

CHEMICAL HERITAGE FOUNDATION

**STEPHEN L. JOHNSON**

The Pew Scholars Program in the Biomedical Sciences

Transcript of an Interview  
Conducted by

William Van Benschoten

at

The Home of Stephen L. Johnson's Brother  
Studio City, California

on

25 and 26 September 2002

From the Original Collection of the University of California, Los Angeles

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This oral history is part of a series supported by a grant from the Pew Charitable Trusts based on the Pew Scholars Program in the Biomedical Sciences. This collection is an important resource for the history of biomedicine, recording the life and careers of young, distinguished biomedical scientists and of Pew Biomedical Scholar Advisory Committee members.

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Interviewee agrees to participate in a series of University-conducted tape-recorded interviews, commencing on or about September 25, 2002, and tentatively entitled "Interview with Stephen L. Johnson. This Agreement relates to any and all materials originating from the interviews, namely the tape recordings of the interviews and a written manuscript prepared from the tapes, hereinafter collectively called "the Work."

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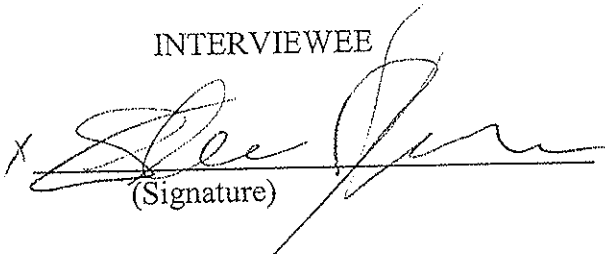
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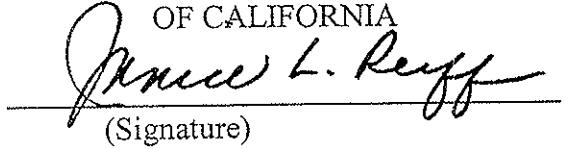
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X   
(Signature)

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Interim Director, Oral History Program  
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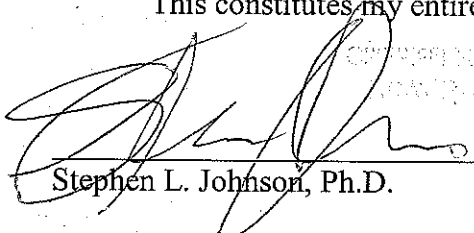
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## STEPHEN L. JOHNSON

1960 Born in Cleveland, Ohio, on 26 December

### Education

1983 B.A., Chemistry and Molecular Biology, Vanderbilt University  
1991 Ph.D., Genetics, University of Washington, Seattle, Washington

### Professional Experience

1991-1996 University of Oregon  
Postdoctoral Associate

1996-2002 Washington University, School of Medicine  
Assistant Professor, Department of Genetics

2002-present Associate Professor (with tenure), Department of Genetics

### Honors

1979 National Merit Scholarship

1983 Eastman Kodak Chemistry Scholarship

1985-1986 Graduate School Recruitment Fellowship, University of Washington

1991-1992 Leslie V. Gates Young Investigator Award, National  
Neurofibromatosis Foundation

1992-1994 NIH Postdoctoral Fellowship

1997-2001 Pew Scholars Program in the Biomedical Sciences Grant



## ABSTRACT

**Stephen L. Johnson** was raised in Nashville, Tennessee, the middle (with his twin brother) of four children, growing up in the pre- and post-Civil Rights Era. His father received his degree in electrical engineering and taught in that discipline at Vanderbilt University, though he also pursued a degree in divinity; his mother was a trained psychologist. Johnson partook in the normal activities of childhood, including Boy Scouts and music, but he had a very high affinity for and interest in writing. He matriculated at Vanderbilt University with the intention of becoming a writer.

After deciding against becoming a novelist, Johnson's interest in science was piqued while working in Lee Limbird's pharmacology lab, though he still had some trepidation about whether or not science actually suited him. Ultimately he decided to pursue science and was accepted into the genetics department at the University of Washington, Seattle, where he worked under Breck Byers on fusing Cdc4 and LAC-Z genes in yeast. While at Washington he was also fortunate to be mentored by Nobel laureate Leland H. Hartwell. Upon finishing his graduate studies Johnson decided to remain in the Northwest and began to work on zebrafish with James A. Weston and Charles A. Kimmel at the University of Oregon, Eugene. While there he worked on tissue regeneration mutants, pigment patterns, isometric growth, and genetic mapping, and he developed inbred strains and centromere markers for mapping the zebrafish genome. Johnson then accepted a position at Washington University School of Medicine to continue his work.

Near the end of the interview Johnson uses the topics already discussed in his oral history as a way to reflect upon his scientific development and the ways in which he mentors students and how he thinks about and practices science. The interview concludes with Johnson's thoughts on the role of technological innovation on his work; the advantages and disadvantages of competition in science; the direction of the national science agenda; the National Institutes of Health; gender issues; and the impact of the Pew Scholars Program in the Biomedical Sciences funding on his work.

## UCLA INTERVIEW HISTORY

### INTERVIEWER:

William Van Benschoten, Interviewer, UCLA Oral History Program. B.A., History, University of California, Riverside; M.A., History, University of California, Riverside; C. Phil., History, UCLA

### TIME AND SETTING OF INTERVIEW:

**Place:** Johnson's brother's home.

**Dates, length of sessions:** September 25, 2002 (113 minutes); and September 26, 2002 (154 minutes).

**Total number of recorded hours:** 3.5

**Persons present during interview:** Johnson and Van Benschoten.

### CONDUCT OF INTERVIEW:

This interview is one in a series with Pew Scholars in the Biomedical Sciences conducted by the UCLA Oral History Program in conjunction with the Pew Charitable Trusts's Pew Scholars in the Biomedical Sciences Oral History and Archives Project. The project has been designed to document the backgrounds, education, and research of biomedical scientists awarded four-year Pew scholarships since 1988.

To provide an overall framework for project interviews, the director of the UCLA Oral History Program and three UCLA faculty project consultants developed a topic outline. In preparing for this interview, Van Benschoten held a telephone preinterview conversation with Johnson to obtain written background information (curriculum vitae, copies of published articles, etc.) and agree on an interviewing schedule. He also reviewed prior Pew scholars' interviews and the documentation in Johnson's file at the Pew Scholars Program office in San Francisco including his proposal application, letters of recommendation, and reviews by Pew Scholars Program national advisory committee members.

### ORIGINAL EDITING:

Carol Squires edited the interview. She checked the verbatim transcript of the interview against the original tape recordings, edited for punctuation, paragraphing, and spelling, and verified proper names. Words and phrases inserted by the editor have been bracketed.

Johnson reviewed the transcript. He verified proper names and made minor corrections and additions.

Squires prepared the table of contents. William Van Benschoten, senior writer,

assembled the interview history. TechniType Transcribing compiled the index.

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