



MARIE JOHNS

Being the first for others to follow

Marie always loved amusement parks, but the one near where she lived in Indianapolis as a child in the 1950s was segregated. There was only one day a year when Black children could go. Her father refused to take her. If his daughter could not go every day, then he would never spend his money there. He drove her to Cincinnati to the closest unsegregated amusement park instead.

She would be among the first cohorts of Black students to integrate the North Central High School in Indianapolis. She was one of maybe 100 students of color in a graduating class of over 1,000 students. In her classes, she was usually the only one. She was lonely. It was hard.

Neither of her parents had the opportunity to go to college, but they worked very hard. Her mother was a secretary and her father was one of the first Black police officers in the city. Despite relentless discrimination, he would rise to the rank of lieutenant. Her mother insisted all her three daughters graduate from college. They are proud to have given their mother the gift of seeing that happen, and all three even have advanced degrees. Both of Marie's sisters are educators.

Marie went on to Indiana University, obtaining degrees in public administration, aspiring to be a city manager. She liked the interplay between policy and operational management. The Indiana Legislative Services Agency recruited her in the mid-1970s to help score legislation for fiscal impact. She was the first Black person hired in the office.

Out of the blue in the early 1980s she got a call from a friend who worked at Indiana Bell. They needed to hire up to prepare for the divestiture of the AT&T and Bell systems, the largest breakup of a company by anti-trust judgement in the country's history. It had to split into long distance and local companies, which is how the regional "baby bells" were formed. She joined and would stay in telecommunications for 28 years. She and her family soon after moved to Bethesda, where she worked at the "baby" Bell Atlantic office. She did service cost estimates, calculating how much the local providers should charge for long-distance companies.

The phone company, as it was called then, was a white male dominated industry. By now, she was used to being one of a few or the only Black person in the room. She had to assert herself to get the support she needed. She was aware that the bar for promotion was higher for her. It was, again, lonely and hard. But she learned a ton about the industry and how to grease a large organization into loosening up for change. She felt honored to have contributed to important processes that affected every person in the country who used a telephone.

In 1998, she was named President & CEO of Bell Atlantic Washington, the first woman to serve in that capacity. That's when she started making her mark on the civic life of the city. She helped form the DC Tech Council back in the rough and tumble early days of the internet. Telecoms were changing fast in those days, with various mergers and market-shattering regulatory changes. She had to navigate the company through it all.

She retired in 2004, starting a small consulting practice and excited for a quieter work schedule. Then she got a call from the White House Personnel Office. Surely, she thought, this must be a hoax. They wanted her to be the Deputy Administrator of the Small Business Administration (SBA). She did not hesitate and would serve for Obama's first term.

Marie is proud of the mark she made while at Bell Atlantic and the SBA, particularly for minorities and women. She created a training program for at-risk youth to land telecom jobs. At SBA, she helped install new loan programs for underserved and minority-owned businesses. And she made sure to fill out the network of women's business centers across the country that had been long neglected. Her husband Wendell made an equally impressive mark with his career. A CPA by training, he was one of the first Black people hired into what is today PWC. He would become a nationally renowned expert in real estate finance at Fannie Mae, pioneering the use of LIHTC.

Each July, she joins her grandchildren and goddaughter for a trip to Hershey Park. They ride every roller coaster. Marie's had to fight battles every step of her life, and her first battle was to go to an amusement park no matter the color of her skin. She feels blessed to have been the first in so many ways, but she's damned sure she won't be the last. At least her grandchildren and goddaughter won't be so lonely on their way up to pierce the glass ceiling. They have women like Marie to thank. ■

