

# Renaissance Woman

SHEILA JOHNSON'S BUSINESS EMPIRE REFLECTS HER PERSONAL PASSIONS AND ENTERPRISING ESSENCE

By Mary Murray

The term “Renaissance man” is reserved for individuals with varied interests and manifold talents. Thomas Jefferson, one of history’s most famous Renaissance men, was a noted scholar, architect, linguist, and musician. Today, another Virginian, businesswoman Sheila Johnson, has successfully redefined the moniker for the new millennium—and for the modern woman.

Johnson is a self-made tycoon. Although best known as the cofounder of Black Entertainment Television, her endeavors range from entertainment to equestrianism, hospitality to sports, philanthropy to films. The mother of show jumper Paige Johnson, she’s long been a fixture in Wellington, where she’s advocated for the area’s development. Most recently, she’s staked her claim in hotels as the CEO of Salamander Hotels and Resorts. Did we mention she’s a trained violinist, too?

“I think [my work] fills the compartments of everything I’ve always wanted to do in my life,” Johnson says. “I don’t want to just be a hotel owner; I want people to look at me as a powerful woman who has the resilience and fortitude to make an impact on my community and society.”

PHOTOS COURTESY OF SALAMANDER HOTELS AND RESORTS



Johnson, who turns 68 this month, has spent her life defying discrimination and working toward a fulfilling professional endgame. She describes her upbringing as unusual, marked by frequent moves to accommodate her father's career as a neurosurgeon. "We moved every 10 months because it was during the time of segregation and my father couldn't practice in white hospitals," she says. "Many children who move around that much probably don't feel secure, but for some reason I was okay with it. ... [It] helped me become very comfortable with everyone—with all cultures, will all races—and it built a level of resiliency."

No matter her address, Johnson found ways to express her energetic nature and innate business acumen. "My mother always thought I had an entrepreneurial spirit because I used to make these potholders and sell them door to door so that I could make some candy money," she recalls.

When her family settled in the suburbs of Chicago, Johnson turned her attention to another passion: music. Her parents played the piano, but she chose the violin. She earned a music degree from the University of Illinois and became a concert violinist and instructor. Beyond artistic fulfillment, Johnson credits music with shaping her approach to business.

"There's so much you learn by playing with an orchestra," she says. "You're listening to people. You're watching people. More than anything, music and the arts teach you how to be focused, organized, and disciplined."

Johnson parlayed this prowess into her first major corporate endeavor. In 1979, when cable television was in its infancy, she launched BET alongside her then-husband, Robert Johnson. "That was the time when all of cable was being born, from CNN to Nickelodeon," she says. "We felt it was a rare and real opportunity to start a network that focused on African Americans and their experiences."

The early vision for BET revolved around programming that addressed concerns within the African-American community. Johnson produced *Teen Summit*, a news magazine-style show featuring black students discussing issues they faced daily. Viewers, however, did not respond to this approach. Johnson's



thought-provoking content was canceled as the channel deviated from its original purpose. In 2001, the Johnsons sold BET to Viacom in a deal reportedly worth nearly \$3 billion.

This sale, as well as her divorce, jumpstarted the next phase in Johnson's career. Armed with enough capital and personal freedom to pursue anything, she set her sights on hospitality, having fallen in love with a verdant, 340-acre farm outside of Middleburg, Virginia.

"As soon as I saw this property, the lightbulb went off [and] I knew exactly what I wanted to do," she says. "I bought it with the idea to build a resort."

But where Johnson expected the community to welcome her, she instead was met with red tape and pushback. "There was a lot of bitterness within the community; they didn't want anything built up there," she says. "But I knew I had a bigger vision [and] that the town needed economic help."

Johnson purchased the property in 2002 and opened her resort in August 2013. She named it Salamander because, as she explains, "it's the only animal that can walk through fire and still come out alive."

Fresh off her own personal and professional rebirth, Johnson created a sanctuary for her guests to do the same. Nestled in the shadows of the Bull Run Mountains, the Salamander Resort & Spa is an idyllic respite from contemporary life. Designed to look more like a home than an imposing hotel, Salamander provides a warm environment for guests to detach from demands and reset their health.

"[I wanted] to help people reconnect, not

JOHNSON'S ENDEAVORS HAVE LED TO APPEARANCES ON THE GOLF CHANNEL AND EVENTS WITH GOLF STARS LIKE JORDAN SPIETH AND NOTABLE BUSINESSMEN SUCH AS RICHARD BRANSON.



THE EQUESTRIAN LIFESTYLE IS A CORE COMPONENT TO SALAMANDER RESORT & SPA IN MIDDLEBURG, VIRGINIA, WHICH DEDICATES 25 ACRES TO HORSES AND EQUINE PURSUITS.



only with themselves but with others,” Johnson says. “I wanted to be able to connect health and wellness, and for guests to really appreciate nature, take care of themselves, de-stress, and talk about nutritional eating.”

In addition to a spa and cooking studio, Salamander also houses expansive equestrian facilities, including a 14,000-square-foot stable and nine paddocks. “So many people complain that they come into a horsey town like Middleburg and never see horses because they can’t get onto the farms,” Johnson notes. “I wanted to have horses in full view, [and for] our customers to experience rubbing their noses and going horseback riding through our trails.” Salamander takes it a step further with Equi-Spective, a program that asks guests to get to know themselves by examining their demeanor around a horse. Think of it as an equine-assisted therapy session.

Johnson’s own equestrian interests precede Salamander and have roots in Florida. Spurred by her daughter’s love of the sport, Johnson began visiting Wellington when Paige was 5 years old. She’s now 31 and a top-ranked show jumper. “I’m definitely a horse-show mom,” says Johnson, who admits she stands up and kicks her leg back when Paige approaches a jump. “I really get a thrill out of watching her.”

Wellington has changed drastically since Johnson purchased 15 acres in Grand Prix Village and built her barn, today known as Salamander South. “Wellington back then didn’t look like it does now,” she says. “I think the equestrian community

has really spearheaded the development that has gone on there. We’ve become the economic engine of Wellington.”

A longtime supporter of the Winter Equestrian Festival, Johnson credits Wellington Equestrian Partners CEO Mark Bellissimo with the town’s growth and evolving clout. Bellissimo, too, praises Johnson for bringing credibility to his endeavors. “Some of the old guard weren’t necessarily too supportive of what we were doing, and she always was,” he says.

Now, Johnson’s working with Bellissimo to establish a resort at his Tryon International Equestrian Center in North Carolina, which will host the 2018 FEI World Equestrian Games. Bellissimo, who has known Johnson for more than 10 years, looks forward to turning a friendship into a successful business relationship.

“To go into a partnership with someone like Sheila is easy because she’s never going to give up and she’s going to pursue the vision,” he says. “When you’re going side by side with someone like that, you know she’ll bring a very principled commitment to a positive outcome. Those are traits that are hard to come by these days.”

The resort at Tryon will become one of many new additions to Johnson’s growing Salamander portfolio, which includes Innisbrook in Tampa Bay, Reunion in Kissimmee, Hammock Beach in Palm Coast, The Henderson Beach Resort in Destin, and the forthcoming Nopsi Hotel in New Orleans. Each location strives for the same level of “luxurious comfortability” that permeates Salamander Resort. “I want families to feel good about being there,” she says. “I want people of all cultures and races to feel completely welcomed.”

In her treasured downtime, Johnson cultivates hobbies—but, in true Sheila fashion, she takes them to another level. She’s a sports fan, with ownership in the WNBA’s Washington Mystics, the NBA’s Washington Wizards, and the NHL’s Washington Capitals. She’s a movie buff, having produced numerous films including *The Butler* and started the Middleburg Film Festival. She’s a budding golfer, who serves on the executive committee of the United States Golf Association. Finally, she’s a dedicated philanthropist, who fosters the next generation of leaders through her fellowship at the Harvard Kennedy School Center for Public Leadership.



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JOHNSON HAS BEEN VISITING WELLINGTON FOR DECADES AND IS A LONGTIME SUPPORTER OF THE TOWN’S HORSE COMMUNITY. THAT SAME EQUINE ENTHUSIASM IS PALPABLE AT SALAMANDER RESORT.

But for all her passions—and compassion—Johnson is first and foremost a dogged businesswoman. Despite her self-made status, she stresses the importance of collaboration and respect among colleagues. This, she notes, is especially vital for young women.

“Sit back and analyze your partners and the people you surround yourself with,” she says. “Make sure they respect you, and it’s the way you handle it. You don’t have to be a contrarian. You don’t have to force yourself on these guys or anything. They have to learn to respect you, and those who don’t want to respect you, they need to go.” And then, with a grit that reflects her desire to see more women follow in her footsteps, she adds: “That’s what’s important. And don’t back off.” ◀◀

