

Optimism overcomes all obstacles

Community service and positive outlook lead woodworker to grow from humble roots in West Africa to prosper in America

by William Sampson

Thomas Johnson's story is one of a series of setbacks and challenges that would have easily stopped most ordinary people. But it would be wrong to tell his story focusing on the negative. For if there is only one thing to say about Johnson, it is that he has seemingly boundless optimism and energy.

It is those traits that have taken Johnson from impoverished beginnings in the West African country of Ghana to running a successful and growing custom furniture company in Lynchburg, Va. And it is also those traits that have led Johnson to a life-long commitment to community service, regardless of his own personal circumstances. Johnson's story doesn't just hold lessons for business success — it offers life lessons as well.

African roots

Johnson's first encounters with

Shop Snapshot

Company: Thomas A. Johnson Furniture Co. Inc.
Location: Lynchburg, Va.
Proprietor: Thomas A. Johnson
Primary product: Custom residential and commercial furniture and fixtures
Annual sales: \$300,000
Employees: 3 (including owner)
Shop size: 3,600 square feet
Key equipment: Jet table saw; Craftsman radial-arm saw, band-saw, planer, and jointer; DeWalt cordless drill.

woodworking came from his father, who was a carpenter building wooden truck bodies. As Johnson was the only one of his father's sons to show interest in the business, his father was anxious for him to take that path, and was opposed when Johnson passed an entrance exam and showed an interest in going to high school. But Johnson was determined, passing the entrance exam a second time and saving his own money to pay the deposit for school.

While going to school, he lived with his mother, but she died before he could graduate. A man took him in and he was able to finish school, but his benefactor died in an accident, leaving four children with no income. It was time for Johnson to get to work.

"I borrowed hand tools, pitched a tent and started making furniture," he says. Soon he got an apprentice to help, and realized that he needed to train other young people to help improve the lot of the community. At one point, he had up to 25 students learning woodworking in his small business.

But just as Johnson had become a teacher, he desired more education for himself. He says he always remembers the advice he was once given: "Don't end your education because of money." Opportunities in the underdeveloped nation of Ghana were limited, so he began to correspond to England (which had originally colonized Ghana), exploring chances to get the education he wanted overseas. He finally found a program offered by SCM in Italy, but then began a tremendous battle with government bureaucracy to get the proper passport



Thomas Johnson has gone from woodworking with hand tools in a tent in an African village to running a custom furniture business with \$300,000 in annual sales.

and other clearances to go. In one absurd moment, he produced his own stamp pad when a clerk told him there was no ink pad to stamp his documents.

Training in Italy

On his arrival in Italy, Johnson realized he was up against yet another challenge. He didn't speak Italian, the Italians didn't speak English, and all the classes were to be taught in Italian. Johnson spent three months learning Italian and then began the one-year SCM program.

He describes the training at SCM as "intense." He says it covered every facet of wood technology, from harvesting trees to advanced production techniques using modern equipment. But it was the business lessons of the program that he appreciated most.

continued

Optimism



Johnson started his shop with \$700 that he spent on a workshop full of old Craftsman tools. He has since added a new Jet table saw, and he hopes to upgrade his machinery slowly, paying as he goes.



These chairs are part of a larger order for a local resort. Johnson has done several projects for the resort after he first built three mantles.

“They train you to become an entrepreneur,” he says. And it was there that he learned one of the key tenets of his basic business philosophy: “If you don’t sell, you can’t grow.”

Everything he learned would be put to the test when he returned to Africa, now in his mid-20s. The friend who he had left to run his business had not had the same enthusiasm for the work. There was no money and lots of debts to pay. Johnson started over. He negotiated a loan extension

with the bank, worked hard and put all his money back into the business.

At the time, he recalls, he got a lot of ribbing because he had not yet found a wife, but Johnson protested he had no time for that. “I was married to the business,” he says. “It takes discipline, determination and dedication to make it work.”

Again, he used the skills he had learned to teach others how to work. His success was noticed by government and international aid programs

that urged him to relocate from his village to a city. But Johnson tried to convince officials to invest in developing his township, to bring in the electricity and needed infrastructure so it could grow and prosper. He adds that people in the town were surprised when he declined opportunities to move to the city. “I was told to look after myself first, but I take in a bigger picture,” he says.

By 1993, pressures inside and outside the country had left the perennially optimistic Johnson discouraged about the opportunities for him and his people in Ghana.

Inflation was out of control, and the government did not seem capable or interested in making the changes Johnson hungered for. “We were going in circles with no growth,” he says. It was time to consider leaving Africa.

New opportunity in the U.S.

As part of his commitment to community service, Johnson had long been a member of his local Rotary Club. Through Rotary he started exploring the possibility of going to America to start anew. But the only way he could get the clearance to go was if he left all his money and resources in Ghana. So it came that, with just \$20 in his pocket, Johnson arrived in New York City on April 25, 1993.

A cousin took him to friends, and he found work in New Jersey. A deeply religious man, Johnson took an oppor-

Not your usual formula for success

“Sometimes it’s just attitude; you have to train the mind,” says Thomas Johnson in trying to account for what has brought him from an impoverished African village to the owner of a successful small woodworking business with two employees and annual sales of \$300,000.

“You have to take things the way God made it,” Johnson says.

A lot of Johnson’s philosophy of success has to do with service: service to his clients and service to the community. “I don’t have a secret,” he says. “Just consider your clients as yourself. If you’re not going to treat yourself bad, you’re not going to treat the clients bad.”

He says he considers everything he does and how it will reflect back on himself. “When I sell a product, I

sell myself.”

As to community service, in addition to his Rotary and church activities, Johnson is also a Big Brother to a local youth. “Everybody who becomes successful, doesn’t become successful by themselves,” he says. “We have to give back.”

Part of his business success may also be attributed to his unbridled optimism and infectious good nature. “I’m me,” he says with a broad smile and a shrug of the shoulders. “I don’t behave like a chameleon. I love what I’m doing. There’s a joy I take out of it.”

He apparently shares that joy with his customers, developing ongoing relationships. “Ninety-nine percent of my customers are my friends,” he says. “And they tell their friends.”



Johnson puts together parts of a reception desk. Building fixtures and bookcases for a local bookstore gave his business its first real success and public exposure.



This food service bar is part of the woodwork Johnson has done for a Lynchburg, Va., bookstore. Other work in the store includes fixtures, displays, checkout counters and more than 160 bookcases.

tunity to study theology at the university in Lynchburg, Va. But it wasn't long before he was back in the woodworking business.

With \$700, Johnson bought a workshop full of old Craftsman tools. For \$15, he located a supply of 9,000 board feet of hardwood offcuts he could use. Johnson smiles broadly as he recalls, "I bypassed the traditional business plan. I say, let me just start it. I believe in God."

His first products were walnut and poplar bookcases and tables that he tried unsuccessfully to sell at a flea market. "They were too much money," he says. So, he went to work building up his inventory, making a few sales and



Johnson makes these tables using a pedestal supplied by Adams Wood Products.

letting word of mouth spread. "Referral is the best advertisement," he says.

Johnson kept his profile up by again being active in the local Rotary Club. Soon, he was starting to get the kinds of customers who would bring him more profitable work. When a bookstore in town was considering going to Chicago to find the bookcases and other store fixtures it needed, Johnson bid on the job. "I quoted a low price, so I would get the job," he says, adding that he was anxious to have the public venue for his work that the bookstore would provide.

The initial order was for 160 cases, then there were 23 more. Then more opportunities started to come. A nearby resort ordered three mantles. "I delivered them quick. I didn't sleep. I put aside other work," says Johnson. The owner was so impressed, she placed subsequent orders for 200 chairs and a run of small tables for which Johnson uses pedestals from Adams Wood Products. Now Johnson knew he could succeed.

Never standing still

Johnson has big plans for the future. He hopes to add apprentices to his staff and continue his training efforts. Next year he hopes to develop a showroom and get involved in antique reproduction work. He recently added a new Jet table saw to the shop and is looking to upgrade his other equipment. To finance his growth, he has some inven-

tive ideas.

Johnson plans to auction off much of the unsold bookcase inventory from his early business efforts in Lynchburg. He is a firm believer in staying liquid and not going deep into debt to finance expansion. Rather than seeking bank loans outright, he has saved money, which he deposited as certificates of deposit in a bank. Then he asked the bank for a loan secured by the certificates of deposit. That way, the bank is willing to lend to someone with little track record. And for his part, the interest he earns on the certificate of deposit partly offsets the interest he pays on the bank loan, thus reducing his cost of money and allowing him to stay liquid.

"You've got to be creative, be alert and use the system," he advises.

Now married and settling into his adopted community and country, Johnson offers one more piece of advice to struggling small business people. He points to a logo on his business card. It shows a massive oak tree, branches spread wide, but it also shows the equally wide root system of the tree. "You have to be humble, act like the roots," he says. "God will continue to bring you up." □

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