

Kevin Johnson Talks Shop

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For Kevin Johnson, life has always been about setting up the people around him to do well. During his years as one of basketball's truly great point guards, first for the University of California Golden Bears and then later with the NBA's Cleveland Cavaliers and Phoenix Suns, few players in the game were more adept than Johnson at making their teammates better. Johnson, known simply as KJ to most people, came to the Bears and the Suns when both were suffering through hard times, and his immense talent and drive helped turn those teams into wildly successful organizations.

Now at a time when most former athletes are content to put their life into cruise control and to reap the benefits of their victories, Johnson has opted to once again throw his energy into the arena to help turn a struggling team around. This time, however, it is not about hoops and hardwood, but rather helping to return the downtrodden Oak Park community where he grew up to its former glory.

Fourteen years after opening of St. Hope Academy - the Oak Park after-school educational program that was Johnson's initial step in bringing his vision of economic revitalization to the area, and the lead factor in KJ being named one of former President George Bush's 1000 Points of Light - Johnson's St. Hope Development Corporation (SHDC) is closing in on the completion of a renovation to the historic Woodruff Hotel and Guild Theatre, two of the neighborhood's most well known but long-vacant landmarks. Set to open most segments in March, the newly formed 40 Acres commercial district, located along the 34th and Broadway corridor just a short block from the sign welcoming drivers heading south from downtown Sacramento to Oak Park, is designed to bring new business, local art and, most of all, renewed optimism to what has for decades been a community with precious little of the above.

"This whole thing started out as a way to improve the quality of life for this community," Johnson says. "St. Hope Academy was started because we felt there is such a strong correlation between education and economic development, but we also knew we had to establish an economy by creating viable businesses in this community where people *from* this community can come, can work and can spend their money."

The newly remodeled 20,000 square foot Woodruff building will certainly have that, with commercial office space, an upscale restaurant, market-rate apartments, the 220-seat Guild Theatre and a twice-the-normal-size Starbucks among its tenants, creating what Johnson hopes will be a cultural Mecca akin any found in the more upscale areas of downtown or East Sacramento. There are also plans to refurbish the old Urban League office, angled across the street at 35th and Broadway, into a pediatric medical facility. Johnson has a commitment from local pediatrician Stephanie Walton to move her south

Sacramento practice to the new building. Walton's father, Vernon, was Johnson's pediatrician.

Although Johnson's efforts are far from the first or only attempts to remove the blight that has for decades engulfed Sacramento's original suburb, he is undoubtedly the first to produce the kind of positive buzz that continues to unfold in what has often been a forgotten world for most Sacramentans. Johnson's hero-status as a local kid who has done better than good, both as an athlete and as a contributor to his old stomping grounds, gives the project a cache that likely would not come from any other local source.

The aura of success follows Johnson like a trusty shadow. His first commercial venture into the gritty Oak Park area was the renovation of a building directly across from the Woodruff site at 3rd and Broadway. The building, former home to a Sacramento Bank outlet, now houses a U.S. Bank branch, which has flourished enough that the bank recently signed a new five-year lease.

Despite the positive results and community support Johnson has garnered to date, he will likely need all of his legendary energy as well as a lot of luck to continue his current hot streak. Although Oak Park was once a thriving middle class suburb, hard times that started during the Depression eroded the area's stability, and by the 1960's it had developed into a ragged collection of deteriorating houses, garbage-strewn vacant lots and rampant crime. For the better part of the last four decades it has been a community better known as a place to avoid than as a destination point.

Johnson understands that changing perceptions and getting people to come to see what Oak Park has to offer now is a major challenge, but rather than use the blinding speed for which he was known as a player, he has taken a decidedly measured and thoughtful path to the goal. Before moving ahead on 40 Acres – named after an 1860's pledge from the U.S. government to provide suddenly freed slaves with 40 acres of land and rented mule - Johnson studied models of similar projects from around the country, looking long and hard at why some things work and others do not before moving forward.

“We know that this is a process that will have to be undertaken one step at a time,” Johnson acknowledges. “With have to build on the positives in this area, such as the Food Source supermarket on Broadway, which has become the fastest growing store in the entire Raley's chain.”

While his face and name are easily among the most recognizable in this region, he does not plan on going it alone. Johnson notes that such prominent local citizens as the Maloof family, Randy Paragary, Mort and Marcy Friedman and the McClatchy's have taken on some level of involvement in St. Hope projects, and as a 501 (c) (3) non-profit, SHDC has put together an active board of directors that takes a hands-on approach to their roles, offering a variety of expertise in development, architecture and commercial brokerage.

“We have a very experienced, true working board,” says SHDC president Tracy Stigler. “As a non-profit we really don't have the resources to hire expensive consultants, so we

really are very fortunate to have board members like Chuck Collings (former CEO of Raley's) and Fritz Brown, who are always available to lend their insight and guidance."

Stigler is himself another convert to the KJ mystique, becoming aware of the goings on in Sacramento during his days as an in-house attorney and accountant for the Phoenix Suns. Johnson was a bona fide superstar for Phoenix at that time, and his passion for St. Hope Academy caught Stigler's attention. A few short trips to Sacramento to see what all the fuss was about convinced him to get involved, first as a part time volunteer and now as a full time participant who moved here and has become "fully engrossed" in the day to day workings of the project.

SHDC has also worked diligently to develop a working relationship with the McGeorge School of Law, located just two blocks from the Woodruff Building. McGeorge Director of Development John McIntyre says a multitude of advantages to 40 Acres that add up to a winning situation for everyone involved.

"Kevin Johnson is doing this the right way," McIntyre says. "His ideas engage the community, they don't push it around. The entire McGeorge community is thrilled with what is happening here."

McIntyre adds that Johnson and the school's dean, Elizabeth Rindskopf Parker, have discussed a myriad of ways the school can officially connect to 40 Acres, including leasing some of the apartments that will be located above Starbucks in the Woodruff Building for use by McGeorge students and the creation of a scholarship program for St. Hope Academy students.

The UC Davis Medical Center, with more than 8,000 employees on hand at any given time, is also a short walk away. Johnson knows the potential to have the restaurant, barber shop and coffee house full of lunchtime and after work visitors from just these two entities alone is a key factor in SHDC's long-range plan.

"Food Source was a great start for the community," he notes. "But we have to continue to develop our relationships with entities like McGeorge, the UCD Med Center and Starbucks."

The connection to Starbucks, which at 1,900 square feet directly on the corner facing Broadway will undoubtedly be the flagship tenant for 40 Acres, appears to be solid.

"We are extremely impressed with Kevin Johnson, and thrilled to be a part of the project," says Tami DeFrank, Real Estate Manager for Starbucks Coffee Company in Northern California. "This particular store is larger than most, specifically because we want it to be a place where the community can gather. This project really represents well our commitment to giving back to the community. In fact, for Starbucks it is less about the project than being involved with Kevin, He has such a feel for this area, and is so committed himself, that we feel very good in supporting him on this."

Janet Dolan, Senior Public Information Representative for UCD, also thinks that 40 Acres could go over quite well.

“We certainly welcome this kind of development,” Dolan says. “The theatre in particular could be a great thing for our employees, a place where they can meet after work and enjoy a play or concert. We are very excited about that.”

Dolan also notes that other service businesses – such as a dry cleaning facility – would likely receive a high volume of business from UCD employees.

But attracting young urban professionals from midtown to Starbucks or a theatre is only one aspect of the challenge. The planned soul food restaurant might even get Kings forward Chris Webber to venture down from his Granite Bay digs once in a while, but as much as the success of the project might depend on being able to draw consumers from outside of the area, Johnson says he is not putting this together as much for them as for the residents of the community. He is emphatic in decrying skeptics who think the businesses going in to 40 Acres will be too upscale for what is still an economically depressed area.

“Studies of this area show clearly that residents want what 40 Acres has to offer,” he says. “This community is tired of getting substandard products and services. Oak Park wants the best.”

Stigler also points out that Oak Park has around 28,000 residents compacted in an area of approximately two square miles. Even with low incomes, he notes, this density creates a market with considerable buying power that deserves to be given access to the same kind of consumer products the rest of the city gets.

Johnson is aware that the success of 40Acres and related projects that will follow could also be a double-edged sword. Some people worry that raising the standard of living too much will rapidly price many current residents out of the neighborhood. During a recent tour of streets surrounding the various St. Hope ventures, Stigler noted several blocks where homes that just a few years ago sold for less than \$70,000 are now going for well over \$100,000. Johnson understands the issue, but thinks

“Gentrification is a huge concern of ours,” admits Johnson. “We don’t want to create opportunity that excludes people here now. We know affordable housing is a must, and we also know it is imperative to attract the middle class to Oak Park. But what we really want is to encourage people already here to move up and not out. We would like to see people who currently reside in standard two bedroom, one bath homes be committed enough to the neighborhood to build on those foundations and to stay here.”

Curing the kind of problems that have plagued Oak Park for generations is not going to happen overnight, or by the creation of one commercial district. Changing the perception most people have of Oak Park, including that of the current residents, will take time. But while Johnson is keenly aware that his personal involvement has given the impetus to

organizations like Starbucks to come to where they might not have otherwise, he is equally adamant in rejecting these as acts of corporate charity.

“Charity strips a community of its dignity,” he states directly, his passion evident in the pitch of his voice. “Oak Park does not want charity. We don’t want anybody to do anything here that does not make good business sense. Be it Starbucks, Raley’s or anyone else, participation here has to be a good investment. Starbucks studied this area before signing on, and they decided to come here because it makes good business sense. Stephanie Walton is coming here because it is good business for her to do so.”

Walton backs Johnson up on this. “When I joined my father’s practice four years ago, I immediately started looking for a place to move,” she says. “We have about 4,000 patients, and a high number come from Oak Park area. We looked all over town, but this made the best business sense for us.”

Given the nature of the challenges faced daily in Oak Park, it is easy enough to be skeptical of the long range viability of 40 Acres, particularly if you don’t have personal experience with Johnson’s desire to succeed. One person with plenty of background with KJ’s relentless drive is Cotton Fitzsimmons, currently Senior Executive Vice-President with the Phoenix Suns and Johnson’s coach there during the team’s rise from the ashes in the 1990’s. Fitzsimmons, who has also been to St. Hope Academy and kept a close eye on his former player over the years, is quick to point out that anyone doubting Johnson’s ability to make things happen – even something as difficult as resurrecting an entire community – simply doesn’t know the man.

“How many kids at the age of 22 already have their life planned out?” he asks. “Kevin has been working toward this forever, so I’m not shocked or surprised at anything he accomplishes. Just look at his career. He has done every single thing he ever set out to do.”

“Anybody can change the buildings,” Fitzsimmons adds. “It takes a very unique person to change how people think. So many guys start foundations saying they want to do this or that in the community, but they really only want to be there for the party and to shake hands, and usually they don’t do a lot else. Not Kevin. He really gets in there and goes to work. He’s a deep thinker with great vision, and the true definition of a mover and shaker. Kevin also doesn’t do anything unless he knows why he’s doing it. As a coach it was easy for me to just hand him the ball and let him do what he did best, because Kevin can simply do anything he sets his mind to. Period.”

Time will tell if the efforts put forth here will actually bear the fruit of success Johnson so desperately wants for his old haunts. Although any number of opportunities present themselves to him all the time – being an analyst for basketball on NBC for one, Harvard Divinity School for another – Johnson says his heart is forever stuck in this little pocket of California’s capitol city.

“There has to be a mission for me to be involved. I will always be fully committed to Oak Park for however long it takes to make this a better place – five years, 10 years, until the end of time.”

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