

# A Fanatic for Service

*Nkenge Harmon Johnson '93, spokesperson for Oregon's Governor Kitzhaber, has worked in political communications for the U.S. Congress and President Obama*

“**P**olitical nerds are service fanatics. You can't really shake it off,” says Nkenge Harmon Johnson '93. She should know. Three years shy of turning 40, she has already carved out a notable career in public service in U.S. and state politics. A brilliant, curious, and resilient woman, her driving force is her love for this country and an overwhelming ethic of inclusivity and giving back.

Since January 2014, Nkenge has served as communications director for Oregon Governor John Kitzhaber and as a member of the Governor's executive team. “I deal with the media, elected officials, and the public about really important issues that affect lives today and affect the future of the state. It's no small matter,” she says. It's her voice you hear discussing state issues and policies, her words that you will read in the media about the Governor's stance on crucial matters.

Nkenge does much more than talk about policy, though: she is an instrumental player in shaping the work of the Governor's office. “Not only do I help define how to discuss the work at hand, I also identify ways to focus the work to the greatest effect,” she says. “It's about identifying commonalities and differences where that is most important. The job is not just talking to people but helping us to listen.”

**Nkenge began her work** in political public service 11 years ago. After Catlin Gabel she attended Florida A&M University as a business and engineering major, and then attended Howard University Law School, which had recognized her potential and vigorously recruited her. Nkenge's law school class was the first to graduate after 9-11, and the job situation was brutal for her and her peers because of the economic downturn. Her family has a strong military tradition, and she recounts the day when she was in D.C., trying to figure out how to serve her country in a time when the employment



outlook for budding lawyers looked bleak. She looked up and noticed the Capitol, and realized: that's what she could do to serve.

But Oregon was calling her back, so Nkenge returned home to take the Oregon Bar exam. She passed the Bar, and went as far as accepting a job at Legal Aid in Portland. She grabbed a chance to take a road trip before she began working—and was in a terrible car accident in Texas. “Every now and again I feel as though the universe puts its hand on my shoulder and says, ‘Slow down,’” Nkenge says. “I was lying on a hospital bed looking up and saying, Oh! Was I not paying attention to something?” That's when she decided to act on her moment of inspiration and seek work on Capitol Hill.

When Nkenge finished her rehab and recovery from the accident, she began working as legislative counsel for U.S. Representative Sheila Jackson Lee, of Texas. Nkenge's first experience with the duties of a press secretary came when she

realized the haphazard nature of the communications coming from Lee's office, and decided to be the gatekeeper for all public material. Although she yearned to practice law, she says, “The job was a natural fit for me to be talking to reporters and talking to the public and helping to shape messages, because I understood the underlying policy and motivations behind what I was saying. There's nothing better than that.”

Growing weary of the politics of being in the minority party in the House, Nkenge worked for two years supporting national political campaigns as deputy press secretary for the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee. Her focus was outreach to stakeholders and media such as the African American, Spanish language, and faith press, a great learning experience. When the election cycle concluded, she earned an MBA and worked as a lawyer in New York and D.C.—and found a way to fulfill her intense entrepreneurial drive.

Before she turned 30 Nkenge bought a mixed-use housing development in D.C., one she owns to this day. She started this business in 2005 partially to see if she could put into practice principles of highest and best use. “I had some theories and ideas about housing issues, homelessness, and finance. I wanted to see if I could walk the talk,” she said. She lived in the building and maintains close relationships with her tenants, some of whom have been living there longer than she has been alive.

After her business was up and running, Nkenge’s thoughts turned to working on the Hill, stirred again by her love of public service. She took a job as director of outreach communications for Senator Majority Leader Harry Reid of Nevada. Shortly after, she became communications director in 2009 for Senator Debbie Stabenow of Michigan, a state that resonated for Nkenge because of its economic similarities to Oregon. Nkenge admired Sen. Stabenow’s strength of character, and enjoyed the work of helping her build a strong national presence.

And then the President called: the Obama administration tapped her to help move forward the country’s trade agenda. When that happens, you act. She joined the office of the U.S. Trade Representative, a position she held for three years, working to help solidify trade agreements with Korea, Colombia, and Panama. “Our schedule was unrelenting,” she says. “But it’s a great honor to work in service of my country and this President. I have to start and stop with these points.”

When the three trade agreements were signed, Nkenge saw that as an opportunity for change. Once again, Nkenge left D.C. to return to Oregon, this time for a very personal and important reason. In September 2012 she married Erious Johnson, a classmate of hers from Howard University Law School. She had been based in D.C., and he was successful attorney in New York. Moving to Oregon was their chance to make a life together. Nkenge and Erious moved to a house in south Salem above a Christmas tree farm, with sunsets, great views, deer, and

space to grow. They established a law firm of their own, where she worked until she was called upon to serve Governor Kitzhaber.

## “Success for me means

finding people from whom I can learn and who are supportive of my decision to work hard to build my dreams,” says Nkenge. At Catlin Gabel, headmaster Jim Scott, science teacher Paul Dickinson, and most of all Spanish teacher Roberto Villa were those people for her. Nkenge had been part of a cohort of students who came from Harriet Tubman Middle School, which brought what she saw as interesting challenges. Jim Scott was someone she went to for help with finding solutions to those challenges, and was a hugely supportive presence. Nkenge loved science and says that Paul Dickinson allowed her to “play with ideas and participate in events outside of school, like the Bickleton bluebird trip, which I did every year at Catlin Gabel.” Roberto Villa is most memorable for her because he challenged her when she didn’t want to do what she saw as a tedious and boring part of her classwork. He urged her to do work that was more complex and interesting, and earned her trust by supporting her to do the work her own way and in turn learn more deeply. She still credits him with her love of and facility with the Spanish language, which she used daily as a lawyer in New York and D.C.

Nkenge says that one of her biggest challenges is helping others see the greatness of her community and state the way she does. “I reject conventional theories about diversity in Oregon. I figure I have a reason to know,” she says. “What’s important is not census numbers or language or heritage, but opportunities that need to be available for all of us. I reject the idea that one has to look a certain way or be from a certain place to succeed. It’s a challenge to make it true that everyone can do what he or she makes up their mind to do—in education, employment, arts and culture, sports, or health care. As long as we think about the state as homogenous it lets us off the hook. Oregon is not so.

What the state looks like calls us into account to make our organizations resemble the state,” she says.

“And the same is true nationally. In the Senate I was one of two African American communication directors out of one hundred. There were two Asians and no Latinos. The numbers of persons of color were far underrepresented, and this was true of every level of senators and their staffs, and it is still true,” she says.

Another great challenge for Nkenge has been her equal desires to be both a public servant and an entrepreneur while working in jobs that are difficult and consuming. She was always interested in business, had thought in college that she would work in finance, and always had the sense that she would work for herself at some point in her life. “Being a public servant means being focused on issues of others. It’s very external. Being an entrepreneur means being mostly focused on oneself and the business, and the mission to build a going concern. Both are different and important to me! I’ve spent most of my time, though, in public service. It’s a challenge to find a way to embrace the entrepreneur in me. It’s probably also a success in that I continue to believe I am able to do more than one big thing at the same time,” she says.

When she looks back on the years since she began working on Capitol Hill, Nkenge feels fortunate to have had an exciting and fulfilling career, and to have been nimble enough to take advantage of opportunities that came to her, even at inopportune times. “I’m not a written-in-cement planner,” she says. “I’m lucky to get to do interesting work. I’m committed to making choices that allow me to do what I want most of the time. I’ve been through pay cuts, moves, leaves of absences, starting businesses on a wing and a prayer. I’m willing to allow myself the chance to do what’s satisfying personally and of most use to the society in which I live. I’m trying to learn from experience.”

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