.

Greg Carr: So the call for Black Power in Mississippi is [19]66, you get to Howard just as that call is resonating.[2] Tell us about that.

Gaynelle Henderson: Just a wonderful, wonderful experience. That was when the Black Power Movement was really resonating, and students were feeling the need to express their connection with Africa and her diaspora through culture, through dress, through music, through hairstyles, through dance—through any and every means that we could, so it was just –

I would not trade it for anything. It was the best time in the world to be at Howard University, at that period when we were so focused on the Black Power Movement and "I'm Black and I'm proud."[3] Really recognizing that we as Black people need to identify with Africa as our roots, as our home and feel proud of our Blackness and live life expressing that position of power.

Greg Carr: What did you come to study?

Gaynelle Henderson: I actually did not know for the longest time. I was in the School of Liberal Arts, but I had no inkling of what I was going to major in. I really had no idea. So I studied a little bit of everything. Then, in my final year, when I had to select a major, I ended up selecting the wrong thing. I spoke to a friend who said, "Oh yeah, you should go into speech pathology."

Greg Carr: Are you serious?

Gaynelle Henderson: I'm serious [laughs]. So, I put that down and majored in speech pathology for my last year and then applied for a master's at Teachers College, Barnard, and was accepted on a scholarship. I went to New York, but after just one semester, I realized that speech pathology really was not my calling.

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[2] In 1966, Stokely Carmichael, then chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), introduced the term "Black Power" during the Meredith March Against Fear in Mississippi.

[3] The song "Say It Loud – I'm Black and I'm Proud" by James Brown, released in 1968, became a powerful anthem for the Black Power Movement, celebrating Black identity and pride while promoting self-empowerment and resistance to racial oppression.

I happened to be there to hear a lecture by Dr. Orlando Taylor. At that time he was about to become dean of the School of Communication.

Greg Carr: They came out of liberal arts.

Gaynelle Henderson: That's right. He came and spoke to us about the importance of Black English at the time at Teachers College in New York.[4] I was absolutely fascinated by the topic. It really resonated with me. I connected with the fact that the way African-Americans speak, especially in inner cities, is tied to our Africanisms in the continent. I transferred back down to Federal City College, where Dr. Taylor was at the time.

Greg Carr: Let's open up a little bit more about some of the things that you did during that period, [19]67 to 19]70, [19]71. Is it after your sophomore year that you decide, with the family business, to help lead a tour?

Gaynelle Henderson: All of us were involved in the family business growing up. We were handwriting tickets before airline tickets were computerized. My parents would give us a list of names because we worked with all the African-American associations, you know. Medical Association, National Dental Association, all the sororities, fraternities, all of the HBCU, I mean a lot of the HBCUs, I can't say all of them. But just about all of the major Black professional associations over the years we worked with. Not just tours to Africa but throughout the world. Most of our tours and what we're known for are the tours to Africa.

Greg Carr: This is amazing, because some of the countries are not yet independent. The Caribbean nations are just gaining their independence. So you're really sending the first waves of organized groups of African people born in this country to see the rest of the African world.

Gaynelle Henderson: Absolutely, no question.

Greg Carr: And it just opened up. And as a child, you're literally sitting there writing the names of the people who are going to—

Gaynelle Henderson: Right. They would give us one flight schedule, and we would write hand tickets with our hands, manually write the tickets, but change the name according to the list. Then we started leading the tours. By the age of, what, 16, you know, we were leading tours. All of us, my four siblings.

One of my first tours to Africa was when I was 18, and it was a group of Savannah State students. We were going to Senegal, to Ghana and on to Nigeria. But I recall that after we took

[4] Black English refers to the importance of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) as a valid linguistic form.

off from Dakar , after spending a few days there, the plane was just about to take off. We looked out the window and one of the propellers had caught fire. Immediately, we turned back around.

Greg Carr: And you're leading the thing, so you've got to remain calm.

Gaynelle Henderson: We have to remain calm. Calm the students down. In fact I wasn't much older than—actually I was the same age as them, getting my feet wet with leading a tour. We ended up actually staying in Dakar for about four or five days, because at that time they had to fly another plane down. It was not a matter of repairing the plane in Senegal to continue on. So we ended up going on to Ghana, but didn't make it to Nigeria because of the delay in Senegal.

Greg Carr: You're in Ghana shortly after the coup [referring to the 1966 Ghanaian coup d'état]. The coup was '66 so [Kwame] Nkrumah is no longer in power, but you're really coming into these countries as they're just getting up on their legs.

Gaynelle Henderson: Absolutely.

Greg Carr: What was that like traveling in Africa at that stage, particularly with young people?

Gaynelle Henderson: It was really empowering, because we were able to show our travelers, our clients, that African countries, the capital cities, were very much developed. Unlike we thought then—in fact, unfortunately, even as people think today, because of the negative press that the continent gets—African countries, even in the [19]50s, the capital cities were very fairly developed for the time. There were clearly high rise buildings, at least four or five story buildings and capitals. And cities that were well on their way. They also had decent hotels. We stayed in what was considered the first class hotels at the time. They were white.

Greg Carr: At Henderson, y'all put people in the best accommodations.

Gaynelle Henderson: This is true. We try to. Now some clients want to live with the people, and we do that. But I remember the first hotel we used in Dakar was the Meridien, which is now one of the most gorgeous hotels on the Atlantic, just a few miles outside of the city of Dakar.

At that time however, they had these adorable little huts, a little village of little huts with thatched roofs. They were quite comfortable, two beds in each one, windows, a doorway and the students loved it. We were right on the beach. So during the time that we were there, we were able to walk along the beach, interact with the village that was right next to us, and interact with African people. It was a wonderful experience.

Greg Carr: This is before Gorée Island really emerges as the destination is now.[5] I know later on you'll do work with Gorée. Was that even something that people did at that time?

Gaynelle Henderson: No, I don't recall it being a part of our site-seeing at that time.

Greg Carr: Now you're engaged in this work, in a parallel track, you are still a student at Howard, and you come into Howard as this Black Power Movement is beginning to emerge. And of course, we look at Henry Hampton's work and *Eyes on the Prize*. They talk about Robin Gregory and the afro and Miss Howard.[6] But you have more than passing knowledge about that. In fact, you're in that bloodline. So talk to us about the politics of style, Black Power and culture at that moment. What does it mean?

Gaynelle Henderson: Very transitional time. Because, again, we were really [about], "I'm Black and I'm proud," James Brown's wonderful song. That took on a life of its own. We were as students, at least a large percentage of us, were really identifying with our African roots expressing them.

At that time, we had many Black activists who came on campus and spoke. Stokely Carmichael, I remember, came a couple of times. I remember being right there listening to him, talk about Black Power and how we should all become active and fight for our social justice and our political and economic equality.

We had wonderful performers, entertainers who came to Crampton Auditorium [a building at Howard University], jazz artists, singers. It was just a time that was just so rich with African-American history and culture and the recognition that we all needed to grasp this culture of ours.

Greg Carr: I'm sure it changed Howard too. I'm sure there's class politics because prior to that period, Howard is not known in that sense for Black Power culture like that. There were outliers like Sterling Brown of course, but you all are driving this. How is that opening up the student body and how does that translate even as you begin to infiltrate some of the rituals like the Miss Howard ritual.

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[5] Gorée Island, located off the coast of Dakar, Senegal, is historically significant as one of the most prominent centers of the Atlantic slave trade. In recent decades, Gorée Island has become a site for pilgrimages, educational tours, and cultural reflection, particularly around Juneteenth and other commemorations of African American history.

[6] Robin Gregory was a participant in Miss Howard University and the Afro as a symbol of Black pride and empowerment. Henry Hampton's *Eyes on the Prize* highlighted how Gregory's involvement at Howard University fits into the larger cultural shift of the 1960s and 1970s, where Black students were embracing their identity, heritage, and activism. The Afro hairstyle, in particular, became a visual symbol of the Black Power Movement and Black pride during this period.

Gaynelle Henderson: You still had your divisions on campus, but they weren't so much divisions. But you had your people who were clearly more interested in their African history and culture and roots and the Black Power movement than others.

Greg Carr: The more things change, the more they stay the same.

Gaynelle Henderson: Clearly had that. I don't know how I got into this position. I became a candidate for Howard's homecoming queen in 1969, my last year. I don't even recall how it happened. Someone said, "Yeah, you should do this," and before I knew it, they put my name up, and I became the representative from the School of Liberal Arts.

I was running against a young lady from the AKAs [Alpha Kappa Alpha], another from the Deltas, another from the Zetas—all these sororities. Historically, the sororities' candidates were the ones who won. Their candidates always had the stronger campaigns.

It was just incredible. I'll tell you, I ended up having the whole Fine Arts School behind me. It seemed like all of the Black Power activists at the time, I had a massive afro and was wearing African dress. I'm very much connected with the Black Power Movement and with my history, my family's history in traveling to Africa.

I recognized the importance of our African roots and the need to connect more than I recognized students were doing. In fact, my campaign slogan was "Out of Many, One People," which is actually Jamaica's national motto. Somehow, I read about it and said, "This is perfect." This really represents what I want to stand for.

Before I knew it, I had this amazing contingency of supporters who did everything. I mean, we had the most creative campaigns, presentations. The one night I remember, at one time being outside of the fine arts building during the lunch break when all the fraternities and sororities gathered and did their ritual dances, et cetera. All of my group got organized and convened right outside the fine arts building, and we had African dancers and African clothes, we had drummers. Someone came dancing around with a python. No, it was a cobra.

Greg Carr: Come on. No –

Gaynelle Henderson: It's a big, huge snake, big, huge snake that they draped around my neck. Of course, I had the African dress. I'm sitting in a Huey Newton chair.

Greg Carr: Wait, this isn't a real snake.

Gaynelle Henderson: This is a real snake. I acted like I wasn't scared to death, but I was.

Greg Carr: There's gotta be a photo of this somewhere [laughs]. You need to send that back to the archives. Are you serious? That had to be somebody's pet. You didn't even see that in Senegal.

Gaynelle Henderson: Not that size snake, no [laughs] I have many pictures with crocodiles and snakes, pythons in Senegal, but nothing as massive as this huge thing. The fine arts Africanist activists all got behind my campaign, and we won.

Greg Carr: Of course, this isn't just restricted to Howard. This is really a national conversation. There was an article we were talking about earlier in Sepia Magazine where they interviewed you and some other folks. You're talking about how much you respect H. Rap Brown and how much you love Miriam Makeba, this is going all over the country. Howard is really participating in helping you shape this consciousness everywhere. Were you all aware of that at the time?

Gaynelle Henderson: I think so because I remember thinking at the time that we were one of the first universities, we thought at the time, to actually stage an administrative building sit-in.

Greg Carr: Talk to me about that. That's the only reason I have a job, what you all did with the Toward a Black University [Conference].

Gaynelle Henderson: That's true, that's true. I'm not saying it's true that you have a job.

Greg Carr: No, no, no. I'm telling you there wouldn't be an African-American studies department.

Gaynelle Henderson: We were fighting for more curriculum that focused on our history, our culture. Our story versus his-story and that was not in the books then. It really is not in the books, as it should be even today. But certainly then we were going to an African-American university, one of the premier universities, Howard University, and we were getting nothing in terms of African-American history and culture in our curriculum.

That was one of the main things that we fought for and there were other reasons too. As I recall, I don't know, of course, what they were. But we staged one of the major administration building takeovers for a couple of days, at least.[7] I remember being right there in the middle of it in the building when we were all there.

Greg Carr: So you were in school with the Allen sisters.

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[7] The 1968 takeover at Howard University was a significant event in the history of student activism and the Black Power Movement. On March 19, 1968, students at Howard University staged a protest by occupying the Administration Building to demand greater representation for Black students and a more inclusive curriculum.

Gaynelle Henderson: Yes, yes.

Greg Carr: Because Debbie Allen tells the story about her father calling looking for them, and I guess Phylicia wasn't in the building. She said, "Yeah, where is that red head?" She's in the building. So, were you there?

Gaynelle Henderson: Yeah, I was there as well. Phylicia was one year ahead of me and Debbie was one year behind me. That was electric. We felt empowered. We were doing what Stokely and others told us to do, be activists, stand up for your rights, fight for your rights. That's what we did in a very nonviolent way. We were adhering to Martin's spirit as well by taking over the administration building.

Greg Carr: Actually, that's interesting. I'm glad you raised that because that sparks April 1968. Do you remember when Dr. King was assassinated?

Gaynelle Henderson: Yes, I do.

Greg Carr: Tell us a little about it.

Gaynelle Henderson: The city of Washington just became literally inflamed. We had riots on U Street, riots up and down 14th Street. Howard students were involved in going out and protesting as well. I remember going over to 14th Street myself and seeing the stores on fire and the looting taking place.

Greg Carr: It hit personally because you know Martin King as a child.

Gaynelle Henderson: It really, really hurt tremendously, because regardless of whether you knew him or not he was such an exceptional man. You had to respect him and respect his principles and respect the way in which he fought to gain our civil rights. He was just an incredible man. And in person, he was just very personable down to earth, just a very warm, warm spirit.

So yeah, I was personally touched, in addition to just being distraught because of what he stood for and what he fought for, and what he represented to Black Americans at the time. He really did succeed in opening the door for our civil rights. And I see the Black Power Movement as picking up from that period, that decade of the civil rights and picking up and taking it to another level with the focus on our Black consciousness and our roots and the diaspora and not just civil rights, but also fighting for political, economic justice, social justice as well.

Greg Carr: Let's talk about that. So you finished your undergraduate career, you spent a hot minute at Barnard and said, "Yeah, I don't know about that." But as that shift – that you all really played a major role in helping to occur – really moves into the 1970s and through the 1970s. What trajectory does your life take, and how, in many ways, how do you help enable that professionally?

Because you do see, everybody starts going to Africa, going to the Caribbean. In 1972, Chou En-lai, they decided to open up China.[8] They give Nixon the credit, but you all are responsible for taking some African people from this country to China. So talk a little bit about the 1970s and how you turn to this work, enabling this Black Power Movement to work.

Gaynelle Henderson: Actually, speaking of China opening up, my mother was invited to be on the inaugural flight from the U.S. to China as a special guest of Chou En-lai.

Greg Carr: No way.

Gaynelle Henderson: She was on that first flight to China and came back and she was very much impressed. I remember her talking about how amazing it was seeing so many people. I mean, millions of people in Beijing, seeing so many people all the time, in green uniforms, on bicycles. I was in China a year or so ago. It's very, very different now. Very, very different now. Just incredible.

Traffic jams and people in cars and very, very upscale, incredible architecture and phenomenal change since then. Back in the [19]70s, that was a period when we really—although she was involved in that inaugural trip to China—we still focused more on Africa and promoting Africa.

We saw that as our calling. What comes to mind is we were leading many groups to West Africa in particular, working with Air Afrique Airlines. Air Afrique was owned by all of the African countries that were colonized by the French. So Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire, Benin.

We used to call it a puddle jumper. They would start in Dakar and literally go to every single capital city along that West African coast. So we just took advantage of Air Afrique and its great prices. In fact, I was cleaning out a storage room the last six weeks with all of our files from 1984 when I started the office here in Washington until now.

I came across some of our initial tours, even in the [19]80s, and air tickets to Dakar were as low as $300 [$873.94 in 2024] to the base fare, which was a lot of money, though, at that time with another—maybe the total ticket was $700 [$2,039.20 in 2024] now it's double that. So we had

[8] The reference to Chou En-lai and Nixon's 1972 visit highlights the broader geopolitical shifts of the era.

tours to Africa that were very affordable, although more expensive at the time than it appears, but we were encouraging our people to go to Africa.

Greg Carr: So what kind of people took you up on that?

Gaynelle Henderson: African-Americans. Primarily, I'd say from age 30 to 60, that's our ballpark. And you know, professional students, not any one segment of people, but generally people who were interested in the African diaspora or African activists or Pan-Africanists. Initially, they were the ones who were interested in—

Greg Carr: In the '70s some of the most important Black Power, Pan-Africanist, internationalist conferences that we have on record took place in that decade. Were you involved in any of them or enabling folks to make connections? I think of FESTAC 77 [also known as the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture].

Gaynelle Henderson: Yes, my brother Jake Henderson Jr. was very much involved with FESTAC. Was that 1974?

Greg Carr: There was '74 yes.

Gaynelle Henderson: He was very much involved and took a group over and was involved in some of the programming aspects. And then also Alex Haley's book *Roots* came out in the [19]70s.

Greg Carr: Yeah, the movie [TV series] was [19]77, so the early [19]70s was the book.

Gaynelle Henderson: That was a real impetus for us, because, of course, after the book, and then the TV series that so many Americans watch to this day. It's phenomenal. We took advantage of that interest in traveling to The Gambia, to Alex Haley's home, Jufureh [Gambia].[9]

Greg Carr: To the village. Everybody wanted to go find Kunta Kinte.

Gaynelle Henderson: Even today, his village still stands. His relatives are there. It's a sightseeing attraction today. In fact, I'm taking a group next month to Senegal and Gambia.

Greg Carr: Oh my goodness. So then that's the [19]70s and it's really opening up. People are beginning to really—

[9] Jufureh is a village in The Gambia, famously known as the birthplace of Kunta Kinte in Alex Haley's "Roots."

Gaynelle Henderson: Very much so. We're attracting not just those Pan-Africanists, African activists, but other African-Americans who now are really curious about their roots and just want to travel to Africa and see it. And every time someone travels to any country in Africa, they always come back and tell their friends and family that they have to go.

And they always come back and say, "I want to see another country." And each and every one of those, 54 at least, African countries now, is unique and distinct in its own way. And that's what we tell people, and that's what they see.

Greg Carr: Could you say more about that? Because, I mean, obviously, particularly some young people are looking at this, and often think of Africa as a country. It's not a country.

Gaynelle Henderson: And you see it in the media. People say, "I'm traveling to Africa." I heard it just recently. Some notable person is going to the continent. Instead of saying, "I'm traveling—as they do with Europe—to France or to Spain, "I'm going to Africa."

Greg Carr: When they say Colin Kaepernick, who went to Ghana, they say he went to Africa. Well where?

Gaynelle Henderson: It's unfortunate, because it just continues that stereotype, and it really also kind of works against Africa in that when there is a coup d'etat or when there is a serious illness—like the Ebola virus in Liberia and Sierra Leone in 2014—the whole continent is affected.

For example, in 2014 when the Ebola virus occurred, no one was traveling to Africa. Even South Africa at the time, the most popular African country, suffered for a year or two before people began to travel again to the continent. It's unfortunate, but the media does not really present a positive picture or a comprehensive picture of Africa. Africa is a beautiful, huge continent that comprises 54 different and unique countries.

Greg Carr: Even within the countries themselves.

Gaynelle Henderson: Yes, very true.

Greg Carr: This groundswell, you all really are enabling people that come back telling their friends and family organizations are going as well, and then some kind of way you decide to strike out, to come up this way and set up a branch. Is that how it works?

Gaynelle Henderson: Yeah.

Greg Carr: So tell us about that. I mean, out of the [19]70s into the [19]80s. Now this moment.

Gaynelle Henderson: I graduated from Howard and came back and got my doctorate from Howard School of Communications. I switched from speech pathology, which wasn't my thing, and ended up getting a doctorate in organizational communications. After I got my PhD in [19]81, I realized that—I worked for a few years with the federal government management consulting firm—but ended up recognizing that I needed to get involved in the family business at one point.

Greg Carr: Interesting.

Gaynelle Henderson: And rather than going back to Atlanta, though, I thought at that time, that was in the [19]80s, the federal government was opening up travel on a competitive basis. Travel agencies could compete for federal government travel. And I said, "Well, this sounds like an interesting opportunity." Let me set up, originally, a branch of Henderson Travel Service here.

And after a year or two, incorporated separately here in the District to take advantage of things like the A to A program which is a set aside program for African-American small businesses.[10] I began to compete for federal government contracts, specifically travel, thinking that was a good way to expand, but it was difficult to compete again with the white owned businesses, women owned businesses that were competing.

Greg Carr: Because Affirmative Action allowed them as well.

Gaynelle Henderson: They were getting all of those initial contracts. Omega Travel, other travel agencies like that. So I said, "Well, let me go after some conference management." My background in organizational communication allowed—and travel, conference management is really logistics. I was able to combine those two.

Our first contract was a contract on AIDS in the minority community, a million dollar contract with Health and Human Services [HHS], and that just propelled us to a new level. So we could continue to develop the travel agency, but we had this management consulting division going too that later focused on—again, got back to the importance of the African diaspora with a contract with Bermuda to promote the idea of the African Diaspora Heritage Trail.[11]

[10] The reference to the A to A program likely refers to a set-aside program aimed at supporting African American small businesses. Set-aside programs are initiatives where a certain percentage of government contracts or funds are reserved specifically for businesses owned by minority groups, in this case, African Americans.

[11] The African Diaspora Heritage Trail is a cultural and historical project that highlights sites significant to the history and legacy of the African diaspora. It aims to trace the journey of Africans across the world, connecting historical landmarks and cultural heritage in regions like the Caribbean, America, and Africa.

That was something that the tourism agency in Bermuda came up with, this idea of bringing countries of the African diaspora together and encouraging them to research their history related to slavery and to incorporate that history in tourism trails that told the unique story of that community and that country.

And they called David Allen, who was the Minister of Tourism at the time who conceived of this idea, called Henderson Travel, called me and said, "Look, we need you to help reach out to Africa. We don't have any contacts there, but we want Africa to be involved in this project."

Greg Carr: So that was 2002?

Gaynelle Henderson: Yeah, we're moving on up in time.

Greg Carr: Let me go back to move forward because during your time at Howard, you were in school with Ewart Brown.

Gaynelle Henderson: Ewart Brown was president of the Student Assembly when we took over the administration building.

Greg Carr: He eventually, a little bit later than that, becomes prime minister.

Gaynelle Henderson: He became Premier of Bermuda, and was premier of Bermuda, and very much involved in recommending to David Allen that he follow up with us. Because if he was talking about attracting people from Africa, he really needed to work with Henderson Travel.

Greg Carr: Pan-Africanism is more than an abstract idea. This is literally how the network develops. And so they bring you into this piece and Henderson is able to, with his contacts, with your contacts, and with this kind of Pan-African synergy, to put together this African heritage trail.

Gaynelle Henderson: In 2002 we were only involved in marketing and doing the travel. But unfortunately, David Allen, the Minister of Tourism, died right after that first conference, which was a great conference. The program languished for a couple of years until Ewart Brown was made Premier of Bermuda. And after that, he said, "this program is too important to allow it to disappear. We need to re-energize it, bring it back to life and make it happen." So he got in touch with us once again and said, "Look, I want you to put together a strategic plan to re-energize this program and let's make it happen." That was 2005 and we brought together some key people from across the U.S. and from throughout the diaspora, 50 people.

Danny Glover [award-winning actor] was very much involved, and we strategized on how we would move forward with convening these conferences once again and pulling together artists, musicians, educators, museums, tour and travel agencies, ministers of tourism, any and everyone who might be involved in any aspect of bringing this concept to life.

How can we bring the researchers, the educators from educational institutions throughout the diaspora to get together to talk about their history as it relates to African enslavement. Then how can we incorporate that into that country's tourism and attract more people to that country? It was an incentive for the country because it would attract more people to that country, but at the same time, it would educate the local people as well as educate their visitors.

That was a wonderful program that we were involved with for several years until—well, it was hosted by different countries every other year, Bermuda decided that it would be hosted by Bermuda. One year it was hosted by Bahamas in 2007. The last conference that we were responsible for was 2009 in Tanzania and Zanzibar. And by far, it was the largest one. I remember we had 28 different countries represented from all of the continents, including the Middle East.

Greg Carr: That kind of vision.

Gaynelle Henderson: Oh yeah, that was the purpose of our coming together. And we had over 300 people there. It was a wonderful, wonderful, wonderful project.

Greg Carr: Let's even explore that a little bit in terms—because here we are in 2017 and we see the ebb and flow of interest in Africa. But what has never diminished is the importance of time culture to this organizational structure, to this question of this thrust, this Black Power thrust. How do you see that unfolding, and how have you continued to participate in that kind of work?

Gaynelle Henderson: First of all, when it comes to Henderson Travel. I'm struggling with what to do, because no one in the family wants to take over the agency, but because of the legacy and the history, I'm finding in my passion for just sending people to Africa and seeing what an incredible difference it makes. Just the discovery, the education. It opens another whole horizon. I'm struggling with letting it go completely, so trying to figure that out.

Greg Carr: Because now you've also moved into putting people together, and you don't necessarily do the same type of scheduling tours like you used to.

Gaynelle Henderson: We do that too. We still do that. Yes, we still do the tours. Yes, absolutely. As I approach semi-retirement, I can't see letting that go, and I would be bored to tears if I would do nothing. And it's like I said, it's my love, it's my family legacy. So I see myself continuing to

do it, but probably downsizing. I've started downsizing and continuing to downsize until it's impossible. I don't think I'll ever stop sending people to Africa.

Greg Carr: This is so important, particularly as we think about this for future generations. You literally have been present from near the beginning of this movement into this burgeoning thing, into now where it's very common. Although not as common as we want it to be, still for people—for our people—to travel to the continent, to travel particularly to Africa.

What shifts have you seen in the market? When you say you're struggling to continue and figure out how to move forward. When our people want to book passage to go to South Africa, or go to Senegal or go to Ethiopia—and you have to tell the Ethiopia story [laughs]. How have you seen that change? Do they have the same interest? Do they have the same desire?

Gaynelle Henderson: Interestingly, we see less interest. We're attracting people who are not necessarily Africanist or people who are African-oriented, but people who want to just travel to South Africa right now. It's the big spot to go to.

Greg Carr: Feels like they never left the United States sometimes. They love Joburg [Johannesburg], Cape Town, Durban.

Gaynelle Henderson: It's like the "it" place on the continent for African-Americans and for Americans in general, it still is. There's a difference in taste among Africans and African-Americans and white Americans. White Americans who travel to Africa primarily go for the animal photography, the safari.

Greg Carr: We saw that up close. Students, they want to go to Kruger National Park. We're trying to go to Robben Island, but they want to go see the rhinos.

Gaynelle Henderson: They can spend a whole week on safari, moving between different safari camps. You take African-Americans to Africa, most only want two days of safari. Many of them, after just one day, say, "Okay, let's go to the city. I'm ready to see the people. I'm ready to shop, visit museums, eat the food, and experience the culture—the dance, the music."

There's a big difference, which still exists today, between the two segments of the American population that travel to Africa. I also see people who want to travel to Africa because it's a hot spot. We're getting more interest on one hand, but not as much interest as we used to have during the [19]60s and [19]70s. We had more of our people interested in traveling to Africa. I didn't have to promote it, they were just calling up and wanting to go.

Over the last 63 years, we've literally sent hundreds of thousands of people to Africa. In the first 20 to 30 years, the majority of travelers were going to West African countries. We also went to North African countries like Morocco, Ethiopia, and Egypt.

Greg Carr: Talk about that because you've had some—in fact, if you don't mind, let's spend a few minutes on some of your most striking memories.

Gaynelle Henderson: My most striking memories…and whenever I tell anyone from Ethiopia, Eritrea or Jamaica for that matter, that I went to Ethiopia and I met Haile Selassie they're just flabbergasted.

Greg Carr: Wow, as I am too. They're listening to you.

Gaynelle Henderson: Haile Selassie. We actually took the National Medical Association [NMA] to Egypt. This was in the late [19]70s.

Greg Carr: Was he still emperor?

Gaynelle Henderson: Maybe, it was early [19]70s?

Greg Carr: Yeah, it must have been early [19]70s. I think it was [19]74.

Gaynelle Henderson: Okay, so it had to be early [19]70s. We went to Addis Ababa first and then went down to Kenya. We have a photo. We were welcomed into his palace, the entire group of NMA doctors and their families. My mother, father, my younger sister and I were there.

I have photos actually shaking Haile Selassie's hand, and my sister and I with our afros—so it was early [19]70s [laughs]. We also have a photo sitting on either side of his pet lion. A big male lion [with a] mane on the front porch.

Greg Carr: I've only heard of this in legend that he had a pet lion and you saw the lion.

Gaynelle Henderson: We were on either side of him, [he was] very tame. He was clearly a pet and we have a photo. That's a real memory.

Greg Carr: So clearly you don't have any fear of animals. [You] get pythons and lions.

Gaynelle Henderson: As long as they're tame [laughs].

Greg Carr: I mean, a tame lion? [laughs] Also, Ron [Ronald H.] Brown, the Secretary of Commerce, he did some work with you all as well.

Gaynelle Henderson: He did. He was a dear friend of my brother Jake's as well. He just traveled with us.

Greg Carr: Andrew Young.

Gaynelle Henderson: Andy Young has always been an avid supporter. Of course, he went with Martin Luther King to accept the Nobel Peace Prize in Oslo and traveled around Europe afterward. But he's also done many tours with us, including a tour to South Africa and others.

We also worked with Jesse Jackson. In fact, we were his official travel agent when Jesse Jackson ran for president.

Greg Carr: Really? There's a picture of him, of all places, in a hip-hop video where's getting off a plane in Africa. I want to say he's either in Nigeria or…but you all were doing his domestic travel during the [19]84 campaign as well?

Gaynelle Henderson: We actually managed his campaign charters—his staff and the journalists traveling with him would charter planes through Henderson Travel. We took him to Cuba, Nicaragua. There was one other place I can't recall where it was. We did three charters for his campaigns.

Greg Carr: That's amazing. We think about these things now. I don't think we really think about the importance of that Black infrastructure to things [that we] now take for granted [like] campaigns. No, at that time, Jesse didn't even have security detail. [Louis] Farrakhan had to give him security before the Secret Service picked up. You all were handling the travel.

Gaynelle Henderson: We were handling the international travel for him during the campaign. I think all of us traveled come to think of it.

Greg Carr: Wow. When you finished your doctorate and opened the business here, this was in the early [19]80s. You're here as well when there's some synergy between Black politics in this city, in this country and this type of thrust. Could you talk a little about what that was like? The [Marion] Barry administration will emerge ultimately. What was it like to be a Black woman dealing with—like I said the federal government is beginning to open up some opportunities. But Black folks are finally getting some of that political power that y'all struggled to push for.

Gaynelle Henderson: It was a period when Black leaders were elected to political positions. People like Marion Barry, who became mayor of Washington, DC, and Maynard Jackson, who became mayor of Atlanta. It was pivotal because they immediately made jobs and opportunities open up for African-Americans that heretofore had never existed. I recall clearly –

There's such a big difference. When I talk to young kids who are graduating from college now, I think about that period and how many opportunities were available to African-American businesses because of small business set-aside programs. These programs were made possible by leaders like Marion Barry and Maynard Jackson.

For example, I clearly remember Maynard Jackson opening up the Atlanta airport — Hartsfield-[Jackson] International Airport. He made it possible for African-Americans to compete for restaurant and vendor positions for the first time. We took advantage of those opportunities. With Marion Barry, so many positions on his staff were filled by African-Americans. Those leadership roles made a real difference in how the city moved forward, accelerated, during his administration in terms of African-American participation and the benefits to our community in general.

Greg Carr: As you look to the future, I know you're thinking about doing some writing and working on archival organizations. Black Power has so many meanings for you and your family. This thrust which began in the fourth and fifth decades of the 20th century, now emptying into the second, third, and fourth decades of the 21st century.

What do you see going forward for our people? What do you see coming next in terms of this kind of [progress]?

Gaynelle Henderson: Given what's happening today, more than ever, we really need to become activists again. Under the current administration, we're seeing a pushback on our progress and what seems to be an effort to roll back the tides of time and change.

I think it's important for our people who are not as active as we could be when it comes to getting out, supporting the rallies, getting in touch with our politicians like Congresspeople and Senators. We need to step it up and become as active as we were in the [19]60s and [19]70s. This is a key time. It's a threatening time in our history, politically and socially.

Greg Carr: What about Africa? I'm thinking about the continent and how you now see the Chinese there.[12] A lot of folks. Everybody is in Africa now and as you travel back and forth and take us back and forth, what do you see as the future of the continent as it relates to this time?

Gaynelle Henderson: I see some countries in Africa that are thriving and doing very well, with bustling metropolises. For example, Accra, Ghana, and Dakar, Senegal—these are just amazing capital cities.

Greg Carr: They're very different from when you went the first time.

[12] The growing presence of China in Africa has been a significant development in recent decades, with China increasing its influence through investments, trade, and infrastructure projects across the continent.

Gaynelle Henderson: Very different now. I mean, highways running throughout the cities and new neighborhoods developing. These capital cities are expanding their boundaries, becoming very upscale. South Africa is another example and Nairobi. You see a lot of progress and some of the economies are strong as well. Ghana is a perfect example; they even have their own stock market. So, there is significant progress in many African countries.

There are still others that are really suffering. In Somalia, you still see a lot of strife. In places like Mali, terrorism has really affected them.

Greg Carr: Destabilizing Libya has really taken its toll.[13]

Gaynelle Henderson: Northern Africa, very difficult situation politically. You've got a yin and yang there when you talk about Africa and its future. The good thing is that there are countries continuing to develop and do well and many countries throughout the continent that need our support, need our interest in traveling, need the connection. Hopefully, we'll give them more of that in the future.

Greg Carr: Dr. Henderson, Gaynelle, thank you so much. This has been the Black Power Chronicles. We've been sitting for this hour with Dr. Gaynelle Henderson, talking about her life, her work, her continuing work. So, thank you. Thank you so much.

Gaynelle Henderson: My pleasure. Thank you.

[13] The destabilization of Libya following the 2011 NATO-backed intervention to oust Muammar Gaddafi has had long-lasting and severe consequences for the country and the region.