

Publishing family writes new chapter

By Harriet C. Johnson
USA TODAY

CHICAGO — It's every budding MBA's dream — winning a top job at a major corporation. But the president's seat just two days after picking up a diploma?

For Linda Johnson Rice, who gets her MBA Saturday from Northern-western University's J.L. Kellogg Graduate School of Management, it will be a dream come true. On Monday Rice — a classic example of the polished, well-spoken, buttoned-down MBA — takes over as president and chief operating officer of Johnson Publishing Co., the USA's largest black-owned company.

She brings to the job more than an MBA: She's the adopted daughter of Johnson Publishing founder John H. Johnson (who becomes chairman Monday when Rice, 29, becomes president. His wife, Eunice Johnson is secretary/treasurer).

"Johnson was out to build

something. Her responsibility will be to sustain it and make it grow," says Chicago advertising agency head Barabara Proctor.

It will be a challenge. Johnson Publishing — 1986 revenues \$173.5 million — produces the USA's most widely circulated black magazines, Ebony and Jet. But a Time Inc.-backed competitor could be emerging; a magazine aimed at upscale blacks is to be launched in 1988.

Johnson Publishing also makes the growing Fashion Fair cosmetics line, but cosmetics are a competitive and fickle business whose success is determined by the whims of the department store shopper.

Other businesses of Johnson Publishing; the extravagant Ebony Fashion Fair, shown in 110 cities this year; life insurance; three radio stations; a syndicated TV show, and mailorder apparel and black hair-care products.

Another hurdle: The succession at Johnson

Publishing goes against the norm for family-owned businesses, which usually pass from father to son or to a non-family manager or are sold. (Rice's brother John Jr., who died in 1981 of sickle-cell anemia, never took a serious interest in the firm.)

"One thing that's going to be difficult for her is the social role of a daughter-successor," says John Ward, a business professor at Loyola University in Chicago. "People are going to be working hard to make contact with her for philanthropic issues, for community issues, for financial giving issues, for feature stories."

"I think it's bigger than a job, it's bigger than a business, it's bigger than her family," says Proctor. "What she is walking into is the premier chronicle of black history, and it has an awful lot of responsibility."

How will Rice adjust to her new responsibilities? Friends say Rice, an accomplished equestrian, will take the

'Ebony' changes guard



By Barbara Ries, USA TODAY
ALL IN THE FAMILY: John Johnson and Linda Johnson Rice will share the power.

jumps head-on. She's a down-to-earth, direct, hands-on manager who's had a hand in almost everything in the business. Take the August cover of Ebony magazine. She conceived the image and picked the people who would represent the issue's theme, "The new black middle class." Then she staged the photo shoot on Chicago's Wacker Drive. "We have a simple philosophy here: We don't ask anyone to do anything here that Mr. Johnson or I would not do," says Rice. "I don't know many soon-to-be presidents of companies out there directing their own photo shoots."

Not that she's afraid to delegate tasks, says Rice.

Her management style, she says, is a reflection of John Johnson's the dean of black entrepreneurs and a self-made man who began his life on welfare and is now one of the USA's richest people. His estimated net worth; more than \$185 million. With Ebony, began in 1945, and Jet, 1951, Johnson was one of the first major publishers to offer advertisers an outlet designed exclusively for black consumers — and his publications remain No. 1 in that market. In 1985 he launched EM (Ebony Man), a magazine targeted for an upscale male audience.

His special knack throughout has been starting from scratch.

From her small, art-filled office on the seventh floor of Johnson Publishing's headquarters overlooking Chicago's Grant Park, Rice sips a Diet Coke. She tells of how she's been part of the

company since grade school, when she traveled with her mother to Europe twice a year to buy clothes for the fashion shows that are major social events in black communities across the USA.

Says Jill Rosten, a special education teacher in Dallas and Rice's long-time friend: "They have been preparing Linda for this business for as long as I've known her."

Rice majored in journalism at the University of Southern California and, at times, considered other careers — such as opera — but "I never not wanted to be here," Rice says.

Working full time as an assistant to the president, Rice attended graduate school at night for the last four years. Her lavish wedding in 1984 to Andre Rice, a stock - broker - turned - entrepreneur, was splashed across the pages of Ebony: John Johnson introduced the couple.

With a new generation at the top, Johnson Publishing is heading for some changes, observers say. "What was daring for the 1950s is seen as extremely calm in 1987," says John H. Britton of the University of the District of Columbia and a former Jet editor. Says Johnson, "I guess I would be disappointed in her if she didn't want to go farther than I did."

Some of Rice's intentions:

■ For Ebony and Jet, together reach about half of all black households, "I really just want to maintain them at the levels that they are," she says. Last year, Ebony saw a 6.3% decline in advertising pages to 1,125.3 — while magazines overall suffered a 1.2% decline. Ad-

vertising revenues for Ebony fell 3.9% to \$36.7 million, says the Publishers Information Bureau. What the two general-interest magazines need: A "very very current, very very modern" look in terms of layout and design, Rice says. She's particularly interested in improving Ebony's photography.

■ Fashion Fair Cosmetics, aimed at upscale consumers, is doing so well that Johnson expects it to become the company's biggest revenue producer in five years. This year, Rice will make appearances at 12 major department stores to promote the line.

■ Ebony/Jet Showcase: The syndicated half-hour entertainment show was reintroduced three years ago after it fizzled in a one-year trial. Rice has ideas for other TV shows, focusing on entertainment and black history.

Other plans: To expand mail-order retailing, which the company began with a women's fashion catalog last September, and to develop a new hair-care business. None of this is set in stone, however. "If you're asking about a plan for the next five years, I don't have that now," Rice says.

As for major changes in direction, "I just don't think, given what Johnson has accomplished, that she would do that," says Earl G. Graves, publisher of Black Enterprise magazine.

The best compliment Linda Johnson Rice says someone could pay her is: "To say, 'You really are your father's daughter.'" The greatest respect they could show, she adds, is to recognize that she has worked for her new title.

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