

Investing in Society

An Entrepreneurial Spirit

An Interview with Sheila C. Johnson,
Salamander Hospitality

EDITORS' NOTE Sheila Johnson is Founder and CEO of Salamander Hospitality, LLC. Johnson is the first African-American woman to have a stake in three professional sports teams, including the Washington Mystics (WNBA), Washington Wizards (NBA), and Washington Capitals (NHL). She is also a founding partner of BET (Black Entertainment Television) and the creator of the award-winning program Teen Summit. Currently, Johnson is creating and championing films with a humanitarian message, including her latest documentary, *A Powerful Noise*. Johnson presently serves as Chairman of the Board of Governors of Parsons The New School for Design and sits on the boards of VH1 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. She is a Global Ambassador for CARE and is a member of the Council on Foreign Relations.

COMPANY BRIEF Salamander Hospitality (www.salamanderhospitality.com) is a company that manages and develops unique hotels, resorts, and inns. The portfolio includes Innisbrook Resort and Golf Club near Tampa, Florida; the Mobil Five Star and AAA Five Diamond rated Woodlands Inn, near Charleston, South Carolina; and the under-construction Salamander Resort & Spa, located in Middleburg, Virginia.

What is the focus of Salamander Hospitality, and is your outlook for growth optimistic?

Salamander Hospitality is a very unique brand focused on affordable luxury. We like to invest in and develop four- and five-star dining and hospitality products. Right now, all hospitality is in a wait-and-see mode. We're continuing to grow, but we want to position ourselves to be able to invest in the future, so when the economy's problems are finished, we will be able to capture the luxury market.

Do you focus on smaller boutique properties or do you also address a broader range of property sizes?

We tend to look at the smaller boutique deals because I can put my stamp on them. It can be what I want in quality and service. But there are some drawbacks with those kinds of properties too, because you have to make sure there are heads in the beds constantly so you can drive revenue.

How much have you had to learn about the hospitality business, and what drew you to the industry?

Coming out of the entertainment business, I didn't see much of a difference – both industries basically work on the same structure and thrive on the same energy. It's important that you bring in the best people who really know what they're doing. You let them do what they need to do and you learn from it. We're in collaboration all the time, constantly planning and sharing ideas.

How has your involvement in the sports industry progressed?

It's one of the hardest and most enjoyable jobs I've ever had. I get a thrill when I see my players running out onto the court to start a game. If they win, it's great, but if they don't, it can be the worst feeling in the world as an owner. It's the entertainment business and there are so many variables to making it successful. You have to have a good product on the floor, and you have to entertain the fans in the seats. It's a tough business.

Was the idea of giving back instilled in you early on?

It started when I was young. My parents have always been focused on giving back. My father was a doctor. We lived in a coal-mining community, and he was always out in the field, either helping those who couldn't pay their bills or patching up people, and I watched that closely. My mother would take in students, or she was always feeding the football team. It's important, as I've gotten older and become an entrepreneur, that I give back to the community because only when I do that will the community give back to business. It's extraordinarily important that all businesses build in some sort of community component so they can reach out and help others.

How do you decide where to focus your philanthropic efforts?

I focus on the issues closest to my heart – youth, women, the arts, eradicating poverty. But I used to run myself ragged trying to be everything to everyone, and I realized I can't do that. My most recent documentary, *A Powerful Noise*, is about global poverty, and what I learned by doing documentary work is I can bring immediate attention to a cause and reach a broad number of people. We have an unbelievable HIV/AIDS epidemic in Washington, D.C. – it's greater than the Congo, but nobody wants to talk about it. With the help of Jose Vargas at the Washington



Post, we are making a documentary on this issue called *The Other City*. I'm going to let Washington, D.C. – the local government and our federal government – know what's going on.

What makes the CARE organization so close to your heart?

I made a personal financial investment in CARE, which focuses on women's empowerment, because it needed a kick-start. Studies show that investing in women is the key to solving the problem of global poverty. Women are the backbone of the community, and if we don't invest in them, the entire world will be affected.

If I was talking to people who have worked closely with you and asked what it was like to work for Sheila Johnson, what would they say?

I am honored and humbled to say that my employees tell me I inspire and motivate them. There's never boredom – every day is different. I try to be open-minded. I love to listen to my employees, to talk with them about ideas and things we should change or make better. I never see myself as above them. They know I'm the boss, but I'm right in there with them. I'll roll my sleeves up to make things work. At my markets, if I see an employee overwhelmed with a customer, I start busing tables – I'm not above doing that.

You appear very calm. How do you deal with stress?

Things happen, and you roll with it. You find the silver lining in a bad situation and make it work. Some things are just out of your control. I like to be optimistic. We need to be careful right now. We need to think beyond this doom and gloom scenario because if we continue to wallow in this, it's going to become self-fulfilling.

How challenging is it to turn off the business?

I can easily go home at night and watch a movie or read a book, and I don't think about work again until the next morning when I go in the office. I look forward to going in the office. I love the people I work with, and I love the people who work for me. They're some of the greatest people in the world – they really are. ●

Sheila Johnson with children in Rwanda