

# THE ECONOMIC CLUB

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O F W A S H I N G T O N, D. C.

## **Signature Event**

**Sheila Johnson**

**Speaker**

**Sheila Johnson**  
**Founder and CEO, Salamander Collection**  
*Author, **Walk Through Fire***

**Moderator**

**David M. Rubenstein**  
**Chairman**  
**The Economic Club of Washington, D.C.**

**Washington, D.C.**  
**Thursday, January 4, 2024**

DAVID M. RUBENSTEIN: Well, you have a lot of friends and fans here, understandably so. So why don't we dig into your life?

SHEILA JOHNSON: OK. [Laughter.]

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So –

MS. JOHNSON: Why beat around the bush? [Laughs.]

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So, right now, if I understand it correctly, you have been a large developer of a company called BET, which we'll talk about shortly. And that was very successful. You now are an author, with this book. It's a best-selling book. You also are a philanthropist. You made a large gift to many places, but in Washington, D.C., in the mall. We'll talk about that in a moment. You also are an accomplished musician, a violinist. And you've started symphonies in the city and in Jordan. And you now are in the hospitality business. So, what do you do on the seventh day? Do you rest, or? [Laughter.]

MS. JOHNSON: Well, more than anything, I have to tell you, I am in the third act of my life. And this has been the happiest I've ever been.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Really?

MS. JOHNSON: You know? [Cheers, applause.]

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK. So –

MS. JOHNSON: And so, on the seventh day I just don't even rest because I –

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Well, I should have pointed out as well you have two children and four grandchildren.

MS. JOHNSON: That's right.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: And that keeps you busy, too, right?

MS. JOHNSON: Absolutely. And the grandchildren are just a delight. My kids have now – as you all know, our kids went to school together.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Yes. We should disclose that. Our kids were together in the preschool at NCRC. And we were the co-chairs of the Capital Campaign, which I think was supposed to raise \$50,000, or something like that.

MS. JOHNSON: No, it was \$100,000.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Hundred thousand dollars. [Laughter.] It came close.

MS. JOHNSON: It was a large amount, back then, yeah.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So, in any event, let's talk about a couple of issues that are important to you at the beginning; then we'll go through your life. So, right now, you are also an owner, I should have pointed out, of three major sports teams.

MS. JOHNSON: That's right. [Cheers, applause.]

MR. RUBENSTEIN: And you're the first woman – as I understand it, the first woman to own three major – to have a stake in three major sports teams. Is that right?

MS. JOHNSON: Yes. And I will say, African American. [Laughter, applause.]

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Well, yes. But no other woman, African American or white, did that, right?

MS. JOHNSON: I mean, that's right. [Laughter.]

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK. So, are you a big sports fan? Are you – [cheers] –

MS. JOHNSON: I have always been a big sports fan. You know, before Title IX,<sup>1</sup> I had to – I had to be a cheerleader because, you know, I couldn't do anything else.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So, now, what also is important to you is gender and racial equity and equality. And what have you done – well, we have a video on that. Why don't we show that first, and you can talk about it?

MS. JOHNSON: OK. All right. You can queue "The Family Reunion."

[A video presentation begins.]

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON: The Family Reunion is an opportunity to celebrate us. To celebrate our food and a way for us to tell our story using food as a conduit.

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON: When you walk in, there's a different energy. There's a different spirit that comes alive once the family reunion starts.

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON: There is just something comforting about where we are and what we're doing here.

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON: You get to sit down and eat with these folks, have drinks, and you talk over these stories. And it's just that one moment in the world where you don't worry about anything at all.

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<sup>1</sup> Title IX is the landmark federal civil rights law in the United States that prohibits sex-based discrimination in any school or any other education program that receives funding from the federal government.

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON: I mean, so often we are in places, and we are “onlys.” And here we are the majority. It feels really good.

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON: This resort behind me is a gathering place of love, adventure, and fine culinary cuisine from all over the country.

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON: Just look at it. I mean, why wouldn't you want to be here?  
[Laughter.]

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON: Family Reunion is way more than just food. In 2023, we're bigger, we're better, we're bolder. We have so much more programming this year. We have a comedy show we added, an R&B night, food competition session. We also have family field day where we've broken the whole group into four different families to compete for the winner of The Family Reunion.

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON: This year's Family Reunion is so unique because we have been able to expand and really share the love and the adventures that we have here.

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON: And now it's a true reunion. People are coming back year after year. There's a magic you feel when you come in the door. And you carry that out into the world.

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON: The future of the family reunion, I mean, the possibilities are endless. As long as we keep growing and people keep showing up, who knows where we'll be?

CROWD: Come as friends, leave as family! [Cheers.]

[Video presentation ends.] [Applause]

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So now that you're one of the, I think, wealthiest African American women in the United States, I think it's fair to say, you don't suffer any gender or racial discrimination, is that right? [Laughter.]

MS. JOHNSON: Oh, no. Oh, come on. It continues to go on. It's something that I continue to address. I not only address it through my company, by making sure that I hire diverse minds, people of color, women of color, men of color. And the reason why I wanted to show this Family Reunion, because what was going on – and especially during COVID – so many African American hospitality people lost their jobs, they lost their restaurants. And when Kwame Onwuachi lost his restaurant at the InterContinental down at the Wharf,<sup>2</sup> and it was written about in The Washington Post, I called him immediately. And I said, I want you to come to Salamander.

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<sup>2</sup> The Wharf, formally The District Wharf, is a multi-billion-dollar mixed-use development on the Southwest Waterfront in Washington, D.C., containing the city's historic Maine Avenue Fish Market, hotels, residential buildings, restaurants, shops, parks, piers, docks and marinas, and live music venues.

We have been together ever since. And we decided to put this Family Reunion together to bring chefs of color, both men and women, and sommeliers from all across the country. We have 41 chefs that come. And to really discuss the issues that are going on in this country as far as economic diversity. We've got to address these issues. We bring the banks in to see if they can really talk about how they can get financing. This is something that I have worked on forever. And, as you know, I put 50 kids through the Kennedy School at Harvard. And these are young people from underserved communities that I paid for their whole education. And they are now so successful. But this is something that we have to do. [Applause]

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So, the push for gender equity, and racial equity, and affirmative action as it was called, the Supreme Court struck down the efforts of some universities to provide certain affirmative action.

MS. JOHNSON: Right.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: And recently we've seen the president of Harvard had to resign. Some people would say there was – she was an affirmative action choice, some people would say. I wouldn't say that. But she would – some people would say that. So, are you worried that the whole effort towards getting greater equity is going away?

MS. JOHNSON: No, it's not going away. And I think it's something that we have to be really aware of, and we've got to – as these issues come up, we need to really address them. What has happened up at Harvard, you know, is unfortunate. I was up there for her inauguration. And it's sad what happened. I don't think it was so much a racial issue. I think it was more the plagiarism. You know, I've talked with people that said they're going to get on plagiarism. And now I understand that even the temporary president that's coming in, what is it, his wife maybe get hit on plagiarism, too? I don't know.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: No, no, no. That wasn't it. No, it was somebody who asked her to step down, who was leading the effort against her effort. His wife has been alleged –

MS. JOHNSON: Yeah. It gets very complicated. But I just think we're in a tough situation that I think what's going on in the country now we have to be very careful how we communicate our feelings.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So, where you are now in life is a place many people would like to be. Did you start out with a wealthy father and mother and –

MS. JOHNSON: They weren't wealthy. They were middle class.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Middle class. So, you might describe what happened in your family growing up, because you begin your book with a relatively sad, I would say, situation. You might describe what happened in that situation.

MS. JOHNSON: Yeah. It's a case, and – now, we're going to go all the way back to the '50s, early '60s. And this is a time when women had very little leverage and control over their own

lives. My father was one of eight African American neurosurgeons in the country. And that put us in a social status up here. He then decided one night he was just leaving. And he just left us cold. And so, my mother suddenly went from here to here in society, in the eyes of society. Her friends left her. It was going on; she literally had a nervous breakdown. And I was coming in – I was working at JCPenney. And I came in, and we found her on the floor in the kitchen in convulsions.

And that was a time, at 16 years old, that I suddenly had to grow up. I had to take care of the family, of my family. And this is something that Black Americans go through. This was so painful for me. And I still think about it. It is something that will never, ever leave me because at that point I learned a hard lesson, where she had no financial status. She didn't have a bank account. She couldn't get child support. She didn't have a credit card. Women just did not have that kind of help back then. And I'll tell you something, even in my divorce I had to hire my lawyer to get in there to get my utilities changed, to get my bank account. Now this is in the – 2000. I just had to struggle still too.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So, your mother obviously went through a difficult situation. She later went back to school to get a career, or what did she do?

MS. JOHNSON: No, she already had her career. But she never – because she was the housewife and the mother. She had graduated. She was a CFO and she then worked at Hines VA hospital.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: And you never saw your father again? Once?

MS. JOHNSON: I saw him once when my uncle Joe was dying in the hospital. And when I walked into the hospital room, when I was there with my uncle Joe, he came in there and he asked me what am I doing here? And it was – you have to read the book. It was so painful. It was so painful. My father just didn't want to have anything to do with me anymore, for no reason.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So, when you were growing up, what city were you growing up in?

MS. JOHNSON: Chicago.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Chicago?

MS. JOHNSON: Maywood, Illinois.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Now, you were – you were going to public high school?

MS. JOHNSON: I was in a public high school. But what you have to understand, I had moved 13 times before then because my father could not practice in a white hospital. They put him in the VA. He could only operate on African American patients. So, once he finished that, then they moved us. It was every 10 months we moved.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So African American surgeons couldn't operate – could not operate on white people. So, you were interested in music.

MS. JOHNSON: Right.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: And you were an accomplished violinist.

MS. JOHNSON: What had happened, despite all my father's issues, he was a great pianist, OK? I don't know where it came from, but he could sit down and play anything. And there was always music in our household. My mother even played the piano. And when we moved to Maywood, Illinois, District 89 said that it was mandatory that we pick up a music instrument. And that's when I picked up the violin. And I just fell in love with this instrument. That instrument was the foundation of my life. It was my sanctuary. And I became really good at it.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So, you graduated from high school, and you went to college, where?

MS. JOHNSON: University of Illinois, in Champaign.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: And were you playing music on the side?

MS. JOHNSON: No. What had happened – this is really interesting – [laughs] – you have to read the book because I have to tell you it's much more complicated than that. [Laughter, applause.] When I was in high school, and what people who got to educate themselves, I was in a very middle-class community. I didn't know about SAT preps. I didn't know about a lot of things in preparation for colleges, that upper-class white people had. So, the problem was, is I went, and they said, you got to go take an SAT test. And I'm like, what's an SAT test?

So, I went one Saturday and took it. I had the lowest SAT scores you can imagine. And when I told my music teacher in high school, I said, I don't understand these scores. She says, oh my God, these are really bad. [Laughter.] And she said, but don't you worry. She says, I want you to go down and audition at the University of Illinois in Champaign. Which I did. And I played in front of Paul Rolland, who was also instrumental in bringing Suzuki, along with John Kendall, into the country. And he says, I'm taking you into this university. I got a full scholarship. But it was because of my musical skills that I got in there. [Applause]

MR. RUBENSTEIN: All right. So, you went there, and you majored in violin, more or less?

MS. JOHNSON: I majored in music and performance and music education. [Laughter.]

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK. And so, you were doing well there. And you expected to be a professional musician?

MS. JOHNSON: I was – yes. And I played in the Chicago Civic Symphony and under Jean Martinon in the Chicago Symphony. And then from there, moved to the East Coast. And that's where I settled in this area and started teaching at Sidwell Friends. And put together one of the most magnificent middle school orchestras. That orchestra grew – I left Sidwell in '72 – took

that orchestra and bought a house on Brandywine Street where that orchestra grew to 110 students. And that orchestra was so good. We played at the old Post Office Pavilion, which is now the – was the Trump Hotel, now the Waldorf.

And Queen Noor, that whole delegation, came in and heard that orchestra. And they went, oh my God. We were invited to Amman, Jordan, to play at the largest cultural festival in the Middle East, called Jerash. And from that point on, we got invited back six or seven times to perform over there. And I received the highest honor in education from King Hussein.  
[Applause]

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK.

MS. JOHNSON: Yeah.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So, you still play the violin?

MS. JOHNSON: I still have my violin. I picked up the cello during COVID.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Did Yo-Yo Ma give you lessons, or no? [Laughter.]

MS. JOHNSON: I wish he would.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK. So, one of the reasons that you became financially successful was a company you helped to build, called Black Entertainment Television.

MS. JOHNSON: Yes, that's right.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: When did you start that company?

MS. JOHNSON: We started – I can tell you; we went on the air January 25th, 1979. Before that was just getting everything in place. I ended up having to sell my violin, my precious violin that my parents mortgaged the house for, to pay the rent on the offices. And it was the old American Trial Lawyers building, which is now a hotel in Georgetown. But it was just these sacrifices that you have to make in life.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So, you started this with somebody you met when you were in college?

MS. JOHNSON: Yeah. [Laughter.]

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK. So, what was the concept behind Black Entertainment Television? What were you trying to do? Why was there a need for a BET?

MS. JOHNSON: What you have to understand, BET was born during the birth of all cable. You know, that was CNN, Bloomberg, you name them. Everybody started these cable networks. But what they weren't addressing was the voice of the African American community. And so, when



Bob<sup>3</sup> was working with the National Cable Television Association he had to take a senior citizen up to the Hill to try to get government approval and some money to start a senior citizen channel. They turned him down. He threw the proposal in the trash.

He pulled it – Bob pulled it out. We brought it home. He says, you need to look at this. I'm crossing out "senior." I write in, "Black," you know? And I said, you know, we made some tweaks. And I said, but how are we going to get money for this? And then we realized there's John Malone in Denver who owned all the cable stations across the country. Took it to him. He says this is the best idea since sliced bread. He immediately wrote a check for \$500,000 to get us started. But, you know, in the television business it goes like that.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: It goes like that every business, but OK. [Laughter.]

MS. JOHNSON: But anyway, he really was our guardian angel all the way up to the sale of Viacom. We had to pay him back. We paid him back every penny that he invested into BET.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK, so you and your then-husband Bob –

MS. JOHNSON: Uh-huh. [Laughter.]

MR. RUBENSTEIN: – built the company. You were the co-founder. And your job at the company was, what?

MS. JOHNSON: I was vice president.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK. And your job – you oversaw what areas?

MS. JOHNSON: Programming. I also – the employees called me the conscience of BET because at the time we were really trying to get programming on the air. Our problem was is we could not sell advertising. No one believed in an African American station. They did not want to invest in it, and it was a problem. You name it, we just could not. Finally, McDonald's signed on. And that was the beginning. Our sales never really were as strong as we really wanted them to do, because they didn't think that we were going to be successful at all.

But what happened is the video market started. And once that started, and you remember it was Michael Jackson and Paul McCarthy, and they had these wonderful videos that were really the art of storytelling on video. I thought they were done so well. Eight months later, it kind of took a turn downwards. And because MTV would not put anybody Black on their station. There were not – and that was our window of opportunity. Once the videos started, we were then able to – advertisers started to come in.

And this is something, you know, even when we think about BET now, whoever's going to try and buy it, there has got to be a revaluation and a reassessment of what is the purpose of BET now? What are they going to do? How are we going to address the public now? Because

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<sup>3</sup> Robert L. Johnson, co-founder of Black Entertainment Television and former spouse of Sheila Johnson.

back then it was so tough. It was so tough. And I still don't think we reached the market that we needed – or our vision.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: And you're not going to be the buyer of it?

MS. JOHNSON: No. [Laughter.]

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK. So BET, you and your then-husband ran it for roughly 20 years, was it?

MS. JOHNSON: Mmm hmm.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: And then you decided to sell it to Viacom for a very nice price at the time.

MS. JOHNSON: Well, I didn't know it was going to go for that. I just remember being in Times Square and I saw that ticker tape thing going around and it said BET was sold for \$3 billion. And I'm like, oh, this is perfect. Let me call my lawyer for like, you know – [laughter] –

MR. RUBENSTEIN: But you had actually left the company?

MS. JOHNSON: Huh? [Laughter.]

MR. RUBENSTEIN: You had left the company before the sale, right? You were – you voluntarily –

MS. JOHNSON: Let me explain that. You can read this in the book. [Laughter.] And I don't want to get in the weeds and the dirt of this. [Laughter.] But what was happening in the company at the time, it was time to sell. If that junk wasn't going on at that time, we probably still would have had BET. I walked into Bloomberg, it was about three or four months ago, to do an interview. I could not believe how beautiful and spectacular that place was. And I was thinking, wait, that could have been BET if we had kept our you-know-what together. So, I mean, it's spectacular.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: All right. So, you sold it. You split up the proceeds.

MS. JOHNSON: Yes.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: And later you decided that you would try to spend some time in a place called Middleburg, where you had bought a house. Middleburg was not –

MS. JOHNSON: A farm.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: A farm.

MS. JOHNSON: Yeah.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Middleburg was not the most welcoming place for African Americans, was it?

MS. JOHNSON: No, not at all.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So why did you pick Middleburg as a place to buy a house?

MS. JOHNSON: Well, I was very naive at the time. My daughter was a – and still is – an incredible equestrian. And she had been on the Nation’s Cup team and was vying to get onto the Olympic team. We had been competing out in that area. I knew people out there. And I just remember taking her to horse shows out there and I kept going down Zulla Road. And I just saw the Shenandoah Mountains. And I said this is the place where I would like to settle.

I had to get out of Washington, D.C. As much as I love Washington, and I’m telling all of you in this ballroom it’s a great city. And I will make my plea to you all a little bit later. But I just want to say, I had to get out of there. I was – the gossip was killing me. My mental health was suffering. And I needed to get out of the city. And that’s where I wanted to be.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So, you went to Middleburg. All right. When you went there, you ultimately decided to buy some land. And where did the idea come from to build a resort hotel there?

MS. JOHNSON: Well, read the book, but anyway. [Laughter.] It was the town that I fell in love with. First of all, I had to buy a – I mean, a gun shop that had a confederate flag in the window. I wanted to get rid of that. So, I bought the building. [Laughter, applause.] That solved it. There were some tweaks I had to make there to make it livable. And I built a performing arts center for The Hill School, because there were just some things that needed – you know, you got to build a foundation there.

And so, then a broker came to me and said, look, Pamela Harriman has passed away, as you know. And this was the last of the estate. So, there’s 340 acres there. And they said, would you be interested? I knew the town was financially bankrupt. And I said, I knew if I could do something as a businesswoman, I needed to put an economic engine in that place and an anchor. So, when I went up on the land, I knew immediately what I needed to do. And that was to build that.

I was very naive about it. I remember having a vision of what I wanted to do, but I also had a party up there to introduce my idea and my vision. The next morning, I was on my way to Dulles Airport and there were signs on both sides of the roads that said: “Don’t BET Middleburg.” And I called my lawyer, who’s sitting here. And I said, you know what? We’ve got a problem. And that went on for the next 10 years. It was the fight of my life. And I will tell you, with everything that I went through, it’s all in newspapers, everything. But when the final vote went down, I won by one vote.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: One vote was the right to build the hotel you wanted?

MS. JOHNSON: That's right.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK. So, you started building it. But then what happened? Did the recession happen?

MS. JOHNSON: The recession hit. I got a call from the bank. And they said, you better mothball this for a while. And we'll give you the green light when to start it again. But the other thing I want you all to know, as a woman, even with all of my money that I had at the time, I could not get a bank loan to build it. I had to use my own money to build that resort because I had – I don't know. I was a woman. And I just could not get the bank loan.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So, ultimately though, you just – you went ahead. The recession kind of went away, and you decide to build it with your own money.

MS. JOHNSON: Yeah. Then bank called and said, you can proceed now. But I still had to use all my own money to finish that off.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: All right. So, you built it. How many rooms was it initially? It was –

MS. JOHNSON: Well, we started with 68. Then it grew, and it grew, and it grew. So now it was 168. And that's where the town put the plug on me that, that that's what I could do. However, I was able to get out of that to build 49 homes, which are going up now. And I was able to also broker a deal with the town hall. I was able to lease a piece of the property to the town. They have a town hall. And I have got the police department on my property. [Laughter, applause.]

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So now, all right, so you decided to build this hotel in Middleburg. And why did you call it Salamander?

MS. JOHNSON: Oh, this is a great story. So, when I moved to that area and I decided to buy the farm where I'm living now, there was a guy by the name of Bill Illisocker [ph] who owned the property. I kind of knew the name because his brother was teaching at Princeton, or something like that. But he had never really lived at the farm. And he had a name for the farm called Cotswold, or something like that, which I did not want. And so, I said, who had the farm before? And they said it was Bruce Sundlun. I contacted Bruce Sundlun and asked him what was the name of his farm before? And he said it was Salamander.

And I said, well, where did that name come from? Bruce Sundlun a fighter pilot that was shot down over Nazi-occupied Belgium. His entire unit was captured. He was able to get out. He crossed Europe and ended up in allied territory of France. He fought briefly for the French Resistance. The U.S. then came to him and said, look, we have got to go in and we have to rescue the rest of your unit out of the POW camp. This is a true story, the story of Hogan's Heroes. That is Bruce Sundlun. That was where the TV show came from.

And he says, well, what does salamander mean? And they said mythically it's the only animal that could walk through fire and still come out alive, which I loved. But you know,

realistically, if you cut off its limbs they regenerate. And it just hit at that time a nerve with me. And I said I need that brand. And I'm going to brand the salamander.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: All right, so Salamander was – your original idea was to build a luxury resort there. But why did you decide to build more hotels, or buy other ones? Was that your original idea, or just to build one, or build more?

MS. JOHNSON: No, it's just that after the success of building the resort in Middleburg, and it just took off, you know. They said, if you build it, they'll come. And then after I hired the most exceptional team I could have put together, and they're still with me, and we were so successful with the resort out there, we decided to expand. But I want to tell you, I then bought Innisbrook Golf Resort, which is in Tampa – outside of Tampa, because during that 10-year fight, and I had hired all this executive team, I needed to keep them employed.

So, I bought Innisbrook, which is a 900-acre golf course. And we're part of the PGA Tour. We have the Copperhead, and we're part of the Valspar – we are Valspar, I should say. We just decided we were pretty successful. And I just decided that we were going to start expanding the company. I'm an entrepreneur. And I –

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Well, how many – how many hotels do you have now?

MS. JOHNSON: We've got seven.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Seven? And including this hotel?

MS. JOHNSON: Yes.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: And you're going to be buying more or building more?

MS. JOHNSON: We're looking at others.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK. [Laughter.]

MS. JOHNSON: We're looking at others.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK, and everything is to be a luxury kind of brand?

MS. JOHNSON: It has to be luxury because that is what I stand for.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK. [Laughter, applause.] So, like, if you have a meal here and you're not happy, what do you do? You talk to somebody.

MS. JOHNSON: You said, what? [Laughter.]

MR. RUBENSTEIN: If you're not happy with the meal I guess you call your general manager.

MS. JOHNSON: Oh, I keep an eye on everything – on everything. Did you enjoy your meal?

MR. RUBENSTEIN: It was excellent.

MS. JOHNSON: Well, thank you. [Laughter, applause.] But you know what? We're going to have one of the best, most successful restaurants in this city. Kwame Onwuachi is my chef. And we're going to – [cheers, applause].

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK. So, let's talk about something else you've done, which is sports teams. So, you were approached by the owner then of the – I guess, the Washington Wizards and the Washington Caps about maybe buying the Washington Mystics, which is the female, women's basketball team. And what did you say?

MS. JOHNSON: That's right. Well, first of all, it was Abe Pollin. He did come to me and Susan O'Malley. And they said – Abe Pollin says, look, I want you to be the face of the Washington Mystics. And I said, what do you mean be the face of? He says I want you to buy this team. His health was failing. And I have to tell you, and a lot of women can understand this, we never get these opportunities. So that was the first thing that struck me. And I was flattered. I was really flattered.

I said, well, Abe, what are the financials on this? And he handed them to me and says, well, they're not making money. [Laughter.] But I was still intrigued about team ownership. So, then I called my lawyer, Sandy Ain. And I said, Sandy, I've just been offered a basketball team. He goes, you don't want to buy a basketball team. [Laughter.] And I said but, Sandy, if you were offered this team, what would you do? And he was quiet. And I said, you just answered my question. And so, I said, I'll be at your office. And I said, I want you to get Ted Leonsis on the phone. And we talked to him.

And I told Ted – I asked Ted. I said, I've just been offered the Washington Mystics. And I know that you want to buy the Wizards, and you already own the Caps. And I said, look, I can make you an offer. I said, I would like to buy into Lincoln Holdings, which was what it was then. And I said I'd like to be the first woman and the first African American. I said I do not think there's any other franchise in the country that can boast that opportunity. And he says, well, let me go to the other partners, and let's see what happens. And that's what happened. So, I got – and I bought into – I paid the money.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So, what happened was you are offered a money-losing women's basketball team and you said, I don't want to just be the face of a money-losing basketball team. I want to be in the other sports as well. Is that right?

MS. JOHNSON: Well, yeah. You know, you got to be smart about this.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK. All right.

MS. JOHNSON: You got to be smart. You know, there's three teams that can share losses and profits.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: All right. So now you're an owner of the Washington Caps, the Washington Wizards, the Washington Mystics.

MS. JOHNSON: Right.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Anymore sports teams?

MS. JOHNSON: Well, let's see. [Laughter.]

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK.

MS. JOHNSON: No, I don't know.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK, let's talk about another sport that you have been involved with.

MS. JOHNSON: Yes.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Your daughter, as you mentioned, is – was a champion equestrian, which is a very inexpensive sport, right? [Laughter.]

MS. JOHNSON: If anyone wants to buy some horses, I've got a few there.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So, she was very good at this. You go to a lot of the matches, or whatever they're called, races. What are they called?

MS. JOHNSON: Show jumping.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK, show jumping. OK, so she's a show jumper. You go there. I was told that the horses are very important in that sport. You got to buy a lot of horses, right?

MS. JOHNSON: Yeah. Yeah. It's gotten out of control. It is the one sport that is so unregulated. And, you know, there's just nothing you can do. It all comes down to money, who can buy the most expensive horse.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK. So, you're doing that. And one time your daughter says to you, why don't you get on a horse? And you tried. What happened then?

MS. JOHNSON: Well, we were out riding one day. And then she was saying, Mom, you got to learn to jump over the logs and everything. So, we went back into the indoor arena. And she was showing me how to do it. And I don't know whether the horse got stung by a bee or what happened, but I got bucked off. And she kept yelling, let go of the reins, which I didn't do. And the horse stepped on this side of my body. And I could hear crunch. All of my ribs on front and back are broken. And I was taken – I was in the hospital for a couple of weeks. Missed my heart by about an inch.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So, have you been back on a horse since then?

MS. JOHNSON: Never. [Laughter.] I would never do it. I just laid there on the ground. And the horse kept nudging me. And I just said, God, if you just let me live, I will never get back on another horse again. [Laughter.]

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Well, but you have been helping horses in one sense. There's a stable on the National Mall that is the stable that the park – I guess, park rangers use.

MS. JOHNSON: The U.S. Park Police.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: U.S. Park Police use for the horses that they have up and down the mall. So, who came to you and said, guess what? We need new stables, and you should put up the money?

MS. JOHNSON: No, as you know, I joined the board of the Trust for the National Mall. And they were giving me the lowdown on you and everything that you've put into our wonderful front yard. [Laughter.] And all of a sudden, I heard horses in the background. And I said what's over there? And they said, well, that's where the U.S. Park Police horses are. And I said, well, where are they? I'd like to take a look at them. And they said, you really don't need to look at that. And I know Catherine Townsend's<sup>4</sup> here. And she's going to cut my throat when I say this.

But I did go over there. And I said, you know, this is what I want to do. We had the park police in trailers or whatever you call them. They were just terrible. And the horses were really in unsanitary conditions, as far as I was concerned and what I'm used to. Catherine don't get mad at me. But anyway, I just said, this is going to be my project. And this is what I want to do. So now if you go on to the mall, right I don't know how many hundreds of feet down from the Lincoln Monument, you see the most incredible stables for these horses. And they're out. [Applause] One of my horses, Chief, is right there.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK.

MS. JOHNSON: So, it was my job to raise the, I guess, it was \$30 million to get that thing up. And we did it. And it's just amazing.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: What happened to the horse that stepped on you? Where is that horse? [Laughter.]

MS. JOHNSON: He's passed away. He actually came down with cancer on his wee-wee. [Laughter.] Don't mess with a woman, you know? [Laughter.]

MR. RUBENSTEIN: I guess that's what he gets for hurting you, right? OK.

MS. JOHNSON: [Laughs.]

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<sup>4</sup> Catherine Townsend is the President/CEO of the Trust for the National Mall.



MR. RUBENSTEIN: So now, recently you decided to write a book?

MS. JOHNSON: Yes.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Now is it painful to write a book where you have to go through your whole life again, the ups and downs? Or how bad was it to do this?

MS. JOHNSON: Well, let me tell you something, this was one of the most painful projects I ever had to do because I had to face some realities, some cold, hard facts. When I'm talking about a memoir of love, loss, and triumph, this was therapy for me. Even though people on the outside said, oh, you just had it made. You got money. You know, you started this company. I went through hell. Even through the birth of BET and working through it, there was abuse – emotional abuse. There was disrespect. I was totally erased out of all of the work that I had done at BET from starting – see, I'm even shaking now – from Teen Summit.

I worked so hard and wanted to promote my then-husband and make him the face of that company. And I was doing everything I could. I stayed in the background but did a lot of work. And I wanted this company to be so successful, not just for us but for the whole African American community. I wanted to build something that we were going to be so proud of, and that we were given a voice that would last forever. I didn't want it to be a video market. I wanted us to be able to talk about our issues that are going on in this world. And I think we have really lost the vision there. And was something that I still think is needed. If whoever buys BET, if they can resurrect it in the right way, because we really missed our mark on this. And I just think there's so much that we can talk about, and to hear our voices, and our pain. And I just –what we –

MR. RUBENSTEIN: How long did it take you to do this book?

MS. JOHNSON: Two years. Two years, a lot of therapy. It was beyond painful. And the betrayal that I went through, everybody knows about what I went through.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So, you're not going to write another book. One is enough, right?

MS. JOHNSON: Yeah. But I learned a lot from it. And I just have to tell you that through this, and as people read it, it can be men or women, hopefully it's inspirational. It gives you the courage to be able to look at adversity in your life, to be able to look at it in a way that you learn from it. I would not be up here on the stage with you if I hadn't gone through the adversity. I have no regrets. As painful as it was, I'm a better woman and a much stronger woman, and what I've learned from what I went through. [Applause]

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So, you write about many things in the book that are really sad. But one of the – perhaps the saddest one was that you delivered a baby and the baby died. You might describe what happened.

MS. JOHNSON: Yeah, I went through the full nine months. I was at NCRC with my daughter. And all of a sudden, I started going into labor. And this was a case – I have adopted both of my children. And I was told that I couldn't have one, but I did get pregnant. And once I got to the hospital, I guess Bob was on his way somewhere. We were able to find him. And then the doctors said, this child isn't going to live, and you may die also. They said, it's either the baby can live, you die, or – I said, I just made the decision. I said, let the baby live. But then, once they were able to go and they took the child, he died of a diaphragmatic hernia. The intestines went through the diaphragm. I think one of the Kennedy children had died that way too.

And it was just a very, very painful thing that happened to me because I – throughout my marriage, I felt like a failure. When you're living with a narcissistic person and they keep telling you that you're not good enough, you're too fat, you're too ugly, that nothing you can do is right, and then by losing that child I felt like a failure again. And I remember Walter Fauntroy coming to the hospital and sitting with me. And I said, why did bad things keep happening to me? And he says I don't know. But we prayed over it. But it was just another one of those things that I felt like, as a female and as a wife, that I had failed my husband again.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Wow. That's very courageous to write about it. And I found it quite emotional in reading that part of the book. Let me ask you, what's next for Sheila Johnson? Are you going to run for office? Are you going to become a Cabinet officer, and ambassador, anything?

MS. JOHNSON: I don't know. I'm just going to continue to focus on my company and try to help encourage so many women, and especially young women, out there to really find themselves. I want to read something to you.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK.

MS. JOHNSON: To the audience. First of all, I just want to say that in writing this book, and people that have read it, there's two things that want to read to you. There was this one woman that came to me. And she actually emailed me, and she was on her way to get on a plane. And she emailed me that she was going to see her mother, who she hadn't talked to in eight years. She had put a lot of blame on her.

She says, "I think we blame our mothers for not being stronger. I always looked at my mother as being weak. And I asked her why she didn't leave him or why she didn't do a better job at protecting us from his abuse. I am now understanding that my mother is one of the strongest women that I know. It takes time. My father was a narcissist. And it wasn't until he died in 2019 that I realized the toll of his abuse on my mother's mental health. Your children will understand one day, but that's not your burden. You did the best you could with what you had, and you did a fantastic job." So, she's now reconciled with her mother.

And if there's anything that I can leave any of the women or young women out there, I said, "16 and a half years ago," – it's really now 17 – "have passed since my divorce from Bob. Exactly half the time we had been together. I was finally free. If I could go back in time and talk to my younger self, I would tell her this: Trust your instincts. Get to know who you are

before you give yourself to someone else. Believe that you can find happiness and that you deserve it. You're going to be OK." And that's what I –

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Well, I don't think we can top that. [Applause] So, Sheila, let me thank you for all that you've done for the community, and continue to do for the community, and what you're doing for the hospitality industry. And hopefully, you know, the best days are still ahead of you.

MS. JOHNSON: They are. And I just want to say, I can't thank all of you enough for being here and being here in our D.C. hotel. I want you to come back, especially in April. You will see a total transformation of this place. And if there's anything that I can leave you all with, you know, there's been a lot of things in the press that have happened and are going to happen. You know, I'm talking on the sports side. Just chill on this. [Laughter.] It's a long ways from happening. The moving trucks have not pulled up yet.

But I'm just saying that if any of you Washingtonians, we have got to embrace this city. I'm concerned about it. I love this city. I've invested a lot in this city. And we have all got to fight for the city and help one another to make this city the greatest city in the country. Don't give up on it. Let's just continue to build it. [Applause]

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK. Thank you. It was great.

MS. JOHNSON: You're welcome.



**Sheila Johnson**  
**Founder and CEO, Salamander Collection**  
**Author, *Walk Through Fire***

Sheila Johnson is the Founder and CEO of the Salamander Collection. The company operates luxury properties centered around unique destinations in the U.S. and the Caribbean that includes Salamander Middleburg which has achieved Forbes Five-Star ratings for both its accommodations and spa.

As Vice Chairman of Monumental Sports & Entertainment, Johnson is the only African American woman to have ownership in three professional sports teams: the Washington Wizards, Washington Capitals, and the Washington Mystics.

She spearheaded the formation of WE Capital, a venture capital consortium to support and invest in female-led enterprises.

Ms. Johnson is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. She also serves as chairman of the College of Performing Arts at The New School. The Sheila Johnson Fellowship at the Harvard Kennedy School supported a cohort of 50 fellows. She is also a board member of the Metropolitan Opera, Jackie Robinson Foundation, and an Advisory Board Member of the NeuroArts Blueprint: Advancing the Science of Arts, Health and Well-Being. A powerful influence in the entertainment industry, she was the co-founder of Black Entertainment Television, served as executive producer of documentary and feature films and is founder and chair of the Middleburg Film Festival.

Ms. Johnson's memoir, *Walk Through Fire*, was published by Simon & Schuster in September 2023.