

Phyllis Johnson | BY GEOFF WATTS

PHOTOS COURTESY OF BD IMPORTS



"Twenty years from now, I hope we have more equity in the coffee supply chain. I hope companies that spend lots of dollars on coffee come to realize the impact their decisions make on the ground." —Phyllis Johnson



Patrick and Phyllis Johnson, graduating from the Harvard Kennedy School of Government with Mid-Career Masters in Public Administration [MC/MPA] degrees in 2015.

WHEN I GOT THE CALL to interview an industry veteran with something to say, a short list of folks who've made an unusually large impact formed almost instantly. Initially, choosing was tough, but upon review there was one person who stood out—quite literally, and in many ways. For the 15 years I've known Phyllis Johnson, she's always been dogged in her determination to find ways to make this world a better place, and recently she has ramped up the pursuit. Her contributions have been groundbreaking already, and she's just getting started. The combination of compassion, conviction and persistence she brings to her work is inspiring, and as we all could use a healthy dose of motivation right about now, I reached out.

We met in May for coffee and tea at Intelligentsia Coffee's Wicker Park cafe in Chicago. What follows is a highly condensed excerpt from that one-and-a-half-hour conversation.

Geoff Watts: You took some time off recently to return to academia. That's something a lot of people I know dream of doing, but never actually do. What led you to do that, and how did it go?

Phyllis Johnson: It was my husband, Patrick, who convinced me we could go back to school at this stage in our lives. I had the pleasure to speak at Harvard Business School to students examining a case study about the International Women's Coffee Alliance. I was the case protagonist, invited to hear the discussion and offer a

perspective. After class, my husband convinced me to visit and later apply to the Harvard Kennedy School of Government. I never believed we both would be accepted, but somehow we were. It was one of the best years of my life. I learned a lot and accomplished things I didn't believe were possible. I learned that problems are very complex, there are no easy answers, and the road to solving critical issues is based on the questions we ask, so I learned the value of asking questions and building partnerships. I was humbled to receive the Barbara Jordan Award for Women's Empowerment by the Harvard Kennedy School 2015 class.



From left: Forest Ranger Jesú "Chus" Lucas; Maya Johnson, Phyllis' daughter; Olga Hazard, owner of Los Andes Coffee & Tea Reserve; Phyllis Johnson; and Phyllis' sister Sandra Morton, visiting the Los Andes reserve in Guatemala in 2016.

GW: That's inspiring! Now let's take this back to the beginning: How did you get started in coffee?

PJ: I found coffee when I was looking for myself. I know that sounds hokey, but it's true. For most of my childhood, I had run away from who I was, which was an individual who grew up poor on a farm in Arkansas. I spent time being educated and pretending to be Miss Corporate America and living life in a different vein, and coffee was the path back to identifying with people who had less than most, and identifying with those who work hard on farms. That's the big global picture of how and why I went into coffee. The logistics were all kind of crazy, but I found it and I'm very happy as I look back.

GW: A lot of us find that working in coffee impacts us personally in ways we didn't expect. I feel lucky to have landed in this industry, but it sounds like there was more intention behind your decision to get into coffee. Was there something about coffee, as opposed to other agricultural products, that drew you in?

PJ: It was the people. Traveling to Africa for the first time [in] 2002, I got an insight, almost like a vision that I can't explain, almost like an out-of-body experience. For some reason, call it ego, I had this deep feeling that there was something calling me to do something greater than me, some representation I needed to fulfill for people who didn't have a voice. It was clear to me that I had grown from a little girl working in cotton on a farm in Arkansas to an educated woman who had some amount of respect, so it was truly the people for me. I can't ever think about coffee without thinking about the people.

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GW: You just returned from Burundi. If you reflect on your first trips to Africa in 2002 and 2003, when you were in Rwanda, then fast-forward 14 years and you're back in Burundi, how has it changed, or how have you changed?



"My advice to my younger self would be to trust my instincts and to walk boldly through life."
—Phyllis Johnson, pictured in Burundi in 2017.

PJ: I feel like when I went there the first time, I had only questions. Between 2003 and today, I've been searching for the answers, because you can't live on Earth and see unspeakable poverty and not ask, "Why?" I don't have as many questions as I used to. I don't try to solve it. I try to do whatever I can. That is part of the reason I got off a flight from Burundi, spent 12 hours unpacking and packing, went to New Jersey, and came here to Chicago to talk to potential customers, because I think they can help.

When I was standing on a farm in Burundi, I was looking around at the children. They live off of nothing. Nothing. And to be honest, I thought, "I spend more money on my pets in a year than what is being spent on these children." It's not an indictment on Africa. It's not an indictment on politics or political leaders. It's an indictment on us as humans. That's how I look at it. So I'm excited when I sit and talk to folks who I think can help. That's how I see potential customers. That's how I see coffee consumers. That's how I see other folks. It's just people who can help.

GW: Are there things that have happened to you or that you've done over the past 18 years that you consider critical formative moments?

PJ: Several. The first critical moment happened around 2006, when I was involved in the Women in Coffee Leadership program sponsored by CQI [the Coffee Quality Institute] and USAID. Margaret Swallow led that work, and I was sitting in a room with 17 women from North America and Central America, women leaders in coffee. It helped solidify some of the things I had been thinking, and it gave me permission to think in the way that I thought. Prior to that, I was always questioning [myself], and I think just taking that time to go and learn—it was a one-year program—that was definitely a pivotal point to set me on a different path. Also my involvement with the industry, serving on the boards. I may officially be the only person alive who has served on both the Specialty Coffee Association of America and the National Coffee Association (NCA) boards. It gave me a lot of questions, but it also gave me information to move forward.

GW: You are a black woman in an industry that traditionally has been dominated by men, more specifically white men. We've

come a long way in 20 years, but still, the huge majority remains white men, perhaps even disproportionately to other industries. You've blazed a trail in an industry where there weren't many role models, and in doing so, you've become a role model for others. Do you feel like a role model, and do you feel like that's part of your responsibility?

PJ: I learned early in life that as a black woman, I have to be a role model, whether I want to be or not. It's my responsibility. When I was sitting in Rockford, Illinois, in my basement running BD Imports and I felt as though I was not having the success I wanted to have, I knew that some African Americans in the local community looked up to our work, and so I had to realize that it wasn't the success on the balance sheet, it was success that came in ways that we couldn't necessarily quantify. So be it another African American woman or man or child who would say, "I can do that. I can start a business," it might be doing something totally different, but maybe they were inspired by our work. It wasn't what was going on in my mind all the time, but the perception.

It's also the value in diversity. People who think differently, they're great, but people who are *physically* different, who've been exposed to different life experiences, we've been treated differently.

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Phyllis Johnson accepting the Barbara Jordan Women's Leadership Award in 2015 from the Harvard Kennedy School for her work founding HKS AD-Women, an organization focused on bridging the gap between women of the African diaspora.



Burundi, 2017.



Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, 2007: Phyllis Johnson agrees to purchase the first lot of coffee produced by Asnakech Thomas of Amaro Gayo. Thomas has become one of the most successful female coffee processors in the country and continues to help build her local rural community.



Phyllis Johnson (left) in Rwanda with Joan Katzeff from Thanksgiving Coffee (center) and Geoff Watts from Intelligentsia (right), 2003.

and because of that we see things differently. We ask different questions. "Where are other people that look like me? What can be done?"

I'm always talking about coffee, and as I look at the NCA National Coffee Drinking Trends survey, African Americans have the lowest consumption level of coffee consumers. I'm sure some of my non-coffee-drinking friends are like, "Is she absolutely crazy? Does anybody actually care that much about coffee?" But my connection to coffee comes from a different place than most people's; it comes from the history of coffee. I feel like if we as African Americans understood the history of commodities such as coffee, we could possibly be more connected. We would be more empowered.

GW: You go to Ethiopia and see the way they live with coffee, the way it is woven into the social fabric of their lives, and the relationship they have with it. It makes our own interactions with coffee and the nature of our particular obsessions look a little ...

PJ: Meaningless?

GW: By comparison, yeah. That's some profound coffee culture over there, with a different level of relevance to life. And it makes me wonder how we could engage African Americans here to rediscover coffee and cultivate a relationship with it that embraces its heritage and recognizes how it can be both a vehicle for change and a connector of people.

PJ: It's good to hear you say that, because I've often thought about this, but you can't force it. Sometimes you have to be that catalyst, just like in a chemical equation, something that causes the reaction to take place, that links things together. Who else?

GW: Who else? That's the question, because other people may not have the privilege of being able to see what we see.

PJ: Privileged—that's what we are. Everyone who comes into this cafe receives a little bit of what you have to offer, but they don't have the privilege of seeing or knowing what you know. Therefore, because we are privileged to know more, we must do more. To whom much is given, much is required. We must be bold and empowered because of our understanding.



GEOFF WATTS has spent 21 years seeking to make coffee better, one way or another. He still can't pour a rosetta, but he's determined not to let that stop him from contributing. In his service as vice president of coffee for Intelligentsia and board member for the Alliance for Coffee Excellence, he is an outspoken advocate for quality as both an end and a means, and a sworn ambassador for the under-recognized coffee farmers who make this industry possible.

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