

Johnson joins Oprah as Black female billionaire

By Blair Walker
Special to Sentinel-Voice
ST. PETERSBURG, Fla. (NNPA) - When she's not managing her sports franchise, starting new businesses, raising her teenage children or preparing for her upcoming nuptials, African-American billionaire Sheila Johnson is busy converting history into her story.

By now, most people know that her ex-husband, Robert Johnson, created Black Entertainment Television in 1980 and sold it to Viacom 17 years later for a princely \$3 billion. Sheila Johnson, 56, wants it to be known that BET wasn't a one-man concoction by any stretch of the imagination.

She personally signed for a \$500,000 loan that got BET up and running, because between her and her then-husband, she was the one with a full-time job at the time. A former concert violinist, Johnson even taught violin lessons in their home to generate income during the early, lean days of BET.

For more than two decades, she kept her role as BET's co-creator on the down low, because "it's the way I was brought up. This was a man that I loved very dearly," Johnson said of Rob-

ert Johnson. "He's very intelligent, and I wanted to help him." She said, "We both had this vision."

Explaining further, Johnson said, "I felt that the best way we could both make it work was for me to do the trench work behind the scenes. I don't think that (competition) is healthy when you're both trying to put a company together. I wasn't the type of person who said, 'I have to have my name on this!'"

Secure in her support role and determined to make their business idea work, Johnson even crafted some of BET's programming, which she enjoyed immensely.

"I did the children's programming part of it, and I did community outreach to make sure BET did its part in the community," Johnson recalls.

Johnson also takes pains to note that she was one of few higher-ups at BET who was critical of the hip-hop music videos that became the network's bread and butter.

"Why are these guys always calling us 'bitches'?" Johnson wants to know of the rappers in the videos. "It's just about the way that women are portrayed — we're simply sex objects,"



Sheila Johnson co-captained BET to dominance among African-American TV viewers—and into personal wealth.

she stated. "That's messing up a lot of young people, particularly women. You watch it over and over and over again and it becomes part of your psyche."

Johnson makes these observations without apparent rancor, but her easy-going demeanor clicks off when asked why her ex-mate eventually fired her from BET.

"Well, now you're digging a little deeper than I want to go," she said firmly. "The way that everything happened at BET was highly personal, highly degrading. I don't want to talk about it — it's not going to get me anywhere. I just want to let everyone know out there how happy I am," Johnson said. "I'm very excited about ev-

erything that I'm doing. I'm very excited about the future."

When BET was sold to Viacom in 1997, making Bob Johnson a billionaire, the transaction also put nine zeroes behind Sheila Johnson's net worth.

"People tend to look to you for money all the time," Johnson observes of her present economic status. "They think I just got the money without working for it — they don't understand the hard work that it took to get there. What you essentially learn how to do is say 'no'. You learn to not feel guilty about [that]."

Born in McKeesport, Pa., Johnson grew up in Chicago, the daughter of a neurosur-

geon dad who was an accomplished pianist and an accountant mom who also played the piano. Johnson took up the violin, becoming so adept that she got a full ride scholarship to the University of Illinois, where she got degrees in performance and in education.

Three years ago when she and Bob Johnson divorced, her divorce hearing was presided over by Virginia judge William Newman, whom Sheila Johnson plans to marry next month.

"We knew each other a long time ago," she said of Newman, whom she met in the late 1960s while they worked as actors with the Negro Ensemble Company.

Johnson had taken a role abandoned by Denise Nicholas, of "Room 222" fame, in the play "Ceremonies in Dark Old Men." Johnson said she and Newman did 98 performances together, and I never saw him again for 33 years. Now, Newman is part of the future Johnson speaks of with so much anticipation, as is the Washington Mystics women's basketball team.

In May, Johnson paid \$10 million to become majority owner of the WNBA Mystics franchise. For an additional sum that Johnson's not at liberty to disclose, she also

bought a minority stake in the Washington Wizards NBA squad, as well as the Washington Capitals, who play in the National Hockey League.

From a sports perspective, however, her main focus is on the Mystics.

"I want to be the face of the Mystics," said Johnson, who is moments away from leaving her Virginia ranch for a flight to Indianapolis to see the Mystics play. "I'm trying to elevate the WNBA to a whole different level."

Johnson has started a Sheila C. Johnson Foundation, which she endowed with \$27 million to address the health and educational needs of impoverished children. She's an active philanthropist, including a \$7 million gift to the Parsons School of Design, which is part of the New School University in New York.

Asked what she'd like folks to know about her, Johnson pauses half a beat before responding.

"I am a woman to be reckoned with," she said, "a woman with passion, a woman who's strong, a philanthropist, and I am a happy person," Johnson adds. "There are a lot of unhappy rich people out there."

Blair Walker writes for the Weekly Challenger.

AARP: More seniors testing entrepreneurship

By Cheris F. Hodges
Special to Sentinel-Voice
CHARLOTTE, N.C. (NNPA) - When Minnie Smith retired from banking, she could have easily settled into a life of leisure. Instead, the 67-year-old became an entrepreneur.

She owns Que Tee Pies, a hat shop in NoDa that specializes in one of a kind items like purses, jewelry and outfits. But the main staple of the shop is hats, which range from a sporty pageboy to elegant church chapeaus.

Smith said her decision to leave corporate America and start a second career had a lot to do with her treatment in the workplace.

"Seniors aren't really appreciated in the workplace," she said.

The traditional notion of retirement is fast disappearing. One thing is sure — retirement is not an ending. For many, it's a new beginning, a chance to reinvent oneself by re-careering, learning, volunteering, starting a new business, job sharing, and even working full-time.

According to the Ameri-

can Association of Retired People (AARP), demographic trends show that the highest growth in the U.S. workforce was among 55- to 64-year-olds. At the same time, the number of 25- to 44-year-old workers is decreasing. By 2005, there will be over 22 million older workers. And by 2015, nearly one fifth of our entire workforce will be 55 and older.

For Smith, she said when she left banking, she wanted to do something but she didn't know what.

"I prayed for a vision," she said. Then she was invited to an apparel show in Atlanta.

"The hats reached out and grabbed me."

So, Smith decided to sell hats. At first, she specialized in the casual hats. She did home shows and two years ago moved the shop to the Colony Building in the NoDa area.

AARP research shows that 80 percent of baby boomers expect to continue working past age 65. Many will start their own busi-

nesses. Others will work part-time. Still others will reinvent themselves and begin new careers, sometimes in order to give something back.

Smith said she's not just working to build her business because she needs something to do; she wants to have something to pass on to her family. But Smith admits there have been times when she thought about just giving it up.

"I know what my goals are, and it is taking longer to reach my goals," she said. "On my down days, someone will come through that door and say 'you can't quit.'"

Smith and other seniors who re-enter the workforce or start their own businesses have something that college graduates don't — a wealth of experience.

"The good news is that employers will have access to an experienced and committed work force in future years just as the pool of younger workers is diminishing. The bad news is that many employers have not yet begun to make the kind of

changes necessary to account for an aging workforce. But visionary companies already have developed age-friendly policies and practices that appeal to older workers," stated the website SeniorCitizensGuide.com in an article called "Unretirement" by Jim Parkel, AARP president.

Learn Self-employment Behavior

To increase your chances of behaving — and feeling — like successful small business people do, take these three actions:

- Learn about other people's small business experience. Try to find people who seem to be like you, or find those who have businesses similar to the one you're dreaming of. Read about their stories in books or online. Ask your local community college or Service Corps of Retired Executives chapter for contacts. SCORE is a nonprofit association that provides free, confidential business counseling, face-to-face or by e-mail. Ask loads of questions. How do you feel after learn-

ing more? Still interested? Or more cautious? Feeling cautious is fine. It can push you to prepare better for success.

- Practice creative thinking. Ask your local librarian for suggestions of the most popular creative-thinking videos and books. We're all more creative than we usually realize. Come up with some variants of your business idea. Even brainstorming with yourself can stimulate business ideas.

- Learn some business planning skills before you

actually take any risks or business start-up actions. How comfortable are you with the technical business information you're learning? Does doing a business plan sound possible, or overwhelming? Check your feelings again. Still excited? Do you want to move forward? Feeling more cautious than ever may be a good sign. Maybe you're ready to sign up for another course, or talk to a small-business adviser.

Cheris F. Hodges writes for the Charlotte Post.

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