

Renaissance Woman

P

URSUE YOUR PASSION, IT'S BEEN SAID, AND SUCCESS will follow. Businesswoman and philanthropist Sheila C. Johnson would hardly argue the point.

A woman of many passions—ranging from classical music to sports to African American culture—she has proven to have an extraordinary talent for transforming her interests into successful business endeavors.

So when she moved to Middleburg, Virginia, several years ago and fell in love with the town, it wasn't long before an idea popped into her head. "I happened to see a huge piece of property that was up for sale," Johnson, 59, says. "And I said, 'You know what? The one thing this town doesn't have is a great destination resort.' I love traveling and entertaining, and I wanted to build a resort so tourists could enjoy not only the town, but also the beautiful countryside."

Her plans initially came up against fierce opposition from some in the community, but anyone who knows Johnson has learned that she isn't easily deterred. Her team worked closely with her neighbors to ensure that their concerns were addressed, and eventually won their permission, as well as their enthusiasm. As a result, the Salamander Resort & Spa, a \$100 million luxury resort set on 340 acres in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains, will open in 2010, making Johnson the first African American woman to build a luxury hotel.

MAKING MUSIC

The seeds of Johnson's tenacity and success were sown early, she says. Johnson grew up in a Chicago suburb under the guidance of parents who believed wholeheartedly in the power of setting goals. "My father was a neurosurgeon and my mother was a college graduate, so that put us in a very distinct category of African Americans."

POWERHOUSE
ENTREPRENEUR
SHEILA C. JOHNSON
WAS THE FIRST WOMAN
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STAKE IN THREE
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PLENTY OF OTHER
GLASS CEILINGS
ALONG THE WAY

by Kimberly Olson

PHOTOGRAPHY BY FÁBIO CÂMARA





IF YOU CAN EMPOWER A WOMAN, YOU CAN EMPOWER A NATION

who provided seed money for the fledgling network. Getting advertisers to sign on, however, proved to be an uphill battle. They simply weren't interested, Johnson says, unless African Americans were cast as comical—often silly—characters on the shows.

"It was difficult to convince advertisers that African American viewers were big consumers of their products," says Johnson, who was the network's executive vice president of corporate affairs. "That, to us, was a huge disappointment, and it was also a challenge because we just had to fight for any nickel we could get."

Then BET got a welcome break. The music video market began to skyrocket behind MTV's success. But that network's playlist, with just a few exceptions such as Tina Turner and the interracial group English Beat, was almost devoid of African American artists. "We saw that as an opportunity," Johnson says. "We got Michael Jackson's videos and a few others, and our ratings started going up because you had all these young kids who were watching videos. Then advertisers were willing to spend the dollars. And MTV said, 'Oh, okay, you're getting the viewers,' and they started directly competing with us in the video market."

Over the next few years, BET would expand beyond entertainment to include compelling news and public affairs programs. Johnson is most proud of having developed the weekly program "Teen Summit," which gave teens a chance to talk frankly about critical issues, from pregnancy prevention to interracial dating to drug use.

"We wanted to really lay it out there and educate young people," Johnson says. "We would bring on celebrities and experts who could talk to these young people—we even had Hillary Clinton on once—and some of these kids had a lot of good questions to ask." The program ran for 11 years and garnered scores of awards.

BET was sold to Viacom in 2000 and continues to be a leader in providing news and entertainment for African Americans and those interested in black culture. The network reaches more than 87 million homes throughout the United States, Canada, and the Caribbean.

GETTING INTO THE GAME

IN 2005 JOHNSON TURNED HER ATTENTION to another longtime love: team sports. "My love of sports has always been there," Johnson says. "My mother adores sports, and from the moment I came out of her womb, I heard baseball games. She's a big Cubs fan, and I remember her putting me in bed early so she could watch baseball, and we always went to every kind of game imaginable."

So when sports mogul Abe Pollin, owner of the WNBA's Washington Mystics (below), offered to sell Johnson the team, she leapt at the chance. "I went to my advisors and said, 'I've just been offered a basketball team!'" Johnson says. "But when they found out it was a women's team, they said, 'Why the heck do you want to own a WNBA team? They don't make any money.'"



"My parents provided a nurturing atmosphere, and also one of purpose," Johnson says. "I was taught to be the best that I could be and to never let my color be a barrier—and I never knew any other world. My parents were very good at letting me fall on my face and learn from my failures. They taught me how to look at a setback and figure out how to turn the problem around."

In their home, arts were every bit as important as academics, so Johnson started playing piano at age five and violin at nine, kicking off a lifelong love of music. "The arts were really the anchor in my life," she says. "I was always going to a lesson or playing in the school orchestra. Music taught me how to focus and develop discipline."

That level of commitment served Johnson well when she launched her first business. After earning bachelor's degrees in both music education and performance from the University of Illinois, she taught violin, piano, and cello to 140 school-age students out of her home and, in 1975, formed an orchestra called Young Strings in Action.

While performing in downtown Washington, D.C., the orchestra caught the attention of Queen Noor al Hussein of Jordan, who invited them to perform at the Jerash Festival of Culture & Arts in Jordan. The event—the largest cultural festival in the Middle East, held in the beautiful Greco-

Roman city of Jerash—features world-class groups such as the Bahrain Orchestra and Ballet Moscow. "We were the only students invited," Johnson says. "We performed at the foot of the temple of Artemis and got a lot of media attention." At Queen Noor's request, Johnson would eventually launch a music conservatory in Amman, Jordan. The National Music Conservatory, offering programs in both Western and Arab music, is now in its 26th year.

CHANGING THE CHANNEL

AS HER MUSIC-TEACHING BUSINESS PROSPERED, Johnson was in the midst of another weighty endeavor: partnering with her then husband, Robert Johnson, to launch the country's first black cable television network. "All of the other cable networks were starting up at that time, and there just weren't enough African Americans on the set, unless we were in a comic role or we were getting arrested on the news," says Johnson. "The whole concept was to offer targeted black programming that would show African Americans in a more positive light."

The two cofounded Black Entertainment Television (BET) in 1980 with help from cable mogul John Malone

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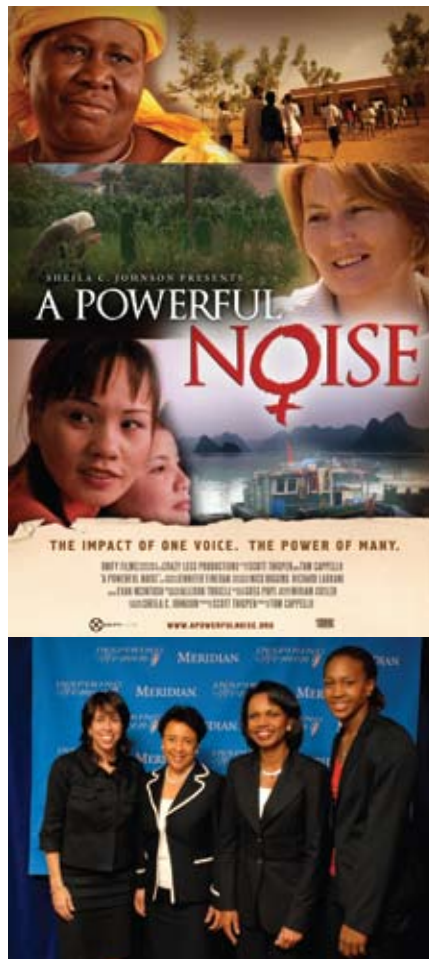
Still, Johnson was determined. As she recalls, "I went back to my team and said, 'Look, this is the opportunity of a lifetime. No other woman out there has been given this chance. This is a historic moment. Just make it work.'"

As she forged ahead, Johnson ran into the same problem that had confronted her at BET—convincing corporate America that her target demographic, this time women, could spend the same kind of dollars that men could. "I visit big companies all the time, trying to make them understand that it's the women in the household who decide what cars, food, and clothing to buy," Johnson says. "Women hold over 70 percent of the credit cards, and it just doesn't make sense that you can't get a financial institution to support a women's sports team. It's so frustrating. When people ask me what keeps me motivated, I say, 'I get pissed off.'"

Bitten by the sports bug, Johnson next approached Ted Leonsis, chairman and majority owner of Lincoln Holdings LLC, which has ownership rights in several Washington, D.C., sports teams. She told Leonsis that she wanted to roll the Washington Mystics into Lincoln Holdings and become a partner of the group—all men at the time—so she could buy into the NHL's Washington Capitals and the NBA's Washington Wizards. "It was an opportunity for me, as a woman, to get on the inside track with these men, and own three teams," Johnson says.

Leonsis loved the idea. Once her deal with Lincoln Holdings was inked, Johnson became the first woman in history to have a stake in three professional sports teams.

"We need people who are very competitive, because we're in this to win championships, but also people who are consumer friendly and who would represent the franchise and the league in the appropriate way," Leonsis says. "For someone who's 'made it,' Sheila is remarkably unhandled. She sings the national anthem. She dances in the box. She'll go to anyone's house to help sell tickets. She's in love with [the



Above: Johnson (second from left) and Condoleezza Rice with WNBA Commissioner Donna Orender (far left) and WNBA All Star player Tamika Catchings (far right). (top) Movie poster from A Powerful Noise

Mystics], the business, and what it stands for, and I think it's that raw enthusiasm that's had the fan base fall so in love with her."

SCREEN DREAMS

AS JOHNSON'S FRIENDSHIP with Ted Leonsis grew, their partnership spilled over into another arena—filmmaking—when he recruited her to become executive producer of a documentary about the Homeless World Cup, an international soccer tournament in which teams of homeless people are able to represent their country. (Leonsis is the film's producer.) The film, called *Kicking It*, was directed by Susan Koch and was accepted into the 2008 Sundance Film Festival.

Now hooked on filmmaking, Johnson has produced a second film, which was inspired by her travels around the world as an ambassador for CARE, a humanitarian organization that fights global poverty. The movie, *A Powerful Noise*, weaves together the stories of three women who overcame gender barriers and prompted remarkable change in their local communities. "This film is about women's empowerment," Johnson says. "Women are the key to development and eradicating poverty. Studies show that if you can empower a woman, you can empower a nation."

As part of her commitment to women, Johnson has issued a \$4 million gift to CARE to initiate an I Am Powerful Challenge. "I'm asking individuals and businesses to match me, dollar for dollar," she says. "Donations will go to 69 villages around the globe, to help build schools, educate young girls, improve maternal health, and assist with other health issues

like the HIV crisis. We're also going to set up savings and loans all over the world. We're going to work in the villages and really get to know the women."

Leonsis, himself a hands-on philanthropist, says Johnson is tireless. "Sheila's not just making phone calls about what floral arrangements should be on the tables at a gala," he says. "She's really getting involved. She's on planes all the time, going to India and South America."

In addition to her work with CARE, Johnson is a generous supporter of the arts. She serves as chair of the board of governors at the Parsons New School for Design in New York, and was the major benefactor of the school's new 32,800-square-foot Sheila C. Johnson Design Center, which opened in February. She also sits on the boards of VH1's Save the Music Foundation, Americans for the Arts, the Curry School of Education Foundation at the University of Virginia, and the University of Illinois Foundation.

Although many people neatly compartmentalize their working lives and philanthropic interests, Johnson has found an elegant way to bring all the puzzle pieces together. For example, she has arranged for Parsons students to travel to other the countries, through CARE, and bring back fabrics that the local women have made. She has also gotten the WNBA to help spread CARE's message and educate fans about global issues.

Today, as Johnson eagerly plans the opening of the Salamander Resort & Spa, excitement is in the air. "It looks like a beautiful stone country estate," says Betsy Davis,

the mayor of Middleburg. "Sheila's put her heart and soul into every little detail—the lights and the linens are all her designs. We can all enjoy it, and we can prosper from the people who come here to enjoy her resort and our town."

Meanwhile, Johnson has purchased the Woodlands Resort & Inn in Summerville, South Carolina, just outside Charleston. She has also bought Innisbrook Resort and Golf Club in Tampa, one of the largest golf resorts in the country, with four top-ranked courses. With that acquisition, she made history once again, becoming the first African American woman to own a PGA Championship golf course.

As she looks back over her illustrious and varied career thus far, Johnson, who has received honorary doctorates from Morrisville State College (New York), Bennett College for Women (South Carolina), Cambridge College (Massachusetts), and Norfolk State University (Virginia), says the challenges were many, and fortitude was key. "As women, we've got everything going against us when we're out there," she says. "The business climate is still dominated by men, and people are always throwing roadblocks in my way, telling me, 'You can't do this.' And I say, 'Why not? If I were a man, would you say this to me?' You have to find the confidence within yourself to stand up and just do it." **DW**

Kimberly Olson is Diversity Woman's web editor and a frequent contributor to Diversity Woman magazine.

SHEILA'S ROAD MAP TO SUCCESS

What are Sheila Johnson's top tips on succeeding in business? "I've made all the mistakes in the world," she says with a laugh. "So I feel very confident giving advice." Here it is.

HIRE WISELY

"There are a lot of people with bogus résumés out there. They're very easy to hire, but they're very hard to get rid of. One of the smartest things I did was to get a head-hunting firm, and they were able to screen out the counterfeits. Ever since, I've gotten real leaders."

LEAD BY EXAMPLE

"You're almost a mentor to every single one of your employees. You need to be a true leader, like the

conductor of an orchestra. Set an example for them as to how you want your company run."

COMMUNICATE CLEARLY

"You need to be able to communicate your goals and your vision. That's the only way you're going to be able to build a winning team. And don't ever underestimate the importance of listening to people. You're the boss, but your employees have a lot to share."

ADMIT YOUR MISTAKES

"Learn to be humble enough to know when you're wrong. People will respect you if you're able to say, 'You know, I've just made a mistake. Let's go back to square one.'"

DON'T BE AFRAID OF CONFLICT

"When conflict comes along, sometimes I'm just so discouraged because I'm running into walls. But you have to realize that conflict brings opportunity."

What makes us different is what makes us great

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