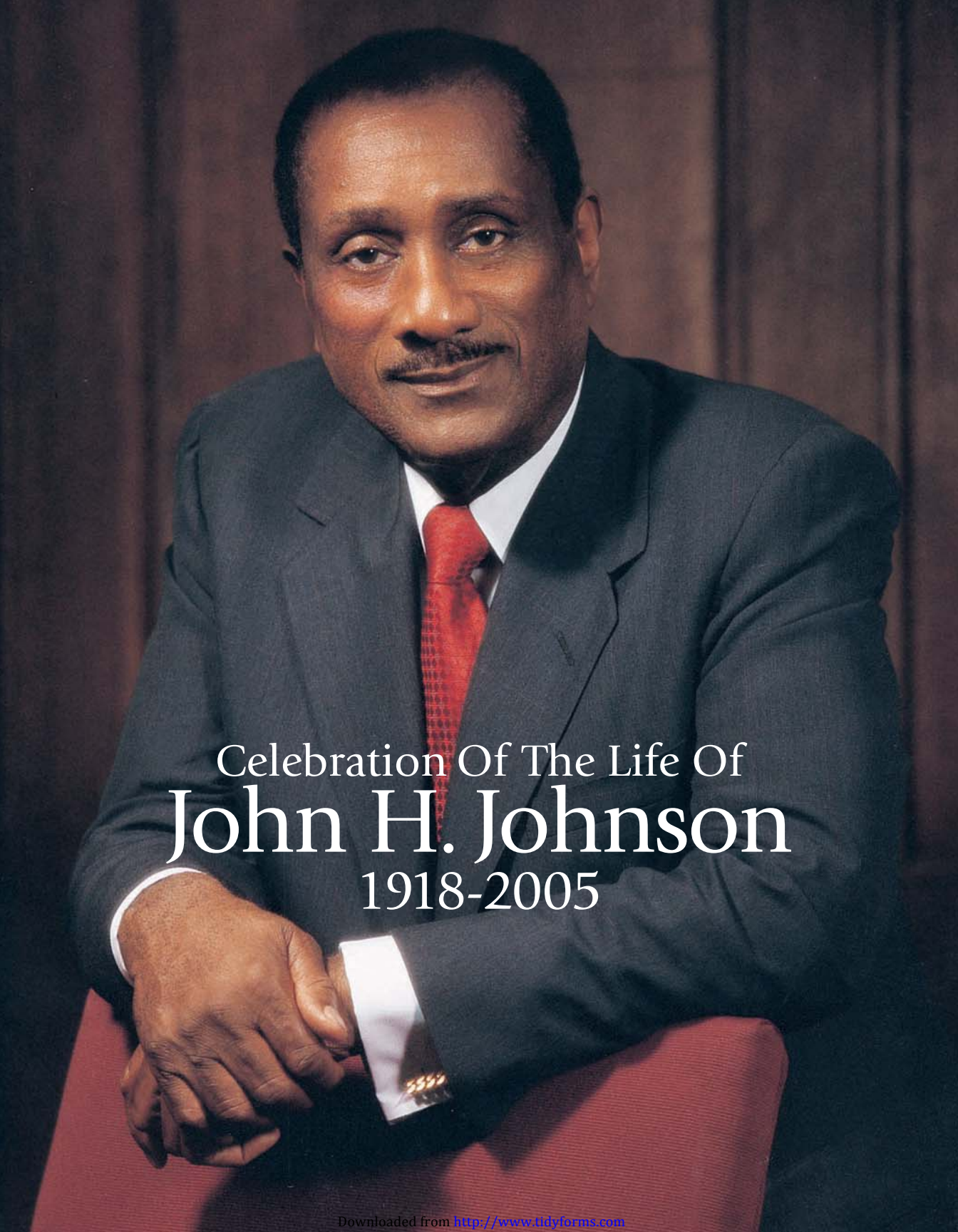

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OBITUARY

JOHN H. JOHNSON, who borrowed $500 on his mother's furniture and created a publishing and cosmetics empire that changed the color and content of American media, died Monday, August 8, at Chicago's Northwestern Memorial Hospital after an extended illness. He was 87.

The founder and publisher of *Ebony* and *Jet* magazines and the chairman of Johnson Publishing Company, Inc. and Fashion Fair Cosmetics succumbed on the 60th anniversary of *Ebony* magazine, which, under his leadership, has been the largest Black-owned magazine in the world for 60 straight years. He was surrounded during his last illness by close friends and family members, including his wife of 64 years, Eunice W. Johnson, who is secretary-treasurer of the company, his daughter Linda Johnson Rice and his granddaughter Alexa Rice. In 2002, Johnson named Linda Johnson Rice, who previously served as the chief operating officer, to her current position as President and CEO of the company, but remained chairman and publisher until his death.

Rice said her father was active in company affairs until the last days of his life. "He was in his office almost every day until his last illness and was alert and active until the end. He was the greatest salesman and CEO I have ever known, but to members of the family and the Johnson Publishing Company family, including the advertisers who have supported us faithfully for 60 years, he was a friend and companion with a great sense of humor who never stopped dreaming dreams and climbing mountains."

Johnson, who was born in poverty and who rose in one generation from the welfare rolls to the rolls of Forbes 400 richest Americans, was the most honored of all publishers. He was a member of the Publishing Hall of Fame, the National Business Hall of Fame, the Advertising Hall of Fame and the Arkansas Business Hall of Fame, and he received the Spingarn Medal, the highest award of the NAACP, and the Salute to Greatness Award, the highest honor of the Martin Luther King Jr. Center, for his contribution to civil rights.

In 1972, he was named Publisher of the Year by the Magazine Publishers Association. In 1974 he was named "The Most Outstanding Black Publisher in History" by the National Newspaper Publishers Association. In 2003, he was named "The Greatest Minority Entrepreneur in U.S. History" by Baylor University. In the same year, Howard University named its journalism school the John H. Johnson School of Communications.

On the 50th anniversary of the founding of *Ebony* magazine, the publisher received the Presidential Medal of Freedom, America's highest civilian honor, from President Bill Clinton, who said he gave "African Americans a voice and a face, in his words, 'a new sense of somebody-ness,' of who they were and what they could do, at a time when they were virtually invisible in mainstream American culture."

The publisher virtually invented the Black Consumer Market and almost single-handedly created the foundations of the Black magazines and the Black media stars of today.

Johnson was born in Arkansas City, Ark., on January 19, 1918, to Leroy Johnson and Gertrude Jenkins Johnson. His father was killed in a sawmill accident when he was 8, and his mother, who later married James Williams, became the dominant force in his life. "She believed in me and taught me to believe in myself," he said later. "She taught me to dream, to dare and to never give up." There was no Black high school in Arkansas City at that time, and Gertrude Johnson Williams, who was the embodiment of the strong Black mother who can't be blocked or stopped by anything, decided to take her son to Chicago where he could get a good education. They left Arkansas City in July 1933 and were joined later by his stepfather. Fifty-three years later, when he returned to Arkansas City for the first time since his departure, every major public officials, Black and White, turned out to greet him, and schoolchildren, Black and White, lined up to honor the most distinguished individual produced in Arkansas City and Desha County. On May 21, 2005, the John H. Johnson Cultural and Educational Museum, a joint project of Arkansas City and the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff, was dedicated at the Desha County Courthouse.

Gertrude Johnson Williams and her son moved to Chicago at the height of The Great Depression and were on the welfare rolls for a short period. But they got off welfare as soon as possible, he said in his autobiography, and "moved on to better times and better jobs."

Johnson graduated from DuSable High School in 1936, and worked at Supreme Liberty Life Insurance Company, the largest Black business in the North, while studying part-time at the University of Chicago and Northwestern University. One of his duties at Supreme was to prepare a digest for President Harry H. Pace of Black or Black-oriented stories in the American press. This gave him the idea for his first magazine, *Negro Digest*, but banks and finance institutions refused to give him a loan. Undaunted, he financed the first issue by borrowing $500 on his mother's furniture. The magazine, published for the first time in November 1942, was an instant success and led to the founding of *Ebony* magazine in 1945 at the end of World War II in his "lucky month" of November. The first issue of *Ebony* sold 25,000 copies, making it the largest circulated Black-owned magazine. Sixty years later, the magazine has a circulation of 1,600,000 and is still the largest circulated Black-owned magazine in the world.

There had been Black magazines before, but none had attracted enough advertising to make them commercially viable. Johnson solved that problem by telling advertisers that it was in their self-interest to use Black models to appeal directly to Black consumers, who constituted, he said, a bigger consumer market than foreign countries like Canada and Australia.

In November 1951, Johnson started *Jet*, which became the No. 1 Black newsweekly and sparked the saying in Black America: "If it wasn't in *Jet*, it didn't happen." He also published books, bought radio stations, and produced TV shows. Another coup for the company was Ebony Fashion Fair, the world's largest traveling fashion show, which is produced and directed by Eunice Walker Johnson. Since 1958, it has raised more than $51 million for the UNCF and other community scholarship groups and has made it possible for hundreds of students to attend college.

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In 1973, the entrepreneur created a cosmetics division, Fashion Fair Cosmetics, to meet the need for a complete line of high-quality beauty products for a wide variety of skin tones. Fashion Fair Cosmetics, which includes a fragrance-free line of makeup as well as a fragrance line for both men and women, is sold in over 2,500 upscale stores in America, Africa, Europe, Canada and the Caribbean.

During this period and later, Johnson became one of the pioneer Black directors of major American corporations, serving on the boards of Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation, The Dial Corporation, Chrysler, Zenith, Conrail, Bell & Howell, Continental Bank, Dillard Department Stores and other corporations. He also became chairman of the board of Supreme Life Insurance Company, where he started his career as an office boy. He served as a trustee of the Art Institute of Chicago, the United Negro College Fund, and the National Conference of Christians and Jews and was on the Advisory Board of the Harvard Business School.

The publisher advised civil rights leaders and presidents. He accompanied Vice President Richard Nixon on a goodwill tour of Africa and served as a Special United States Ambassador for both President John F. Kennedy and President Lyndon Baines Johnson.

He was a personal friend and supporter of Martin Luther King Jr. and other civil rights leaders, and *Ebony*, *Jet*, and *Black World*, played key roles in the Freedom Movement and were pioneers in popularizing African-American history and culture.

In addition to his daughter, who is married to entrepreneur Mel Farr Sr., the Johnson family included a son, John Harold Johnson Jr., a photographer, who died in 1981.

The secret of his success, by almost all accounts, was his indomitable tenacity of spirit and his refusal to take no for an answer. When he was refused permission to buy a lot in downtown Chicago because of his race, he hired a White lawyer who bought the land in trust, and he became the first African-American to build a major building in Chicago's Loop.

Defying the odds was his passion and his motif. "Failure," he said, "is a word I don't accept."

In his best-selling autobiography, *Succeeding Against the Odds*, he said that the message of his life "to Blacks, to Hispanics, to Asians, to Whites, to dreamers everywhere, [is] that long shots *do* come in and that hard work, dedication, and perseverance will overcome almost any prejudice and open almost any door."

Final Interment

It is the family's wish that a fitting monument be constructed as a permanent tribute at Oak Woods Cemetery, and a private dedication of Mr. Johnson's final resting place will take place at that time. We will therefore conclude the service with a prayer and statement of thanksgiving.

Order Of Service

The Rev. Dr. William H. Gray III .....Officiant
Senior Minister, Bright Hope Baptist Church, Philadelphia, Pa.

Organ Prelude
Processional
Opening Prayer
Musical Selection .....Sanctuary Choir, Apostolic Church of God

Scripture Readings

The Rev. Dr. David E. Chambers Jr.,
Senior Minister, Church of the Good Shepherd, Congregational UCC
Psalms 27: 1-4

The Rev. Dr. Kenneth B. Smith
Senior Minister, Retired, Church of the Good Shepherd, Congregational UCC
II Timothy: 4: 1-8

Official Tribute

The Honorable Richard M. Daley, Mayor of the City of Chicago

Acknowledgements

Alexa Rice

Musical Selection .....Vickie Winans

Tributes

The Honorable William Jefferson Clinton, Forty-second President of the United States
The Honorable Barack Obama, U.S. Senator, Illinois
The Honorable John H. Stroger Jr., President, Cook County Board of Commissioners
Earl G. Graves Sr.
John W. Teets
Desirée Rogers

Musical Selection .....Vickie Winans

Tributes

Lerone Bennett Jr.
Christie Hefner
President H. Patrick Swygert
Tavis Smiley
Tom Joyner

Musical Selection.....Sanctuary Choir, Apostolic Church of God

Eulogy

The Rev. Dr. William H. Gray III

Musical Selection.....Santita Jackson

Benediction

The Rev. Jesse Louis Jackson Sr.

Recessional

Take The 'A' Train
Billy Strayhorn/Edward Kennedy Ellington

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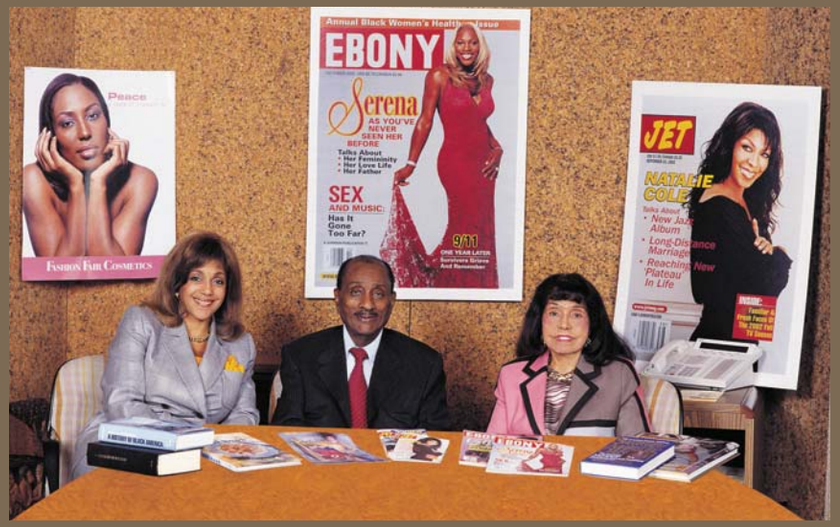

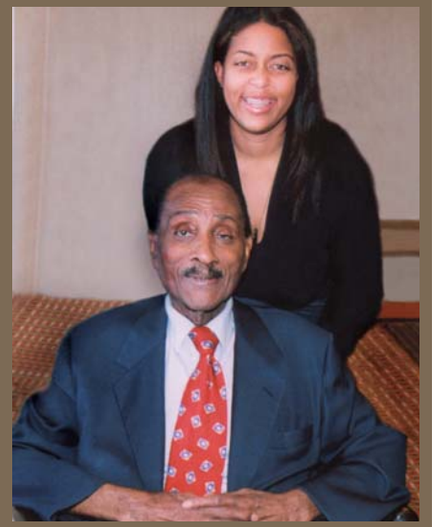

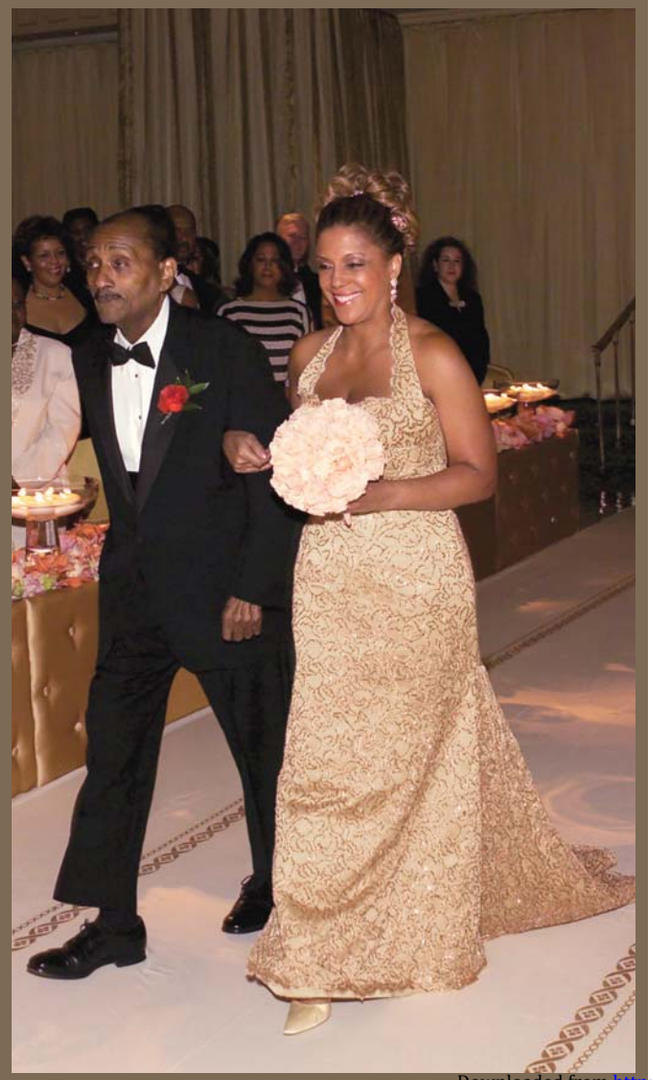

Pallbearers

Dennis Boston
Sylvester Briggs
J. Lance Clarke
Raymond Grady
I.S. Leevy Johnson
André Rice
John W. Rogers Jr.

Honorary Pallbearers

Muhammad Ali
Jeff Burns Jr.
John H. Bryan
Thomas J. Burrell
Dr. William H. Cosby
The Honorable Danny Davis Jr.
Mel Farr Sr.
Minister Louis Farrakhan
The Honorable Jesse Jackson Jr.
Robert L. Johnson
The Honorable Emil Jones Jr.
Michael Jordan
Edward T. Lewis
Darryl R. Matthews Sr.
Della L. Palmer
June Acie Rhinehart
The Honorable Bobby Rush
The Rev. Al Sharpton
The Honorable Rodney E. Slater

Acknowledgements

The family of John H. Johnson wishes to express sincere appreciation
for your prayers and acts of kindness.

In lieu of flowers, the family asks that donations be made to Howard University John H. Johnson School of Communications, 525 Bryant Street NW, Washington, D. C., 20059, or the United Negro College Fund, 8260 Willow Corporate Drive, Fairfax, Virginia, 22031.

FUNERAL ARRANGEMENTS ENTRUSTED TO:
Unity Funeral Parlors, Inc. Norman J. Williams President & Funeral Director
4114 South Michigan Avenue Chicago, IL 60653

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