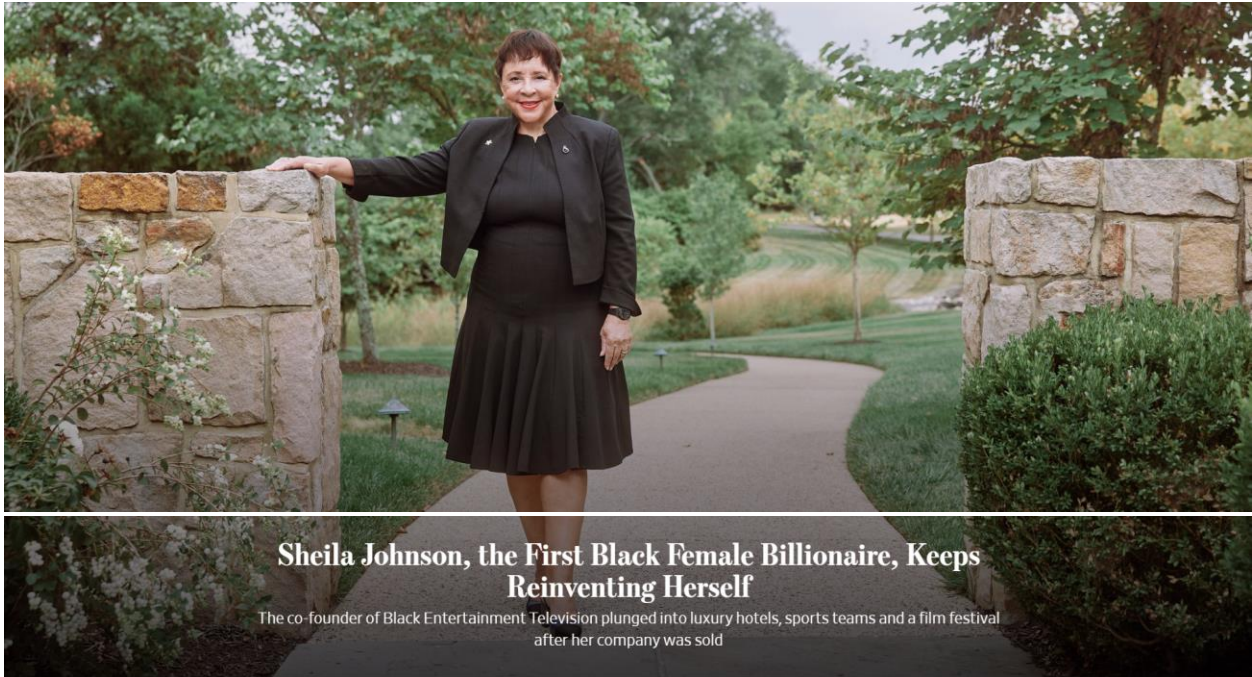


THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.



Sheila Johnson, the First Black Female Billionaire, Keeps Reinventing Herself

The co-founder of Black Entertainment Television plunged into luxury hotels, sports teams and a film festival after her company was sold

Sheila Johnson, photographed at her flagship Salamander resort in Middleburg, Va., Aug. 29. JARED SOARES FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



By Emily Bobrow [Follow](#)
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Sheila Johnson could have retired when Black Entertainment Television (BET), the company she founded with her then-husband Robert Johnson, sold to Viacom in a deal worth \$3 billion in 2001, making her the first Black female billionaire. But the music-teacher-turned-media-mogul says she was too restless, too eager to prove herself after her divorce went through in 2002. “I think I was pissed off,” she says, nodding to her years “as the little woman behind the man.” She adds: “There was a lot of me left on the table.”

Johnson, 74, threw herself into the luxury hospitality business, largely on a whim, and now runs a portfolio of seven hotels and resorts in the U.S., Anguilla and Jamaica called the Salamander Collection, recently ranked the No. 1 luxury hotel brand by USA Today. She owns stakes in three Washington, D.C. teams, the WNBA’s Mystics, the NBA’s Wizards and the NHL’s Capitals. Why sports franchises? “It’s a vanity ploy. You ask any of the white men out there, it’s all vanity. It gives you a certain kind of cachet and power within a town.” At Robert Redford’s suggestion, she founded a film festival that transforms her sleepy town of Middleburg, Va., into a glittery Hollywood outpost every October.

“Greta Gerwig, Maggie Gyllenhaal, Dakota Johnson, they all show up here now because of what I’ve built in the third act of my life,” says Johnson over video from her office at the flagship Salamander Resort & Spa in Middleburg, an hour’s drive from the capital.



Johnson with her violin in the mid-1970s when she taught music lessons, Washington, D.C.
PHOTO: SHEILA JOHNSON

As Johnson writes in her new memoir, “Walk Through Fire,” out next week, her journey was hardly smooth. She opens her book with a story about finding her mom in the throes of a nervous breakdown after Johnson’s father walked out on the family. “This is the moment my childhood ended,” she writes of her 16-year-old self. For years the family had lived comfortably, though they had to move 13 times before her father, a rarity at the time as a Black neurosurgeon, got a permanent job outside Chicago. Now Johnson was suddenly mopping floors at J.C. Penney after school just so her family had enough to eat.

A quiet and somewhat awkward child, Johnson found solace in the violin. She earned first-chair honors in the Illinois All-State Orchestra as a high-school senior, and then got a full scholarship to study music at the University of Illinois. Her first day on campus in 1966, she met an upperclassman named Robert “Bob” Johnson, who proved a tenacious suitor.

They married in a small ceremony in 1969, with the bride in a dress she sewed herself. She says she dismissed early red flags—he left her alone in their motel room on their wedding night and received letters from other women—because she believed she could make the marriage work. “I just wanted to be able to prove to myself that I was the type of woman who could hold on to her man,” she says. Bob Johnson declined several requests to be interviewed for this story.

In Washington, D.C., Sheila Johnson taught music lessons, wrote music textbooks and founded her own student orchestra, which performed around the world. Her husband began lobbying for cable TV companies, which inspired him to enter the business. By 1979 the Johnsons were seeking seed money for a cable network aimed at Black viewers, which they launched in 1980 as BET.



Johnson at BET’s then- headquarters in Washington, 1995. PHOTO: SHEILA JOHNSON

The network swiftly carved a niche by broadcasting the sports events at Black colleges and the music videos by Black artists that mainstream cable networks neglected. By 1984 BET had 18 million subscribers, but most advertisers stayed away, which kept it from turning a profit. Johnson says her music business paid their bills at home until 1989, when the company lured enough advertisers for her to join BET's executive staff full-time. When the company went public in 1991, it was worth over \$470 million.

Johnson says she believed BET "had a responsibility to the Black community" to broadcast something better than "raunchy" videos that increasingly dominated the network. Her husband publicly argued that the network should not be held to a higher standard than white-owned businesses. In 1989 Johnson took matters into her own hands and created "Teen Summit," an award-winning show featuring real students talking about issues like teen pregnancy and AIDS, which ran for 11 years. It was gratifying, she says, for BET to air something she didn't feel embarrassed to have on when she was with her two young adopted kids at home.



'There was a lot of me left on the table' after BET was sold, Johnson says. PHOTO: JARED SOARES FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Johnson was humiliated by her husband's infidelities, which became public in a 1992 lawsuit by several former employees. But she says she was too scared to leave and felt pressured to stay: "So many people told me you cannot end this marriage, you guys are the king and queen of Black media." It was only after Bob fired her from BET in 1998 and began running the company with Debra Lee, with whom he was romantically involved (which Lee chronicled in her own memoir earlier this year), that Johnson decided it was time to go. "I then had to reinvent myself," she says.

When her divorce went through, Johnson was already living in Middleburg, having fallen for the rolling hills of Virginia horse country while taking her daughter to her elite equestrian competitions. Her move to a largely white, conservative town south of the Mason-Dixon Line raised eyebrows both among locals and her friends, but she believed her business savvy could boost an area that she writes in her memoir had become a "slightly shabby relic of a bygone age."

Irked by the Confederate flag hanging in the window of a local gun shop, she bought the place and turned it into Market Salamander, a chic cafe and market. In 2002 she bought a 340-acre estate and planned to build a resort but, she says, “I had absolutely no idea what I was getting into.” Local opposition to a large development in a small town was one issue; in her book she recounts a woman in a shop who yelled at her daughter: “How *dare* your mother come in here and destroy this beautiful area? Who does she think she is?”



Johnson, center, with her son Brett holding her hand, cuts the ribbon to open Salamander Resort & Spa in Middleburg, 2013. PHOTO: ROBERT T. WILLIAMS

She took strength from what has become her spirit animal, the salamander, which mythically walks through fire and survives. She also found love again with William T. Newman, a former circuit court judge, whom she married in 2005. The 168-room Salamander Resort & Spa finally opened its doors in 2013. Middleburg mayor Bridge Littleton says Johnson’s work has indeed boosted the local economy, noting that local sales tax receipts were up nearly 30% within five years. Johnson mollified some critics by giving more than \$7 million to a local private school and contributing almost twice that to build a new local water and sewage treatment system.

As Johnson has expanded her portfolio, she says she has learned that the real money is in management, not ownership. At the properties she owns outright, “things break down and then you have to pour money into it because no one’s there to help you.” Like many women entrepreneurs, she found it hard to attract investors. This changed in recent years. Last year she bought the Mandarin Oriental in D.C. in partnership with Henderson Park, a private equity real estate group. “Now I can continue to grow the brand,” she says.



Johnson fell for the rolling hills of Virginia horse country while taking her daughter to her elite equestrian competitions. PHOTO: JARED SOARES FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL