



BUSINESS & LOBBYING

A view beyond K Street By Jessica Holzer

Posted: 05/05/08 07:12 PM [ET]

Broderick Johnson makes a lot of money on K Street, so many might be surprised to learn he supports curbs on lobbyists. Maybe that's the side of him that almost became a priest, always questioning what's in front of him.

Or it could be that he's achieved so much from humble Baltimore roots — working in the White House, advising presidential candidates and helping expand opportunities for minorities inside the Beltway — he could easily find something else to do.

"There are a lot of things that mean a lot more to me [than earning a living]," said Johnson, noting that he's also a father and a husband. "I'll be doing other things throughout my life, hopefully."

Friends admire his disarming self-possession and describe him as being "smart," "elegant" and a "straight-up, no-chaser kind of guy."

Now the president of Bryan Cave Strategies, Johnson has represented AT&T and BellSouth, where he earned a reputation for deep knowledge of telecom tax issues. Last year, he led a coalition of cable, wireless and tech companies that won the longest moratorium on Internet taxes.

He's best known, though, as a "born Democrat." Johnson served as the Clinton administration's top liaison to the House following the former president's impeachment by that body in December 1998. He crisscrossed the country on behalf of Sen. John Kerry (D-Mass.) in 2004, acting as a liaison to members of Congress, state politicians and mayors. He now doles out advice informally to Sen. Barack Obama (Ill.) in his bid for the Democratic presidential nomination.

According to Kerry campaign manager Mary Beth Cahill, Johnson "knew everybody" and swiftly gained clout with the other staff for his "smooth and adept way of managing crises."

Johnson's steep ascent caught Sen. Ken Salazar (D-Colo.) by surprise. The two attended law school together at the University of Michigan, where Salazar played the role of Johnson's mentor. Salazar was impressed running into his old friend at a late-1990s White House reception for the king and queen of Spain, the first meeting since their law school days.

"I was so, so proud," Salazar said. Though he knew Johnson would be successful in Washington, Salazar said he "never imagined he would be a special assistant to the president."

Johnson grew up in Baltimore, where his father sorted mail at IBM as one of the first blacks employed by the renowned computer maker. His mother worked at night in a bank. They sent him to parochial schools, and did everything to provide for him and his sisters.

At age 12, he went away to a Massachusetts seminary. He decided a year later that he did not have the calling for the priesthood. Yet the experience laid the foundation for his faith and political career, says Johnson, who remains a devout Catholic.

Johnson considered returning to Baltimore after graduating in 1983 from law school, where he helped to end the university's investments in South Africa and introduce an affirmative action component for law review as head of the black law students' group.

However, back in his hometown, he says the prominent law firms were "very unwelcoming" to black graduates, even one with a prestigious degree and strong ties to the city. "It worked out better for me, but it was a rude awakening," he says.

So Johnson took a job drafting legislation in the House Office of Legislative Affairs. Hardly glamorous, it taught him to pay attention to detail and write succinctly. It also gave him a bird's-eye view of lawmaking, not to mention his role writing landmark legislation such as the Family Medical Leave Act and the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act.

He returned to the Hill after four years in the private sector and became the staff director and chief counsel to the now-defunct House Committee on the District of Columbia.

When the 1994 Republican takeover of Congress triggered massive Democratic staff layoffs, his command of House rules landed him a job as chief counsel to the House Education and the Workforce Committee in the new minority. But he worried about those less fortunate.

At a meeting then of staff directors and the Democratic leadership, Johnson pressed them on how they were going to help find new jobs for all the administrative staff.

Julian Epstein, a friend who was the chief counsel to the Judiciary Committee, recalls that Johnson was firm.

"He said, 'Look, I'm not going to let this meeting come to a conclusion until we have a solution for them,' " he remembers. That got the leaders' attention, and they agreed to help.

Helping others is a theme in Johnson's life. In the late 1980s and '90s, he worked with children and teenagers as the president of the group Concerned Black Men of D.C. More recently, he has helped talented minorities land jobs on the Hill and on K Street.

Johnson laments Washington law firms' poor progress on increasing their diversity. The lobby shops have done better, he says, though they're "not at all close to where they should be."

"Fortunately, I'm in a position now to be able to do something about that," he says. "It's very important to me."

Johnson's own career could hinge on who is elected president this fall, particularly if Obama wins. The Illinois Democrat had promised that lobbyists wouldn't work in his White House. But Obama then modified his stance to say he would bar lobbyists in his administration from crafting rules affecting the industry they used to represent for two years, and he would prohibit those who leave government from lobbying his White House.

Johnson is coy about his next move, saying only that he envisions leaving the private sector at some point and that "public service, to me, is the most rewarding thing."

David Castagnetti, a lobbyist and political strategist at Mehlman Vogel Castagnetti, says Johnson is a no-brainer for a senior role in a potential Democratic White House, no matter who is president.

"If there was a Democrat in the White House and they couldn't bring him in, it would be their loss," he says.