

A Heart-to-heart with America's first Black billionaireess

Written by Kam Williams



Sheila Johnson

"The Other City" Interview with Kam Williams

Entrepreneur and philanthropist Sheila Crump Johnson is the only African-American female to enjoy ownership in three professional sports teams: the WNBA's Washington Mystics, the NBA's Washington Wizards and the NHL's Washington Capitals. Furthermore, as CEO of Salamander Hospitality, a company she founded in 2005, Ms. Johnson oversees a growing portfolio of luxury properties, including Woodlands Inn, in Summerville, SC, which is one of only a handful of properties to receive both a prestigious Forbes Five Star rating and a AAA Five Diamond rating for lodging and dining.

In 2007, she acquired Innisbrook, a Salamander Golf & Spa Resort. Set on 900 acres, this 72-hole Florida getaway hosts the PGA Tour's annual Transitions Championship and the LPGA Legends Tour Open Championship. The company is also building the eagerly-anticipated Salamander Resort & Spa, nestled in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains in charming Middleburg, VA.

In addition, Johnson is a partner in ProJet Aviation, a company specializing in aviation consulting, aircraft acquisitions, management, and charter services based in Winchester, VA. And she is a partner in Mistral, a maker of fine bath, body and home products.

Ms. Johnson has long been a powerful influence in the entertainment industry as a founding partner of Black Entertainment Television (BET) and, most recently, as a film producer. In partnership with other investors, her first film, *Kicking It*, premiered at the 2008 Sundance Film Festival. She executive produced her second film, *A Powerful Noise*, which premiered at the 2008 TriBeCa Film Festival in New York, as well as her third film, *She Is The Matador*.

In 2006 she was named global ambassador for CARE, a leading humanitarian organization fighting poverty worldwide by empowering women since they are in a pivotal position to help

A Heart-to-heart with America's first Black billionaireess

Written by Kam Williams

their communities escape poverty. "Sheila's I Am Powerful Challenge" was instrumental in raising funds for this important work.

A fervent supporter of the arts and education, she was recently appointed by Barack Obama to the President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities and serves as Chair of the Board of Governors of Parsons The New School for Design in New York. She sits on the boards of Americans for the Arts, the Jackie Robinson Foundation, the Tiger Woods Foundation, the University of Virginia Curry School of Education, Howard University, the University of Illinois Foundation, and is a member of the Council on Foreign Relations.

An accomplished violinist, Ms. Johnson received a Bachelor of Arts in music from the University of Illinois, as well as honorary degrees from numerous other institutions. Ms. Johnson, who lives in Middleburg, VA, is a mother of two, and remarried to the Honorable William T. Newman, Jr. Here, she talks about her new film, *The Other City*, an expose' about the HIV/AIDS crisis in Washington, DC which recently premiered at the 2010 TriBeCa Film Festival.

Kam Williams: Hi, Ms. Johnson, it's an honor to speak with you.

Sheila Johnson: Thanks, Kam, how are you?

KW: Fine thanks. I saw *The Other City* and loved it, and I told my readers I'd be interviewing you, so I have plenty of questions to get to.

SJ: Oh, great!

KW: Reverend Florine Thompson asks, what is it about HIV/AIDS that prompted you to produce the film?

SJ: I really wanted to do this film in order to ignite the discussion, and to reeducate. What has been happening, that is so wrong right now is that AIDS has disappeared from the radar screen. It's no longer a celebrity-driven cause anymore, so I wanted to bring it back to the people. I also wanted to give dignity to the victims now suffering with AIDS, so that people can see not only that the disease hasn't gone away, but is spreading at an alarming rate and disproportionately affecting African-American women. So, I think we need to get out and start educating young people, and especially the Black churches need to be talking about it from the pulpit. And we, as a society, need to stop hiding behind the stigma in order to be able to give the disease the platform we need to start the reeducation process and halt the increase in the transmission rate.

KW: 2010 Florida State University grad Laz Lyles would like to know what was the most surprising thing you've discovered about the epidemic?

SJ: How it has increasingly become a heterosexual disease. The thing I wished the movie had emphasized more was how many married women we now have coming down with it. Their husbands are bringing it home to them. I had three women come up to me and say that the only sin they committed in life was getting married. That's very sad. The other surprising thing we're finding is that AIDS is hitting at a younger age, as young as 13 among gay males.

KW: Lester Chisholm says that Urban Prep, an African-American male charter high school in Chicago has a 100% college acceptance rate, and it's aiming for a 100% college graduation rate. He wonders whether we might accomplish a 100% success rate in the fight against AIDS, if we adopted this same attitude for a given population.

SJ: I think that we really could stop this disease, if we seriously educate our young people, starting in junior high, and continue delivering the message in high schools and across college

A Heart-to-heart with America's first Black billionaireess

Written by Kam Williams

campuses. I really do. Meanwhile, scientists and doctors are still working on finding a cure, and some say they're getting closer and closer. Between education and research, we can stop it.

KW: Larry Greenberg says, "I know that in addition to your enormous accomplishments in business and philanthropy you are a virtuoso violinist." He asks, "Do you still find time to play?"

SJ: I don't. I'm very ashamed about that. My mother's on me all the time about that, and so, is my husband. He always says, "You're such a great violinist. Why don't you keep playing?" I guess what has happened is that between raising a family and trying to keep businesses afloat I just do not have the time to practice, because I'm such a perfectionist. I suppose I could make the time, even if I sat down for just an hour every day, but I've lost the discipline of practice.

KW: Rev Thompson asks, "Who has been your role model along your journey? Who or what has been your source of inspiration in life?"

SJ: I'd have to say there have been many, many people. Basically, educators have been my role models. There are two teachers in particular, from high school and college, who I stay in touch with and talk to on about a monthly basis. And as I've gotten older, there have been more and more people I've met in life who've become role models. Four years ago, I remarried, and my husband is one of the most inspiring men I've ever met. He's a Chief Judge, and I just love to watch him on the bench to observe how he tries to find a silver lining in the most hardened of criminals in order to give them a second chance. Another person I admire is the President of the University of Illinois, Joe White, who I think is brilliant. He's always giving me terrific advice on different issues. I am lucky to have a lot of extraordinary friends who really do help me including, of course, my mother, who's living with me now. She was there from the beginning, and even at the age of 87, she's still constantly pushing me forward, encouraging me with, "You can do it!" and "Don't give up!"

KW: Reverend Thompson asks, "What would you like to accomplish that you haven't already?"

SJ: I'm in the third act of my life with this hospitality company, Salamander. The one thing I really want to do is to continue to build this resort that I've been working on in Middleburg, Virginia. My goal is to get it finished and open. It's been a seven-year battle for me, because I very naively built south of the Mason-Dixon Line. I didn't realize that there was still this much racial tension in the country. I was very naïve about it. Racism smacked me right in the face while doing this project, but I did not want to lose this war.

KW: So, I guess the rumors I've heard about what you've encountered are true.

SJ: It was unbelievable... the death threats... you have no idea.

KW: Did you regret endorsing Republican Bob McDonnell for Governor of Virginia, given that after he won the election he issued a proclamation declaring April Confederate History Month?

SJ: Yep, I think I've been thrown under the bus. It was quite an embarrassment. My husband had warned me, too. The one thing I learned from this experience is that I will never get involved in politics again on either side. I'm declaring myself an independent. I was just shocked. A group of us, including the President of Hampton University plan to meet with the Governor soon to discuss it.

KW: Yale grad Tommy Russell says, "Since you're a former media executive, what do you think about Comcast's move to buy a controlling stake in NBC/Universal--good move or bad move from NBC's perspective?"

SJ: Well, I will tell you that not only print, but all media are struggling right now. These are business decisions that only the people running the company can really answer. Those on the outside shouldn't be too judgmental about these mergers. There are reasons why they're happening, and it's really for the survival of the market.

A Heart-to-heart with America's first Black billionaireess

Written by Kam Williams

KW: From Reverend Thompson again: What most informs your spirituality?

SJ: I have always been a strong Christian? Growing up, I never missed church. I'm not as good about going right now, because I'm always travelling so much. But I pray every day... before I get out of bed...and when I go to bed at night. I have a very strong spiritual core.

KW: Finally, the Rev asks, what advice would you give a young lady who seeks the level of success you've attained?

SJ: Stay humble. Don't ever, ever take anything for granted in life. Don't assume anything. It's very important to have love and passion for whatever you do.

KW: Is there any question no one ever asks you, that you wish someone would?

SJ: [Chuckles] I wish someone would ask me to be an ambassador someday.

KW: The Tasha Smith question: Are you ever afraid?

SJ: Yes, there are times when I'm afraid. Just building that hotel in Middleburg made me fearful on many different levels. Sometimes, I get anxious. One of my biggest problems is that I tend to get very impatient, especially during this recession. I'm a little bit afraid about the economy, because it really does affect everyone, and you just don't know what's going to happen.

KW: The Columbus Short question: Are you happy?

SJ: I am very happy. I have reached a point in my life where I feel safe for the first time. In my personal life, I have lots of friends, and I've learned to be comfortable with myself, and I don't feel the need to prove anything. I'm following my passion, and I wake up everyday wanting to do more.

KW: The bookworm Troy Johnson question: What was the last book you read?

SJ: [Game Change](#).

KW: The music maven Heather Covington question: What are you listening to on your iPod?

SJ: It depends on my mood. I tend to listen to a lot of jazz. If I'm going to bed at night, I might listen to classical music, but I do like jazz.

KW: What is your favorite dish to cook?

SJ: Anything that is Italian. Pasta is my favorite food in the world.

KW: The Teri Emerson question: When was the last time you had a good laugh?

SJ: [LOL] I laugh every day. Let me think of the funniest thing that happened recently... My husband is a very funny man for a judge. He just told me a joke that I can't remember, but he keeps me laughing all the time.

KW: The Ling-Ju Yen question: What is your earliest childhood memory?

SJ: It would be my first day of school in kindergarten. I was sitting in the classroom, and the little boy across the table made pee-pee on my foot, and I'll never forget that. [Chuckles]

KW: When you look in the mirror, what do you see?

SJ: Oh, I see a woman that is aging gracefully, who's happy, and seems to be at peace with herself.

KW: If you could have one wish instantly granted, what would that be for?

SJ: To recover from this recession and have my hotel opened.

KW: The Uduak Oduok question: Who is your favorite clothes designer?

SJ: Donna Karan.

KW: The Laz Alonso question: How can your fans help you?

SJ: By, instead of asking for a handout, offering to help me help others.

KW: How do you want to be remembered?

SJ: As a woman who was always generous, not only with her pocketbook, but with her heart.

KW: Well, thank you for being so generous with your time, thoughts and feelings here. I really

A Heart-to-heart with America's first Black billionaire

Written by Kam Williams

appreciate it.

SJ: You are so welcome.

To see a trailer for The Other City, visit:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L6b6htdGv_U