

## Don Lemon: Lemon Zest!

Written by Kam Williams

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*The "We Were There: The March on Washington" Interview*

Born in Baton Rouge, Louisiana on March 1, 1966, Don Lemon anchors CNN Newsroom during weekend prime-time and serves as a correspondent across CNN/U.S. programming. Based out of the network's New York bureau, Don joined CNN in September 2006.

In 2008, he reported from Chicago in the days leading up to the presidential election, including an interview with Rahm Emanuel on the day he agreed to serve as President Barack Obama's Chief of Staff. He also interviewed Anne Cooper, the 106-year old voter Obama highlighted in his election night acceptance speech.

Don has covered many breaking news stories, including the George Zimmerman trial, the Boston Marathon bombing, the Philadelphia building collapse, the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting, the Colorado Theater shooting, the death of Whitney Houston, the Inaugural of the 44th President in Washington, D.C., the death of Michael Jackson, and the Minneapolis

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bridge collapse, to name a few. And he anchored the network's breaking news coverage of the Japan tsunami, the Arab Spring, the death of Osama Bin Laden and the Joplin tornado.

Don began his career at WNYW in New York City as a news assistant while still attending Brooklyn College. He has won an Edward R. Murrow award for his coverage of the capture of the Washington, D.C. snipers, and an Emmy for a special report on real estate in Chicagoland.

In 2009, Ebony Magazine named him one of the 150 most influential Blacks in America. A couple of years later, he came out of the closet, and discussed his homosexuality in an autobiography entitled "Transparent."

Don recently caught a lot of flak from a number of African-American pundits for agreeing with Bill O'Reilly's criticisms of the black community, especially since he even suggested that the conservative talk show host hadn't gone far enough.



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Here, he talks about *We Were There*, an oral history of The March on Washington featuring the only surviving speaker Congressman John Lewis as well as Harry Belafonte, U.S.

Representative Eleanor Holmes Norton, and other attendees.

The special is set to debut on CNN on Friday, August 23 at 10:00p.m., 1:00a.m., and 4:00a.m.

**Kam Williams:** Hi Don, thanks for the opportunity to interview you.

**Don Lemon:** Hi, Kam. How are you?

**KW:** Great! And you?

**DL:** I'm not complaining, but it's a crazy-busy day. I have to anchor, do my radio hits, prepare for my show tomorrow, make tapes, and do press for *We Were There*!

**KW:** What interested you in doing a special about The March on Washington?

**DL:** We had been talking about it for awhile as the 50th anniversary approached, and I kept indicating that I would love to be a part of it. Somewhere, somehow, somebody heard that, Kam, and they said, "Don really wants to do this. Let's have him do it."

**KW:** Being an Emmy and Edward R. Murrow Award-winner, I don't think you'd have to beg too much.

**DL:** Just because I'm here at CNN, I never rest on my laurels and presume I can coast now. I still throw my hat in the ring and push to have a voice. I am the face of this documentary for CNN, and I think that says a lot about how far we've come. Here I am a young African-American who has a voice at this major network. That is part of the fulfillment of Dr. King's dream.

**KW:** Does the documentary have a theme?

**DL:** There are, for me, a few different themes. People like John Lewis and A. Philip Randolph put their lives on the line to participate. So, the first theme that stands out to me is courage. The second theme was the hope they exhibited in "the teeth of the most terrifying odds," as James Baldwin said. Thirdly, Bayard Rustin, who many call The Architect of the Civil Rights Movement, finally gets his due. I think that's a fair characterization to some degree. He's the silent, strong man who made The March happen. But because he was gay and people tried to use that against him is probably why we don't hear so much about him.

**KW:** I remember feeling admiration as a child for the folks from my neighborhood who were going down to The March on Washington, because of everyone's palpable sense of concern for their safety.

**DL:** I think admiration is a good way of putting it. Whenever I see John Lewis, I invariably say, "Thank you." And I will never stop. I don't know how he's still standing, because what he endured took courage and strength that I don't know that I have.

**KW:** I interviewed Ellen DeGeneres the day after Barack Obama won the 2008 Presidential Election. She felt his victory had been bittersweet because Proposition 8 had passed in California, banning gay marriage. The measure had succeeded with the help of the black community. I asked her whether she thought African-Americans would feel differently about

homosexuality, if a famous black icon came out of the closet. How do you feel about that, as probably the most prominent black celebrity to come out?

**DL: I don't consider myself a celebrity. I'm just a journalist. Frank Ocean is a celebrity. Yeah, I was in the forefront, and took a lot of heat for it. I think the President's evolution in terms of gay marriage has helped change many people's minds. I think it's empowering for a person to live an authentic life. It can only help when prominent and successful people of color come out and live authentically, because younger people, who are being bullied and might be questioning whether they should continue to live, might have second thoughts about taking their own lives. So, yeah, I think any celebrity who comes out can only help a young person struggling with the stigma.**

**KW: Do you think your coming out started a snowball among black gays?**

**DL: I don't know. But I do think it helps the next person, because I get positive feedback every day from someone who has read my book.**

**KW: See, you're not just a journalist. Plus look at all the blowback from your recent remarks agreeing with Bill O'Reilly about the black community.**

**DL: I don't feel any blowback, but I will say this, whether you agree with whatever I said or not, at least I got a conversation started. That was my goal, and I think I accomplished it. I think if you've watched or read my work over the years, you know that I'm pretty much at the top in terms of taking on issues that have to do with African-Americans and profiling, and with race and racism. What I love about CNN is that, yes, we believe in diversity of bodies, but we also believe in a diversity of opinion. So, whether my bosses agree with what I said or not, it doesn't matter. We're in the business of journalism here. Journalism is about having a diversity of opinion. And just because I'm African-American does not mean I have to feel a certain way because I'm black. You don't have true freedom until you allow a diversity of opinion and a diversity of voices.**

**KW: I always feel that I'm black, so whatever my opinion on an issue happens to be is a black opinion.**

**DL: That's a good way of putting it. [Laughs]**

**KW: But do you fear being pigeonholed as a buddy of O'Reilly?**

**DL: There are many things that Bill O'Reilly and I disagree about. I just happen to agree with some of what he had to say on this issue, but not all of it. Does that mean I co-signed his whole being and existence? No?**

**KW: Is there any question no one ever asks you, that you wish someone would?**

**DL: Yes, what do you get from icons like Dr. King, Malcolm X and John Lewis? What I get from them is personal empowerment, personal responsibility, and that the only thing you truly own is your mind. And once you truly own your mind, you're free. You can decide for yourself what is the best way to respond in the face of discrimination. How to carry yourself with dignity. What matters is how you think of yourself, and having presence of mind. Once you get that right, it doesn't matter what anyone thinks of you, because you know how to carry yourself in the world.**

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**KW:** The bookworm Troy Johnson question: What was the last book you read?

**DL:** The last two books I read were: "The New Jim Crow" by Michelle Alexander, <http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/1595586431/ref=nosim/thslfofire-20> and "Man's Search for Meaning" by Viktor Frankl, a Holocaust survivor. <http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0807014273/ref=nosim/thslfofire-20>

**KW:** When you look in the mirror, what do you see?

**DL:** Besides all the flaws, I see the kid that I once was. [Chuckles] Seriously, what stares back at me is someone who lives in a constant state of gratitude, regardless of what's going on in my life. Just this morning, when I woke up, I walked into the bathroom, looked in the mirror and said, "Look how far you've come. I'm grateful for this day. And for those fat cheeks. And for the boldness that you have. And for the stances that you take. And I know that you're going to be okay. And I want the next person who looks like you whether they're 1 day-old or 15 years-old to be better than you and to have a better life." I swear to God I just said that this morning in the mirror. So, it's funny that you asked that question.

**KW:** The Ling-Ju Yen question: What is your earliest childhood memory in Baton Rouge?

**DL:** Sitting in my grandmother's kitchen at about 3 or 4, watching her talking on a yellow telephone with a long cord. I spilled my drink, and my sister scolded me, "Every time you spill something!" And I asked my very understanding grandma's permission to go to the bathroom.

**KW:** Can you give me a Don Lemon question?

**DL:** Yeah, this question has gotten to just about everyone I ask. It even made Wendy Williams cry. It's, "Who do you think you are?"

**KW:** What is your guiltiest pleasure?

**DL:** Sleep. I loooooove to sleep. I also like salty, plain potato chips and Lindt dark chocolate with a touch of sea salt.

**KW:** What is your favorite dish to cook?

**DL:** Seafood gumbo, because I get to make it with my family over the holidays.

**KW:** If you could have one wish instantly granted, what would that be for?

**DL:** That we would not be so enamored with the slavery of equality, and be more enamored with the freedom of independence.

**KW:** The Judyth Piazza question: What key quality do you believe all successful people share?

**DL:** Being self-possessed. Having a strong sense of self.

**KW:** The Mike Pittman question: What was your best career decision?

**DL:** Leaving Louisiana.

**KW:** The Sanaa Lathan question: What excites you?

**DL:** Babies and puppies, because they're so innocent, and they have their lives ahead of

**them.**

**KW:** Makes me think of the saying: Youth is wasted on the young.

**DL:** To get back to O'Reilly and the whole saggy pants thing, it's almost like, "Just take my advice, I'm an old guy. That's probably not a good look. You might want to rethink that." And then, invariably, something will happen to them in their career, and I hate to say, "I told you so, but..." I suppose people just have to go through things.

**KW:** Which reminds me of another saying: When the student is ready, the teacher appears.

**DL:** I like that. I'm going to use that on the air.

**KW:** What advice do you have for anyone who wants to follow in your footsteps?

**DL:** I think it's great, if you want to follow in my footsteps, but I want you to be better than me, and you have to do it because you are passionately motivated by journalism and by a quest for the truth, not by a desire to be a celebrity. That's not what this is all about. And you have to be thick-skinned, since you're going to receive a lot of criticism, and that's part of what being a journalist is. I feel really strongly about the oath that I've taken to inform and to tell the truth. I'm not a race protector, I'm a truth protector. The truth is the truth is the truth. And as long as you tell the truth, you'll be okay in the end. A lot of people didn't like Dr. King, either, especially the black establishment. So, you may not be liked, but you'll be respected.

**KW:** Thanks again for the time, Don, and best of luck with We Were There.

**DL:** It's been a pleasure, Kam.

To see a trailer for We Were There: The March on Washington, visit: <http://www.cnn.com/video/data/2.0/video/bestoftv/2013/07/31/exp-we-were-there-the-march-on-washington.cnn.html>

To purchase a copy of Don Lemon's autobiography, "Transparent," visit: <http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0982702787/ref%3dnosim/thslfofire-20>

To read a transcript of Don Lemon's remarks about Bill O'Reilly and the black community, visit: <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/1307/27/cnr.06.html>