

Passionate About Giving

An Interview with Sale Johnson, Philanthropist



EDITORS' NOTE Upon graduating from the University of Miami, Sale Johnson attended the Allstate Construction College studying for a General Contractors license. She earned her Florida Real Estate license, decorator's license, and continued a successful international modeling career in North and Central America while attending graduate school. Johnson accepted a position as Vice President of Sales and Marketing with a real estate marketing and property management company based in South Florida. She has been active on numerous boards including: the Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation International (JDRF), the New York Chapter of the JDRF, the Morris Animal Foundation, the development committee of the American Horse Shows Association, the Girl Scouts of Greater New York, the United States Equestrian Team, the Alzheimer's Foundation, and the Hampton Classic Horse Show. Sale has chaired among others the Lenox Hill Neighborhood Association annual benefit, the Girl Scouts of Greater New York annual benefit (twice), the 100th Anniversary of the Wildlife Conservation Society Gala, the AHSA/Cartier and Asprey annual benefits for the National Horse Show, and has been the Honorary Chairman of the Promise Ball for JDRF for many years. Johnson was an honoree of the Red Ball to benefit the Mary Lea Johnson Richards Organ Transplantation Center at New York University Langone Medical Center; she was awarded the Lizette H. Sarnoff Spirit of Achievement Award for Volunteer Service given by the Albert Einstein College of Medicine; she was honored with the Humanitarian of the Year Award at JDRF's 25th Annual Promise Ball; she was noted as "A Woman to Watch" by Van Cleef and Arpels; and the Irvington Institute for Immunological Research honored her with the Rosenwald Award for Outstanding Philanthropy.



Sale Johnson

You are considered a leader in philanthropy and are involved in many different causes. What interests you about philanthropy, and how do you decide which areas deserve your attention?

I believe one chooses to become involved in a cause because of a personal issue that has impacted his or her life. I have three daughters. Each one has a different medical condition.

My eldest daughter has diabetes, my middle daughter has lupus, and my youngest daughter has a blood disorder. It is very difficult having children who are not well, both for the parents and especially for the children. In our case, they look perfectly healthy, but their diseases are life-threatening.

My eldest daughter was diagnosed with diabetes when she was eight years old. That was our first experience having one of our children become very ill. It was overwhelmingly traumatic. You handle this kind of discovery in a very personal way. My former husband, Woody [Robert Wood Johnson IV], and I both joined the board of the Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation because this organization focuses solely on research. Woody soon became Chairman of the International Board while I became active with the New York board. We immediately began our efforts to raise as much money as we could to support research toward a cure. Woody went to the National Institutes of Health and became a board member of the National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases. He raised \$30 million with one congressional presentation. With each year's effort and a large active committee, I annually helped raise a few more. As a parent, you are in a huge hurry to find a cure for your child's illness. Every dollar is one more test tube for research towards that cure.

When our middle daughter was diagnosed with lupus, for one year we had been unsure what was wrong with her. Her joints were painful with arthritis. Initially, the doctors thought she had juvenile rheumatoid arthritis. It took one year and trial treatments with experimental drugs to finally realize her diagnosis was lupus. There is no definitive test for lupus like there is for diabetes and many other illnesses; it is a process of elimination. Woody then founded the Alliance for Lupus Research. We as a family have been especially involved in this effort. It is a forward-thinking foundation, completely privately funded. All monies raised go solely to research.

When you learned of your daughters' diagnoses, that age-old phrase "knowledge is power" must have come into play for you. Was diving in and learning everything you could critical to your success in these areas?

Absolutely, but I do tend to do that with everything. When I was learning to play golf

or compete with the horses, tennis, swimming or even studying the oboe or piano, I studied everything I possibly could. I read everything, watched every professional video, and took as many lessons and spoke to as many professionals as I could. I am not a periphery personality. I like to be knowledgeable about everything that I am doing. I ask a lot of questions, often to the annoyance of my normally very tolerant girls, or Ahmad [Rashad], my wonderful and supportive husband. It might appear nosy, but to me, it's inquisitive. When our daughter was in the hospital after her diagnosis, I would go the hospital's medical library to search for anything that might help educate me about diabetes while she slept. But unless I read Latin or was a doctor, there really wasn't anything useful. This is why we wrote the book *Managing Your Child's Diabetes*. When our daughter was 10, she and I went on a book tour to spread the word. That book was widely distributed to hospitals, diabetes clinics, to anyone that asked. At this point, if a friend, or even a friend of a friend, has a problem, they often call me. That is just who I am; a nurturer, a doer. My daughters tell me I don't always have to answer the phone, but I can't help it. If I can be of help, I try my best to do it.

You have such a can-do attitude, but is it ever challenging to take the emotion out of the situation and be objective? Do you ever think "Why us?"

It is very hard and incredibly stressful. I get exhausted. I cry. But I believe that if you talk to anyone who has been in the trenches of similar situations, no matter how strong they seem, and may be, they feel the same way I do. When our daughter was initially in the hospital, she said to me, "Why me, Mommy? What did I do wrong?" Try to explain to an 8-year-old that she did nothing wrong, yet she is suddenly so ill. But had she not gotten sick, her father and I would not have gotten involved. I told her, "Hopefully, we have helped you and many others in the search for a cure." That is the only justification I can give. I have learned to believe it.

I am trying to raise my daughters to become involved. I hope they develop the desire to give back to the community, locally and worldwide, to work and support the causes they feel passionate about. The list is an expansive one. Pick one; pick five. Help others. Feel good about yourself. Just get involved. ●

Sale Johnson (center; blue dress) with Nelson Mandela