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America's first Black woman billionaire is promoting diversity in the arts as well as the c-suite

By [Chauncey Alcorn](#), CNN Business

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New York (CNN Business) — Promoting diversity in the arts has become a [mainstream mantra](#) in the entertainment industry since the first [#OscarsSoWhite](#) controversy in 2015, but it's something Sheila Johnson has been doing her entire adult life.

It's been 41 years since the Salamander Hotels & Resorts owner and CEO co-founded the BET network with then-husband Robert Johnson, creating a national platform for African-American music videos, television shows and movies at a time when they were often excluded from the airwaves.

Now the 72-year-old hotel industry mogul and part-owner of three professional sports franchises in Washington -- the Wizards, the Mystics and the Capitals - is celebrating the Black-American experience on stage, as a financial backer and ambassador for "[Grace](#)," a new musical created by acclaimed composer and playwright [Nolan Williams Jr.](#) and executive producer [Dale A. Mott](#).

Johnson, who declined to say how much she invested, says "Grace" pays homage to Black culinary history as well as Black women entrepreneurship — two central themes in her own life — while telling the tale of an African-American family in Philadelphia debating what to do with its century-old restaurant following the death of the family matriarch.

"If you listen to the music, it makes you cry," Johnson said of "Grace" during a recent CNN Business interview. "This is like pulling it all together so people can see the importance of promoting our African-American chefs, just really listening to all of this talent. I'm just so proud to be a supporter."



Salamander Hotel & Resorts owner and CEO Sheila Johnson, right, stands with "Grace" musical composer and playwright Nolan Williams Jr., center, and celebrity chef Carla Hall, left in December 2020.

Johnson and celebrity chef [Carla Hall](#) are just two of a dozen early investors for "Grace." In August, some of the cast will perform one of the play's musical numbers during a ["Family Reunion"](#) event promoting diversity in the hospitality industry at Johnson's Forbes five star-rated, 340-acre Salamander Resort & Spa in Middleburg, Virginia — one of her company's five luxury resorts in the United States and Jamaica.

The full musical is set to debut at a Washington area theater in the spring of 2022, and Johnson said she hopes the play will eventually reach Broadway.

"We have got to send a message about diversifying Broadway," she said. "We've got to support Black theater. There's just a lack of representation there."

Not defined by her bottom-line

Johnson and her ex-husband completed their sale of BET to Viacom in 2001 for an estimated [\\$3 billion](#) in total compensation, making her the nation's [first Black woman billionaire](#). The couple divorced in 2002. While Johnson understands the historical significance of her net worth, she doesn't like to dwell on it.

"People cannot be defined by their bottom-line, their bank balance," she said. "I think that is wrong and I really want to get away from that. There are a lot of billionaires, multi-billionaires, trillionaires, but it's what they do with their lives and how they give back to the community [that matters]."



Salamander Hotel & Resorts owner and CEO Sheila Johnson.

Turning lemons into lemonade

It's that worldview that helped Johnson navigate her luxury hotel company and sports teams through the worst of the pandemic, when Covid-19 and related government shutdowns and mandates decimated both industries' revenue streams.

Initially, Johnson's management team furloughed some hotel staff members, but she tried to make the best of a bad situation after returning to her Salamander location in Middleburg to find the main entrance had been padlocked by management during its temporary closure early last spring.

"I could have gotten very upset about it, but I went in a side door and I called my general manager," Johnson recalled. "I said, 'I want you to bring 11 people back to work.' We found the silver lining in this dark moment and it was called 'deferred maintenance.'"

A Salamander Resorts spokesperson said the majority of the resort's staff of 369 employees was furloughed last spring due to the pandemic, but the company continued paying their benefits and health insurance. The resort received an estimated [\\$3.6 million PPP loan](#) in April before reopening in June, the company confirmed. Salamander says 100% of its PPP funds were used to pay its staff.

"This meant they were able to return many employees back to work safely and quickly, and many months on, they are still hiring staff as demand continues to improve," a company spokesperson said via email.

Johnson found additional ways to make use of her Middleburg resort while supporting diversity in the arts during the pandemic, which has shuttered theaters and [performance venues](#) across the country.

In October, she hosted outdoor screenings for the Middleburg Film Festival she previously founded on her compound. The resort will also be hosting American Ballet Theatre performances later this year after the New York City-based classic ballet company announced the cancellation of its spring and summer performance schedule.



Salamander Hotels & Resort owner Sheila Johnson, left, plays the cello during a lesson with instructor Alan Saucedo Estrada in Middleburg, Virginia, in this undated photo.

Advocating for more Black hotel executives

Johnson also has challenged the hotel industry to increase the number of Black senior and executive leaders in its ranks, an issue she addressed during her [keynote speech](#) at last year's Virtuoso Travel Week Conference and in recent conversations she said she's had with other leaders from the American Hotel & Lodging Association.

African Americans, who represent about 13% of the US population, made up nearly 19% of hospitality industry workers, but only [1.5%](#) of the industry's executives in 2019, according to a 2020 study conducted by the Castell Project, a nonprofit that advocates for women in hospitality industry executive leadership.

Johnson says she's one of only two Black women hotel chain CEOs in the US that she's aware of. (The other is Sojourn Accommodations founder and CEO [Kristin Kitchen](#).)

"It's been uncomfortable for me personally," Johnson said of being one of the few Black women hotel chain CEOs.

Correction: A previous version of this article misidentified the number of staff members Salamander Resorts employs.





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