



"It's about keeping your eyes open, being able to look through a lens and see every aspect of what's going on around you."

AN AMAZING RANGE Amid her philanthropic and business endeavors, Sheila Johnson has transformed her photography into scarves benefiting homeless women.

Captured!

A whole other side of Sheila Johnson comes into focus.

| By Jennifer Sergent | Portrait by Jonah Koch |

The first strains of the national anthem don't always hush a raucous crowd, particularly those at the Verizon Center. But plenty of Washington Mystics fans did a double take at this year's season opener when the team's owner, Sheila Johnson, stepped forward—violin in hand—to lead the DC Youth Orchestra in playing "The Star-Spangled Banner."

Despite the collective pause, Johnson's musical background—she's a classically trained violinist—and her support of the arts have never been a secret. But these days, those who know her merely as a big-time sports owner, entrepreneur and philanthropist are seeing a lot more of her artistic pursuits—most notably her photography. "This is an art form that I really love. It's about keeping your eyes open, being able to look through a lens and see every aspect of what's going on around you," she says.

Johnson's been an avid amateur photographer nearly as long as she's been playing the violin. She recalls taking photography classes at Glen Echo Park in the mid '80s, where she learned to shoot and develop black and white film.

Last month, her photography moved into the textile realm with a new collection of eight gauzy scarf designs

digitally imprinted with Johnson's nature photography, taken on her Middleburg farm and her Innisbrook Resort near Tampa, and on her recent travels in Africa and Haiti as a global ambassador for CARE. She will appear at a Dec. 8 event at the Chevy Chase Neiman Marcus to promote them, and proceeds from each \$475 scarf will benefit the Lady Salamanders, a Street Soccer USA team that aims to end homelessness through sports. "The scarves have been a relaxation moment for me because I just love creating," she says.

Additionally, Johnson spent the summer taking pictures behind the scenes at the filming of *The Butler*, a movie she executive-produced that stars Forest Whitaker and Oprah Winfrey, based on a White House butler who served eight presidents. The photos are a mix of off-set snapshots, on-set activity and a series of more symbolic images, such as a row of tuxedoed butlers taken from the neck down and a group of stone-faced actors in Depression-era costumes.

A veteran of four documentaries, Johnson says she was approached to be an executive producer after the movie's backers couldn't secure enough studio funding. She delivered, kicking in \$2 million of her own money and raising \$24 million. CONTINUED...

...CONTINUED more from investors. But her real passion, she says, was seeing the civil rights events of her adolescence recreated on camera and capturing the experience through her own viewfinder. "This was probably one of the most unique and greatest summers of my life," she says. "You're watching history being made through the eyes of a butler who's head and shoulders with the most powerful men in the world."

Those scenes, she says, brought back the tension she felt during the civil rights and black power movements. Fellow students criticized her when she didn't participate in the sit-ins at the University of Illinois, while her parents back home were uncomfortable with Martin Luther King Jr. Her complexion didn't help, either. "I was a very fair African-American," she says. "I didn't fit in anywhere. I was too white for blacks and too black for whites, which is why my music was so important. It became a comfort to me."

When Johnson speaks about her background, or of any of her business and philanthropic endeavors, the conversation usually circles back to the arts. "It's really been a foundation in my life. It's something you can't get away from," she says. With her recent projects, she explains, "I'm very much continuing this passion of mine, of photography and the arts. It's touching everything that I do."

She wants the arts to touch others in the same way: In the past five years alone, she gave \$7 million toward the construction of the Sheila C. Johnson Design Center at Parsons The New School for Design in New York (where she is a trustee) and she's endowed two chairs in violin and jazz in the University of Illinois' music department (where she graduated with a degree in music education).

Lately, she's focused on completing the new Salamander Resort & Spa in Middleburg, which is expected to open August 2013, after several years of delay due to the recession. Not only was she involved with the architectural designs, which resemble her own home, but she also designed the linens and throws for the guest rooms. Her scarves will be sold on-site, and her photography will hang throughout the hotel, along with art from her personal collection.

"I am really focused on getting this finished and getting the furniture moved in," she says. Yet amid all the work that comes with completing the punch list of a major new resort, she found the time to create the scarf line and document more than 85 percent of *The Butler's* filming. That artistic overlay is a priority for her, rather than a diversion, she says, using her Mystics performance as an example: "It's my way of putting my thumbprint on ownership—and on who I am." ■

STILL LIFE A scarf from Johnson's collection, with a photo she shot of a sugar maple tree on her Middleburg property



AT YOUR SERVICE
The Butler provided creative fodder for Sheila Johnson, photographer, as she snapped some extras awaiting their on-camera entrance. Johnson helped produce the film starring Forest Whitaker.



PORTRAIT OF FOREST WHITAKER BY ANNE MARIE FOX