



Robert Barker

A Conversation with Michael Johnson

By Bill Summers

(Editor's Note: Michael Johnson shares the following thoughts as he prepares to become dean of the Hotel School on July 1, 2006.)

What do you find attractive about leading the Cornell Hotel School?

Coming into the interview process I knew that Cornell had the best Hotel School in the world. What I learned during the process was why. The most attractive feature of the Hotel School is its people, which is a service organization's greatest asset. The people associated with the Hotel School are wonderful. This starts with a faculty that is passionate about connecting theory to practice, cares deeply about the institution, and is determined to stay number-one. The quality of the people extends to include the students, alumni, staff, and administration. During my campus interview the students were in the midst of planning for Hotel Ezra Cornell. Their unbridled enthusiasm for the School was amazing. Over the last couple of months I have asked dozens of students just what they think of their experience in the program. The universal response is that, "It is everything I expected, and more." I have talked and exchanged emails with dozens of alumni. Their strong identification with the Hotel School and willingness to help is a huge asset going forward. I was deeply impressed with this University's administration, from then President Lehman and Provost Martin

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to the deans of other schools. Few individuals have the opportunity to work with such a talented group. And let's not forget the staff. From the Hotel School, to the Statler Hotel, to the University as a whole, the staff has been extremely professional and helpful.

Another factor that attracts me to the Hotel School is its focus. Most professional schools share a common dilemma. They instruct students that organizations should focus on their strengths and not be all things to all people, yet they fail to practice what they preach. The beauty of the Hotel School is that it focuses on

connecting theory to practice within the hospitality industry. This solves a huge problem by allowing faculty, students, staff, alumni and the industry to work together toward a common goal.

Finally, even though the School focuses on a particular industry, it happens to be the largest industry in the world. The sheer size of the industry provides abundant opportunities for the Hotel School to innovate,

grow, and have a significant impact on the service economy as a whole.

You are a highly accomplished educator and scholar. Why move into administration?

To be honest, I had come to believe that being a full professor at Michigan was one of the best jobs in the whole world, and it is! But this opportunity caused me to closely evaluate just what I want to accomplish with my career. Sitting here now, I picture my

At left: Michael Johnson at the dean's alumni breakfast during Reunion Weekend.



Michael Johnson with wife, Jill, and their sons, Alex, 15 (far left), Andrew, 12, and Thomas, 8.

career in terms of three distinct phases. Phase One was the process of becoming an established scholar, which included my PhD studies and years as an assistant professor. Phase Two was the post-tenure years, where my research and teaching interests broadened to include cross-functional, applied projects. Along the way my attention turned to service organizations, which are inherently cross-functional in nature. The natural next phase for my career is to lead an excellent service organization. The more I learned about the Hotel School, the more I realized just how great the fit was. The challenge of leading the Hotel School will keep me excited and energized for years to come. In short, I thought I had the best job in the world until an even better job came along.

What do you plan to do in the coming year to prepare for the job?

Any incoming dean, especially one from outside the institution, spends a significant amount of their first year just getting to know the place. My plan is to accomplish as much of this learning as possible over the next year. I will be no stranger to the faculty, students and staff between now and July of 2006. Schedule permitting, my plan is to attend all of the major events at the School including the New Student Orientation, parts of the Dean's Distinguished Lecture Series, Hotel Ezra Cornell and graduation. Visits to meet the larger alumni groups and attend University-level meetings are also on my agenda. In hindsight, having the year to transition provides me the advantage of getting to know the School and its various constituents before I land in Ithaca full time.

How involved will you be with the Hotel School up until your start date?

As you can tell, I plan to be as involved as possible. But keep in mind that I am an employee of the University of Michigan for one more year. While at Michigan I will teach a student projects course, where teams of MBA students conduct applied projects for companies, as well as several executive programs. Having another year at Michigan also affords me the time needed to gain closure on a number of research projects. Of course, this transition would be impossible without Professor Sherri Kimes. Having spent the last 23 years at Michigan, it was just too much to ask my wife and family to pick up everything we had built here in Ann Arbor and move so quickly. Provost Martin came up with the creative solution of having Professor Kimes serve as interim dean. She has the respect of the entire faculty and will do an excellent job.

It is early, but looking out over five years, what do you see as your priorities for the School?

One clear priority is to continue to enhance an already outstanding faculty. The School's faculty has improved tremendously over the years. But, like every other school at Cornell, the Hotel School must continue to improve. The general logic of the Hotel School is relatively simple: hire and develop outstanding faculty members who deliver an outstanding educational experience to students who become leaders in the hospitality industry. The challenge is finding those unique scholars who are both trained to conduct rigorous academic work and thrive on translating theory into practice in the hospitality industry. Another priority is to build more bridges across Cornell University. There is so much potential synergy within this University that should be tapped. For example, as self-service technologies continue to expand within the hospitality industry I would love to see our faculty and students work with people from across campus working at the leading edge of the technologies. Finally, we must prepare the School to meet the financial challenges of the future. We all know how much tuition levels have increased at universities in recent years. Here at the Hotel School, we must find creative ways to make sure that a diverse population of students who value service and serving will continue to have access to our programs.

I have some other specific ideas for the School, such as expanding opportunities for applied student projects, expanding the reach of the Hotel School's research, and engaging a whole new generation of alumni in the School's activities. My plan is to work with the faculty, students and alumni to set specific project priorities and implement them over the next five years.

Tell us about your family.

My wife, Jill, and I have been married 20 wonderful years. She grew up in Rochester Hills, Mich., received her BBA from the Michigan Business School, and received her JD from the Michigan Law School. After law school Jill worked in the Office of the General Counsel of Ford Motor Company. Our three boys, Alex, 15, Andrew, 12, and Thomas, 8, keep us very busy. Alex plays high school football and basketball. This spring and summer he is playing AAU basketball with the Michigan Mavericks. Andrew is our middle school student who loves baseball and hockey. He is

spending the summer playing baseball for the Washtenaw Red Sox. Thomas plays for the Ann Arbor United Strikers soccer team and will play baseball this summer with his grade school friends. As you can imagine we often need to be in three or four places at once, but somehow we make it work.

What are your personal interests?

When I manage to find some free time I drop my kayak into a river, work upstream, and then glide back down. It is great therapy for both body and mind. During the winter months I try to cross-country ski on the weekends and play hockey once a week. We take the guys downhill skiing when we can. Can you tell that I grew up in Wisconsin? Moving to Ithaca will seem very natural to me. Of course, time will be the scarce resource.

Reading history and historical fiction is another hobby. I am in the process of reading James Fenimore Cooper's *Leatherstocking Tales*. So far I have enjoyed *The Last of the Mohicans*, *The Deerslayer* and *The Pathfinder*. By coincidence these tales provide a unique glimpse of frontier life in New York State during the early eighteenth century. Among history titles, my favorites include *1914* by Lyn Macdonald, *Battle Cry of Freedom* by James McPherson, and *Scipio Africanus: Greater than Napoleon* by B. H. Liddell Hart.

How hard will it be to leave Ann Arbor after 24 years?

Ann Arbor has been a great place to raise the boys and we have made a lot of friends over the years. So it will be hard to leave. But then again, I thought I would never leave Madison. Everyone we have talked to agrees that Ithaca is a very special place. We already know several families in the area, including some old friends from Ann Arbor and Chicago, which will make the move that much easier. We look forward to calling Ithaca home.

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