

Interview with Hansford Johnson

Director of the Mentorship Program at the Wake Forest University School of Business

by Ellie Poole

EP: All right--we should be good to go. Can you tell me a little bit is about your background? Where did you grow up?

HJ: Oh wow. Ok. Well, I'm from West Africa, Liberia. It's about as far west as you can go and it's about the size of Tennessee, [but with] 3 million people. Born in 1980, so I just turned the big 3-0 in October, so that's been interesting. But I left there in 1985 and moved to Minneapolis of all places. Minnesota. If you know anything about West Africa, Liberia, there's two seasons: it's rainy and dry seasons for six months apiece, so we don't see snow at all. So when I moved to Minneapolis, it was a culture shock beyond a culture shock.

EP: I can only imagine.

HJ: From the weather, to the overall culture, to the people. You know, almost everybody I saw, if not 99%, were of the same race and same color.

EP: Right, right.

HJ: Not that we didn't want to intermingle, it's just the way it was, so when I got here to New York and then Minneapolis, it was a culture shock, big time. And then, of course, the snow. So, I lived in Minneapolis from five, six years old all the way 'til about 1994 when we moved to Atlanta, Georgia. My mother had started her own business doing hair, you know, big stuff. In Atlanta there's a high concentration of African Americans and that whole industry was booming there so of course, opportunity. When my mom moved there, we relocated. So, we relocated there and, of course the Olympics were there in '96, and I lived there until 1998, when I went on to play college football at university...Middle Tennessee State University. I was there from '98 to 2002. And then when I got done there, I was kind of in the same boat you are--trying to figure out what I wanted to do.

EP: Right.

HJ: I got really involved in a campus ministry while I was there and really, really got involved and just didn't know what I wanted to do, so I figured, shoot, why not dedicate my life to my faith to just see what to do. So I went out to Fuller Theological Seminary, and studied there and studied intercultural studies, anthropology and global leadership. Got a masters in that and then when I got done I went to work for an International Christian organization for about five years or six years as a campus minister doing, (I mean, the description didn't fit what we did), but it was a lot. It was a lot. Helped church planting, learned a lot of little things indirectly that kind of parlayed into what I do now, so...but I did that for awhile and then moved to Tampa, Florida, got married, did a lot of travelling, and just wanted to sit. I was doing too much. Specifically, I was reaching inner city, lower socioeconomic groups and the only thing I saw with those students I was working with was they had a lot of inconsistencies in their lives. I felt I was the same way, because I was going back and forth. So, long story short, I decided to stay. I stopped doing what

I was doing and just stayed with the ministry but I was more centered and focused in Tampa. So I kind of poured my efforts into being a mentor--being a role model. My wife and I started coaching, my wife and I. At first it was life coaching, but then it was football, because they found out I played football.

My wife actually started working there as a teacher [of] education, business education. And then I coached there for a couple years--next thing I know I became a teacher, so I taught three years, academy of finance. I have a lot of respect for teachers. It was a lot. I did that for awhile and got a little...I was satisfied, I was content, but I wasn't satisfied. So, I got my MBA and wanted to move on to higher education. I moved to University of South Florida and that's where I took on the title of the mentor program, so I became the director for the corporate mentor program, working with first generation college students [and] underrepresented minorities. The idea was to help them pretty much get a mentor relationship with individuals who could help them move to that next level. And then in 2008, I heard about this opportunity, read about Steve Reinemund, thought, "This is a great opportunity," so...here I am. That's a long way, but that's where I'm from, that's what I'm about. This is where I'm at right now.

EP: That's such an interesting path. I've loved, especially as I've come into the last few years of college, with people asking me what I'm doing, I've loved hearing people's stories of the process of how you get from one point to another. You know, a to e, and you figure out what b, c, d...

EP: Do you have siblings? Where do they live?

HJ: I do. I have three brothers. No sisters. Just sister-in-laws. But my three brothers...one lives in, what's it called, South Carolina, Columbia, and his wife is working on her PhD at USC. My other brother is in Knoxville, where his wife is finishing up her masters at Knoxville. And then my other brother is in Minneapolis, so we're kind of still all over the place. I'm the youngest of four. The oldest is about 44, 43, and I'm thirty, obviously.

EP: Did you always, I mean, I know you said you went back and forth, but have you always kind of had an interest in the mentoring type of relationship and, you know, the question we have is, "Did you always know that you would go into this line of work?" Which, obviously with the details of it, it seems like you didn't, but does it fit into things you've always been interested in?

HJ: It really has. Seriously. I think, and I know you're recording, but I think it's unreasonable to think that someone who's 21, 22 years old really knows what they want to do. You really don't. You really don't. I think [you should] get as much experience as possible and, you know, depending on what your values and your belief system is, I think you're going to figure out what you want to do. Figure out what your calling is...what you're passionate about. Figure out what you want to do by the time you're 30, hopefully, and I think at that point then you should devote your life to it. It can be earlier. No, I didn't know. I think it was just, I don't know how else to say it, but [it was] divine purpose for me to be doing what I was doing. But like I said before, it kind of set me up for what I'm doing now. Because it's always been centered around people, though, I did mention, you know, my degree was in finance. I'm good with numbers, projects, stuff like that, but it's always been about people, emotional intelligence, people development. So, you know, I didn't always know I wanted to do this, I'm still trying to figure it out, but I love

what I do now. It just feels like there's more. There's definitely more. But the whole idea is wrapped around just making a difference in people's life, but we'll see where it goes.

EP: Yeah. When you were young, was there something that you really wanted to be when you grew up?

HJ: I think, yeah, like most people, it's always the big, grandiose, ideas--far-fetched--but to be honest with you I never thought I'd be doing this. My ideas were very self-centered, as a young person, but I really wanted to play professional sports. Seriously, I mean, I knew I had an athletic ability. I was, (at one point in my life), I wasn't vertically challenged. Stopped growing, you know, so...so I wanted to do that, but ultimately when I got done with that I wanted to be a business person. I wanted to be able to control my own time, to give and do what I thought was most desirable. So, I wanted to do business and be in corporate America. I like feeling important, I guess, wearing a tie. I learned it's not that important to wear a tie. But that's what I wanted to do when I was younger.

EP: [laughs] Yeah. That's great. Well, will you tell me about the work you do now? I just kind of want to understand your job.

HJ: Yeah, yeah, yeah. I'll try to wrap it because seems like everyday I'm talking about it so I'll give you the brief version. So basically what we do is we help students. We're part of the Career Management Center, and the whole idea is to, and even the mission of the school of business, (really almost the entire *Pro Humanitate* thing), is to help students find their fire, find their passion, find their calling. And that involves people. And if it involves people, then I think people or students need to understand how to build relationships and how to have relationships. And not to be manipulative or, you know, insincere, but how to genuinely connect with people to figure out what it is they want to do. What the mentor program, Executive Partners in Mentorship program, does it places, right now, current graduate students (we will be, in the near future here, working with undergrads, specifically with the schools of business because it's a business school initiative). We help place them in one to one meaningful relationships with industry professionals. So, we line up students within a profession [with what] they feel they may want to do. It's not fully focused around the profession, more the individuals. It's a lot trying to figure out a student's social competence or personal competence, EQ, to try to match them up, to put them in a relationship that can help them navigate through these waters to try to figure out what they want to do. So, it's really putting people who've been there in the lives of people who are trying to get there and help out, help figure out the process. Like you said, from a to e, but trying to figure out b and c, what does that mean? There's so many things they deal with while they're here. They can figure out what they don't want to do, overall objectives to help students understand how to be better, as a mentor, colleague, whatever it might be. You learn to build relationships. It's important.

EP: Yeah, it seems so important, I mean, having been undergrad at Wake for four years, it just gets so easy to get caught up in just your academics and to kind of forget about friends, I mean, obviously people have friends, but, as far as being able to...I think there's this loss of sincerity of relationships, especially with people that are older than you are. You know, in the age of email, Facebook, and texting, it's hard for kids. Especially, if you didn't grow up (my dad's a pastor

and so I grew up having adults at my house all the time)...but if you didn't have something like that it can be really hard to engage face to face and I think that's a really valuable asset to somebody who's trying to figure out how to do business.

HJ: I agree with you. I think it's simple, but because of this boom of technology--and technology is good for us, makes word move faster, gets us all connected—but it takes away, like you said, that genuine life doing, life exchanging life and we, this generation, don't know how to do that because we have access to so many things that you can put that wall up.

EP: Right, on our own.

HJ: So, it's basic, it's easy and some students think it's the soft skills kind of stuff, but I like it.

EP: Yeah, well what you're doing seems important to the way that the Business School is run. Do you kind of think about that as you do your job...the importance of what you're setting up for kids?

HJ: Absolutely. I think it falls right in line with everything we're doing because we as an institution want to be able to empower and to help [someone] like you, anyone, find their passion. What are you passionate about? We use this model called the 4 p's: passion, performance, or purpose, passion, preparation, and performance. It's that whole process there, so what we do here with our program is an extension of that. It's about building relationships, especially with the economy the way it is. People say it's a lot about what you know--it gets you in there--sometimes what you know gets you in the door but who you know gets you a seat. So we just feel like we're doing something that's essential, basic to life, but I think we're doing basic things that people don't feel like they have time to do, so it is valuable. We're not making money off of it, adding anything to the program or to the degrees, so it's central.

EP: Sounds like it. What are a few of your favorite things about your job?

HJ: My favorite things about my job is that it's very flexible. I say that my priority, obviously, this is an interview...I don't feel like my job is my number one, and I know how that sounds, but my job is not my priority. But when you have a job that allows you to do what you feel like is most important which, be it my faith, my family second, it makes you love what you do, and I can really pour myself into what I do. It's very flexible in that I can do what I want. But also, too, what I'm learning, what I'm studying helps me be a better husband, better father, better friend, because I'm studying things, like I said, emotional intelligence or just understanding that, so, of course I love the people I work around with. It's very difficult and you'll find that, it's not a given statistic but I feel that 90% of people don't like what they do; they hate what they do. They dread going to work. And to me I think you're wasting life because it's very precious. Find what the heck you want to do and do it. I know it's easier said than done, but also to be surrounded by people who, they might not be as passionate as you, you can't expect that, so those are two things I enjoy about my job.

EP: Even today we had the head of HR come into our class...

HJ: Angela?

EP: Uh-huh and she, oh she was so impressive.

HJ: She's so great. I love her personality.

EP: Our whole class was totally in love with her, you know, she was so eloquent and just passionate about what she was doing and she was asking us, "Do you know the number one reason people quit their jobs?" and we were all thinking, "Oh, you know, they don't like it, they want to make more money somewhere else." And she goes, "No...people don't like their boss."

HJ: Absolutely.

EP: And they're not--the only thing is the relationships within their work--so I feel like it probably, I feel like for you to say you like the people you work with, that speaks volumes.

HJ: Yeah. It's true though. You'll really find that people, money, all that stuff, that's good and all, but as a human being, it goes deeper than that. It's a higher need, you know, and that's great, to do things, [but] ultimately, it's not the most important.

EP: I agree. Well, do you have advice for anyone going into your work or kind of have similar interests?

HJ: Sure! I think... into what I do? Or just the work force in general?

EP: I think your line of work. I know your work is a pretty specific area in a really typical position, but maybe someone had similar interests as far as the interpersonal significance and maybe even the faith aspect of it?

HJ: I see what you're saying.

EP: For people who are interested in that?

HJ: You have to make sure you're passionate about it. Because if you're just doing it because of those superficial things, you know, the aspects of the monetary flexibility will give you, I think you're wasting your time. But make sure you're passionate about it. But number two, and this is you now in the natural...be good at what you do. And I tell this to people all the time, regardless of what you go into, study it. You know you might not be the smartest person in the world or the most talented, but you can outwork people. And my whole thing is that I do something like this because there's so much information out there: be the best at what you do. Study a lot, engulf yourself in it, I mean, not for it to become a religion. It's about people. And make sure, number one, that you like people.

EP: Right!

HJ: And not just that, but that you like to study human behavior and that you like projects, so, any things like what I do, you have to check those things. Think about what you're going into, whether it's,[and] all these things are synonymous-- advising, coaching, mentoring-- it's all because of the help and to see the better in people, so it's very similar. Pay attention to what you're doing. It's just that I think there's so many other technical parts that go along with it. So many things you need to add. I see people who are so people driven that they tend to forget the other part of it too. It's technical, it's project oriented, it's budgeting. All that...those things are going to come in handy. Those are the things I would say.

EP: Yeah, yeah. That's great. Well I know you said you heard about Dean Reinemund and this position but what brought you to Wake?

HJ: I think two things. Before I was here, I was at University of South Florida and my position there was similar to this and that was a corporate mentor program, so, different title, same job, working with students, liberal arts undergrads, getting their masters and get into a technical job by this business skill sets. But more importantly, I did that with underrepresented minority groups, because the Dean had started a corporate fellowship specifically for underrepresented minority groups to help the university in inclusion opportunities on campus. So, I read it and obviously I'm always challenging my students to go to grad school at USF, especially within that group of 1st generation, where the graduation rate amongst them is, like, 27%, so it's pretty bad. So of the 27% that graduate, less than 10% of them go and get a graduate degree. But as you see, the more education you have the better it's going to be. So, you know, I took a look at it, and I always see things like this, especially when it comes to universities, diversity, inclusion. I say, "Ok, great, you're doing it, too." The thing that got me was that I did some research. And I always tell people, "There are two kinds of people in life, not male and female, but people who are committed to things and people who are interested in things. When you're interested in things, when the rubber meets the road, or when pressure hits, you're gonna make an excuse. You want to work out, New Year's resolution, you're tired, you're hungry, so you stop working out. But when you're committed to something, it's like a marriage, you're committed to it. It doesn't matter how you feel, it's a decision you made" and I saw that his life's work spoke of that, so that's the kind of stuff I wanted to be around, that kind of leader. Because I think, to me, if I ever want to be something I have to take the initiative to put this program together because he's coming from where he deals with people who [snaps] get the work done with not much direction, so I have to. But then the opportunity to meet with him on a regular basis, might be every month or something, but to be mentored by him. So, it was selfish, but you know, doing the work is just going to stretch me, so that's why I came to Wake. I didn't know anything about Wake, really, I was gravitating toward the leader more than the school, but the school has been great.

EP: Good, good. Well, what do you like most about working at Wake Forest?

HJ: Hmm, well, I think the environment here, working at the Schools of Business because we're separated, but the overall school. I understand, I know *Pro Humanitate*, I read about all the different traditions they have here, but I'm in the grad school, and you know 90% of them don't come from Wake. They come from different schools, so there's not that level of commitment, that level of...[basically] they don't feel the same as you do. But in reading about it and

understanding the brand of Wake Forest University, it just feels nice going out in public knowing you're working with a company that's well respected, you know? And well respected in a way [because] what they do, it's honorable work. So you know, so the answer to your question "What do I like most about Wake?": it's that...just the reputation, what it stands for, a smaller environment, the way it develops the students, the liberal arts, how it allow students to think, you know, teaches them how to think, not just what to think, which is important to me.

EP: Yeah, yeah, I think you're dead on. That's something I feel in undergrad and I assume that that carries over the grad school too.

HJ: Right.

EP: Well, where do you see yourself, or what will you be doing in ten or fifteen years?

HJ: Wow, ten or fifteen years.

EP: You could go five if you want [laughs].

HJ: Well, let's see, I can answer your question. In five years, gosh...this is at a point in the season of my life where I'm figuring those things out.

EP: Right.

HJ: Because I think in graduate school or in school in general, but especially in grad school, you're always pushing students to be thinking about what they're going to be doing next. And I think it's very, it's not practical because you need to be in the day and not worry about tomorrow. I understand planning. I'm very much a planner. So to answer your question: professionally I see myself, whether I stay in higher education or not, I see myself in a role where I'm affecting change, pushing for change. Change not in such a way that what we're doing here is not good, but progressing, you know, thinking about what we can do, think ten years beyond where we're at now, look at what's going on in the world, the culture, the people, get around, see how we can set Wake into an atmosphere that embraces change in the people that are going to be coming here. I see myself now as more of a manager, where I'm managing a project and doing those kinds of things.

But, like I said before, the reason why I came here was so I could see a leader, so I could see it through his lens, where I'm not so much thinking the right things or doing things right, which managers do, but being able to do the right thing. So, you know, I don't know. I think I know in five years, whether or not I'm somewhere else, I think I'll be in a position to speak to a person like me and do what I do better. So, you know, the whole coaching, mentoring aspect--I want to be at a level where my work has gotten me to a place of expertise, but I've also gained the respect of my peers, that [they think], "He knows what he's talking about." Not just to be this floating head, where I've put my time into this and I'm going to put what I have into you, so public or private sector, we'll see.

EP: Yeah, we'll see.

HJ: We'll see how it goes. So, I don't know.

EP: We've spoken a little bit about your family, but does your wife work here? Do you have kids?

HJ: No, my wife doesn't work here. She's a teacher in the Guilford County School system. She's a high school teacher. She teaches Marketing and sports and entertainment. She's been doing, that's what she went to school for, so she's been teaching for quite some time. But she took some time off--it's not like we're old--she took some time off, but she took some time off she could stay home with the kids. We didn't plan it that way, but it's really important in those formative years that, you know, you kind of get that time. Just being around a lot of pastors, and seeing how they raise their families and... I don't know what it is, but every pastor's family we've been around had five or four kids, but that doesn't mean it's the wrong or the right way, but we just saw the value in it, you know? So, anyway, my wife teaches school and she works in Greensboro and we have three young children. We have a four year old, Jada, a girl. And then we have a two and a half year old, Jordan. And then we have a son who just is 13/14 months. So, for me, I'm done, but my wife wants more. We'll see how that goes. And they go to school here at First Assembly Christian. It's real close, it's good for them to be right there and our son has an au pair, nanny, whatever you want to call it.

EP: Yeah, I'm one of three.

HJ: Yeah?

EP: It's a good number. Three's good. Do you have certain hobbies or interests that you like to do outside of work?

HJ: Yeah! I'm still, like said I grew up playing sports, I don't know if I mentioned that, but I grew up playing sports my whole life. When we lived in Minneapolis, inner city, I didn't know it 'til I went back, but I went back and we really lived in the hood. I didn't know that, you know? But my mom kept me in baseball, in football, track, all year round so I thank her for it because it's what allowed me to go to school for free, you know, so I didn't have to pay for my education. But I still have that love for sports. I watch football. A pretty typical guy, I guess. I love to play it, too. Working out. I love to read. I love talking to people but the more and more I see... now I do it, but the time it takes, it's difficult now, because I don't have the time to give. I know that sounds very bad. Between a wife, three kids... talking to people about life, direction--whether I'm giving the advice or hearing it--I have multiple mentors, so... those are my interests. I don't collect cards or play video games. I don't have time for that. But those are my interests.

EP: Our last--my last question is just about the very first day in class, which is called America at Work... it's just all about history of labor, and obviously the concept of the American dream really ties into that, so we spent our first day of class talking about what do we think it is, what do we think it has to do with everything? So we've been trying to decide what it means today. So, do you have thoughts on what you think it is? Do you think you're living the American Dream? I think you have a pretty interesting perspective, not being born in the United States.

HJ: Exactly. That's what I was about to say.

EP: I would love to hear your thoughts.

HJ: That's a loaded question.

EP: Yeah! We can break it down.

HJ: No, no, let's see if I can answer it. Am I living the American dream? I think I am. I mean, I'm 30 years old. I'm understanding America. I think growing up I didn't pay attention. I understand why a lot of people from my country come, or people, because it's the land of the free. Nothing's really free. There's, you know, the opportunity, for the effort and then reap the benefits is here. It's a lot of hard work, you know, but I feel like I am...because when you're from another country, America represents opportunity. It's not as easy as it looks on TV but because I've been able, well, to do what I do and where I'm at from where I've come from, I think I am living the American Dream. Also just the simple fact that when I left I was 5 or 6, and four years later there was civil war for fourteen years, so people my age were forced into the war as soldiers, and I see them now, and they're psychologically really messed up. You know, I think, to be taken out of that situation at that time; [what that] has done for me and my children and my wife, and my faith and just where I'm at, I think I'm living the American dream. So I don't know what that looks like and I think you define that, you know, because it's not the superficial stuff. Don't get me wrong, it's nice to have all that stuff, but getting all that stuff and keeping up with the Joneses--then you'll be in debt. And that's part of the American dream, too, you know, so I think I am [living it]. I really think I am. The opportunity to believe, the opportunity to express that, the opportunity to be an African American in America which is only fifty, sixty years removed from segregation or racist [beliefs], and to have the people to grow with in an environment that doesn't necessarily have a history of inclusion (Wake Forest) but they're doing it, working on it. Not just an idea...[they are] definitely committed to it. But I'm here at a really, really good time. Everything that's happened in my life I say is about opportunity, so I say I am living the American dream because it's been [full of] opportunity and I've been able to seize it, by the grace of God, because it's a lot of hard work. It is, so, yeah, hopefully I hit them all right there.

EP: Yeah, I think you did!

HJ: So, that's how I define it, and then ultimately, ultimately, the opportunity to do something...because what you do is an investment for your children, you know what I mean?

EP: Mm-hmm

HJ: It's--to me it's good. You, too, can have a choice. I didn't have any sisters, but I do have two daughters and the fact that whatever the mom and dad does, from that, they can have better choices. I think my mom did very well raising us by herself, but because of my choices, my kids can do well and we live in a country, God forbid anything happens, that they can too. So, I'm living the American dream. I think so.

EP: Great, great. Well, that's the only questions.

HJ: That's great.