

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Sheila C. Johnson

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers® 1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Johnson, Sheila C.
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Sheila C. Johnson,
Dates:	August 1, 2007
Bulk Dates:	2007
Physical Description:	5 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:31:27).
Abstract:	Entrepreneur Sheila C. Johnson (1949 -) was the co-founder of Black Entertainment Television (BET). As the owner of the Washington Mystics, Johnson was the first African American woman to own a professional basketball team; her involvement with the Washington Wizards and Washington Capitals earned her the distinction of being the first woman to be a stakeholder in three professional sports franchises. Johnson also owned Salamander Resort & Spa and Salamander Hospitality. Johnson was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on August 1, 2007, in The Plains, Virginia. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2007_222
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Entrepreneur Sheila Crump Johnson was born on January 25, 1949, in Pennsylvania. Her father, George P. Crump, was a prominent neurosurgeon, and her mother, Marie Iris Crump, was an accountant. During her early years, her father's practice at Veterans Administration hospitals took the family from town to town. Johnson's family then relocated to Maywood, Illinois, a suburb of Chicago, where she attended Irving High School, and then graduated from Proviso High School in 1966. During this time, Johnson found her first love, music; she went on to become a concert violinist and the first African American to win a statewide violin competition in Illinois. After high school, Johnson enrolled in the University of Illinois where she met her now-former husband and business partner, Robert Johnson (divorced 2002).

In 1969, Johnson married Robert Johnson, and in 1970, graduated from the University of Illinois with her B.A. degree in music. After graduation, Johnson worked as a music teacher at the private school, Sidwell Friends. In 1975, she founded a 140-member youth orchestra, Young Strings in Action. The group was invited to perform in the Middle Eastern nation of Jordan, where she was given the country's top educational award by Jordan's King Hussein.

In 1980, Johnson and her husband co-founded Black Entertainment Television (BET), a cable network geared towards African American audiences. Johnson became BET's executive vice president for corporate affairs, focusing on issues affecting the communities that BET served. In 1989, Johnson created *Teen Summit*, a show that dealt with the everyday issues of teens and attempted to motivate the teen viewers.

In 1999, Johnson left BET to pursue her own interests and to guide her daughter's equestrian career. In 2002,

Johnson became head of the Washington International Horse Show. Johnson purchased a farm in Northern Virginia in Middleburg and turned the 350 acre estate into the Salamander Inn & Spa, an 85,000-square-foot French country resort. Johnson also formed Salamander Hospitality, a hotel resort and spa management firm, in order to achieve those goals.

Johnson became involved in the Washington Mystics WNBA franchise, and in 2005 purchased it from former owner, Abe Pollin; this and similar moves in relation to the Washington Capitals (NHL) and the Washington Wizards (NBA), earned her the distinction of being the first woman to be a stakeholder in three professional sports franchises. In 2005, Johnson married William T. Newman, Jr., a judge in Arlington, Virginia. In July of 2007, Johnson purchased Innisbrook Golf Resort and its four golf courses outside of Tampa, Florida. Johnson expanded her portfolio to include film in 2008, when she was the executive producer of *A Powerful Noise*. Johnson is the mother of two children, Paige Johnson and Brett Johnson.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Sheila C. Johnson was conducted by Julieanna L. Richardson on August 1, 2007, in The Plains, Virginia, and was recorded on 5 Betacame SP videocassettes. Entrepreneur Sheila C. Johnson (1949 -) was the co-founder of Black Entertainment Television (BET). As the owner of the Washington Mystics, Johnson was the first African American woman to own a professional basketball team; her involvement with the Washington Wizards and Washington Capitals earned her the distinction of being the first woman to be a stakeholder in three professional sports franchises. Johnson also owned Salamander Resort & Spa and Salamander Hospitality.

Restrictions

Restrictions on Access

Restrictions may be applied on a case-by-case basis at the discretion of The HistoryMakers®.

Restrictions on Use

All use of materials and use credits must be pre-approved by The HistoryMakers®. Appropriate credit must be given. Copyright is held by The HistoryMakers®.

Related Material

Information about the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview, as well as correspondence with the interview subject is stored electronically both on The HistoryMakers® server and in two databases maintained by The HistoryMakers®, though this information is not included in this finding aid.

Controlled Access Terms

This interview collection is indexed under the following controlled access subject terms.

Persons:

Johnson, Sheila C.

Richardson, Julieanna L. (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews
Johnson, Sheila C.--Interviews

African American businesspeople--Interviews

African American women executives--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Black Entertainment Television

Occupations:

Entrepreneur

HistoryMakers® Category:

BusinessMakers

Administrative Information

Custodial History

Interview footage was recorded by The HistoryMakers®. All rights to the interview have been transferred to The HistoryMakers® by the interview subject through a signed interview release form. Signed interview release forms have been deposited with Jenner & Block, LLP, Chicago.

Preferred Citation

The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Sheila C. Johnson, August 1, 2007. The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

Processing Information

This interview collection was processed and encoded on 5/30/2023 by The HistoryMakers® staff. The finding

aid was created adhering to the following standards: DACS, AACR2, and the Oral History Cataloging Manual (Matters 1995).

Other Finding Aid

A Microsoft Access contact database and a FileMaker Pro tracking database, both maintained by The HistoryMakers®, keep track of the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview.

Detailed Description of the Collection

Series I: Original Interview Footage

Video Oral History Interview with Sheila C. Johnson, Section A2007_222_001_001, TRT: 0:29:24
?

Sheila C. Johnson was born on January 25, 1949 in McKeesport, Pennsylvania to Marie Iris Crump and George P. Crump, Sr. Johnson's mother, a foster child, worked as an accountant, while her father, a native of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, became a neurosurgeon. Due to segregation, he could only find work at veterans' hospitals, leading the family to move often. While living in Louisville, Kentucky, Johnson passed for white to attend the local all-white school. She also recalls her experiences of racial discrimination in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Johnson's family eventually settled in Maywood, Illinois, where she attended Irving Middle School and Proviso East High School with Joyce E. Tucker, who later served on the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, and Shelvin Louise Hall, who became an appellate judge. Johnson studied violin and piano at the Music Conservatory of Chicago College of Performing Arts, and became the first African American first chair musician in the Illinois All-State Orchestra.

African American businesspeople--Interviews.

African American women executives--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with Sheila C. Johnson, Section A2007_222_001_002, TRT: 0:29:46
?

Sheila C. Johnson performed in Europe with The Symphony of Oak Park and River Forest while a student at Proviso East High School in Maywood, Illinois. She also took violin master classes with Marvin Rabin at Northwestern University, before entering the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign at sixteen years old. There, Johnson was mentored by violinist Paul Rolland, Susan Starrett and Daniel J. Perrino. Johnson also met trumpeter Cecil Bridgewater and singer Dee Dee Bridgewater. She recalls the riots that took place on campus after the deaths of Robert F. Kennedy and Black Panther Party member Fred Hampton, who was also a Proviso East High School alumnus. In response, the administration developed affirmative action programs, including Project 500, which tripled the school's black student population. In 1969, Johnson married Robert L. Johnson. While he was stationed at Fort Leonard Wood in Missouri during the Vietnam War, Johnson worked at the Illinois String Research Project, JCPenney and the YWCA.

Video Oral History Interview with Sheila C. Johnson, Section A2007_222_001_003, TRT: 0:30:29
?

Sheila C. Johnson worked with the University of Illinois at Urbana-

Champaign's Illinois String Research Project, through which she taught the Suzuki method to students at Homerton College at the University of Cambridge in England. Upon graduating college, Johnson moved to Princeton, New Jersey. She became a music teacher for five junior high schools in the Woodbridge Township School District, and then taught at the Princeton Day School. Then, Johnson and her husband, Robert L. Johnson, moved to Washington, D.C., where he worked at the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and the Greater Washington Urban League with Sterling Tucker, while Johnson worked at Sidwell Friends School. There, she started the Young Strings in Action orchestra, which performed at the Jerash Festival for Culture and Arts in Amman, Jordan. Around this time, Johnson and her husband founded Black Entertainment Television, with John C. Malone as an investor. The network programming featured Tavis Smiley, Ed Gordon, III and Petey Greene.

Video Oral History Interview with Sheila C. Johnson, Section A2007_222_001_004, TRT: 0:30:55
?

Sheila C. Johnson's youth orchestra, Young Strings in Action, performed in Washington D.C. with organizations like the Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company. They also played at the Jerash Festival for Culture and Arts at the invitation of King Hussein and Queen Noor of Jordan. Afterward, Johnson was commissioned by the king and queen to found the National Music Conservatory in Amman, Jordan. She raised money through the U.S. Department of State; supervised the teachers' training; and obtained instruments from Boosey & Hawkes. In 1989, Johnson joined BET full time as the executive vice president for corporate affairs, and worked with executives Jefferi Lee, Louis Carr and Curtis Symonds. She also produced the BET Awards and 'Teen Summit,' a show where teenagers talked about issues like teen pregnancy. 'Teen Summit' aired for eleven years, and Johnson spoke at numerous universities and colleges. Johnson recalls buying a farm in 1996 to support her daughter, Paige Johnson Payne's interest in equestrianism.

Video Oral History Interview with Sheila C. Johnson, Section A2007_222_001_005, TRT: 0:30:53
?

Sheila C. Johnson's daughter, Paige Johnson Payne, trained as an equestrian from 1991. Johnson grew knowledgeable about the horse show industry, and became the president of the Washington International Horse Show. In 2005, Johnson purchased socialite Pamela Harriman's estate in Middleburg, Virginia, and began converting it into Salamander Resort and Spa. She also bought the Innisbrook club in Palm Harbor, Florida, becoming the first woman to own a PGA Tour golf course. At the suggestion of sports team owner Abe Pollin, Johnson bought the Washington Mystics, and joined Ted Leonsis, Richard D. Fairbank and Dick Patrick as an executive of the Monumental Sports and Entertainment company, which owns the Washington Capitals and Washington Wizards. She describes her goals for the Washington Mystics WNBA team, and her women empowerment initiative, Sheila's I am Powerful Challenge. Johnson also reflects upon her legacy; her hopes and concerns for the African American community; and how she would like to be remembered.