

## REMEMBERING PETER V. JOHNSON

On February 17, 2016 Whitney Green '10SEAS '13TC introduced Peter at the Annual Heritage Award and Scholarship Reception to receive his BAC Heritage Award. Her comments were epic. Read and remember Peter V. Johnson.

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Good Evening Everyone,

Tonight, I have the incredible honor of introducing someone truly special. An icon, a legend in his own right, and a pillar within our Columbia community and education at large – the ever wonderful Peter V. Johnson.

Peter has had a long and outstanding career within education:

He started as an Assistant Director of Upward Bound at Earlham College in 1971 where he worked to guide students in their preparation for college – a theme that would last his entire career. He then became Assistant Master then Associate Director of Admissions at Hampshire College. Then in 1982 he became the Assistant Dean of Students under another beloved Columbia icon, Roger Lehecka. There he worked as an advocate for minority students and translated their needs to an ever evolving office of student advising. From there Peter joined the Office of Undergraduate Admissions where he has been for over 20 years in various roles and capacities in multicultural recruitment and engagement, athletics, and student enrollment. He has also served on several boards, has been involved with the Double Discovery Center, has done tremendous outreach in Harlem and Manhattanville, and much more. Currently, Peter serves as the Director of Enrollment Group Special Projects. He is also the parent of a 2001 Columbia College graduate. In 2013 Peter received the New York State Association for College Admissions Counseling Distinguished Service Award recognizing him as the college officer of the year and for his exceptional service to the profession. He has also been honored by the Higher Education Opportunity Program for distinguished service and the advancement of the HEOP mission which is to provide the opportunity of a college education to economically and educationally disadvantaged students. He was featured on the television show, "The Scholar", was interviewed for Jaye Pace's piece on the "First Generation," and has received countless other honors and accolades.

Peter has spent decades purposefully serving, supporting, guiding, and growing our youth so that they can achieve within a college environment and go on to realize their highest potential. He has a miraculous way of engaging people, especially students, at their level, often courageously using his own life stories to teach the realities of life, to instill accountability for one's actions, and to inspire individuals to be the best version of themselves. He has the spirit of an activist and yet he derives enormous satisfaction from making a difference in people's lives and their success. Peter is always about who he is helping. And tonight, we as Columbians get to honor his impact within our community.

Beyond Peter's tremendous professional achievements is a person who means so much to so many people. And in an effort to try to capture the magnitude of Peter's impact on those around him, I reached out to various individuals and asked them to describe Peter through words, phrases, and favorite anecdotes. The character who emerges from what people shared with me is someone truly astounding and I'd like to share a bit of what people had to say about Peter as a person tonight:

**Professionally Peter is described as:**

- A wise and innately generous mentor and educator
- Someone who works within the confines of the system to create systemic change
- The man who makes dreams come true
- The reason why I joined Columbia admissions
- A man of impact on thousands of lives students, educators, and professional communities...
- (and) The heart of the Columbia Admissions Office

**(When it comes to) His voice (it has been noted that he):**

- Tells magnificent stories with his booming theatrical speeches
- (and yet) Possesses one of the most calming speaking voices on the planet

**In support of students**

People note that they've heard others speak of Peter's impact. Most powerful are the stories told by current students and alumni that will highlight a comment or gesture... seemingly small but consistent actions that made them feel cared for and supported, and that they could succeed even in moments of great doubt or uncertainty.

He was very involved with student protesting – acting as a sounding board for ideas and discussion but also bringing food and coffee and making sure the students were okay. At the same time he also made sure students were maintaining good standing academically.

**His Clothes (people describe him as):**

- So well dressed
- Mr. Bow-Tie
- Sartorial splendor
- Bespoke; threads that make this dapper man
- (and an enthusiastic) That man can dress!
- (However) Behind the seer-sucker suits and pocket-squares is one of the realest, most humble, most down souls that ever lived

**(and in that vein) In the category of Mind and Spirit (Peter is described as):**

- A gentleman and a scholar
- Erudite, principled, benevolent, spirited, funny, inspiring
- Demonstrates honesty, dignity, and integrity
- (has a) Contagious laugh
- (and is) The voice of reason
- Someone to believe in and someone who believes in you
- A rock and a foundation
- An activist
- (and someone) Willing to take a chance on people truly worth taking a chance on
- (he has a) Love; of words and music, the literature of life and expression
- (and) He is Columbia blue

**(Some of his most notable) Phrases:**

- (Those in admissions will be familiar with) "We admit students, not stories"
- "[Person's name], you call those appropriate work shoes?!"
- And individual who sad that "Peter Johnson gave me some of the best professional and life advice I ever received after dealing with people in various capacities. "Tell them who you are, tell them what you want and don't apologize.""

- (And of course, his most famous) "Love you madly" – a phrase that Generations of MRCers and so many others hold dear

**In the category of Miscellaneous (Peter is described as a):**

- Cool cat
- (the) Bomb.com
- Mad dope yo
- (and) I on many occasions try to stand next to him just to seem cool by association

**(And) In the category of unshakeable love for him (he is described as):**

- My Black Panther boyfriend
- My work father
- I am so lucky to have him for a dear friend
- I love that man
- Peter is family

**Lastly, In the category of Jazz:**

Peter's love of Jazz and club hopping is well known. I will share one anecdote from Pam Mason that I thought wonderfully described both the complexity and beauty of Peter's character:

“Peter is jazz personified: I've been told that it's actually easier to play classical compositions than to improv jazz. You have to have discipline and natural talent to perform the masterpieces like a virtuoso, but to take those musical rules, know the rules backwards and forwards, swallow them down into your being and radiate them back out spontaneously, bending and breaking them (but with purpose) to capture the vibrant truth of the moment... that takes reckless courage, righteous brilliance, loving humility and unfettered genius. Peter lives his life like a breath-taking jazz adventure.”

So I think these words do well to demonstrate the impact Peter has had on this community and on so many students and colleagues beyond our campus. I look at examples like the Perspectives on Diversity Brunch where some of our most accomplished and esteemed alumni look to inspire the next generation of Columbians. But before they do, they always mention that they were and continued to be inspired by Peter Johnson. I think about our tremendous student

advisors and coaches who do incredible work around Morningside Heights; and if asked who assisted them in building the talent, personality, and camaraderie of their groups, they'd always give special thanks to Peter Johnson. I think of the tremendous movers and shakers who are leading higher education across our Ivy peers, sister schools, and so many institutions of higher learning across our country. And among their list of most important mentors and influential people in their career trajectory, there is one consistently named – Peter Johnson. I think of the landscape of higher education itself and those who are most committed to honest, nuanced, and thoughtful conversations about how we continue to admit, support, graduate, and stay connected to students and alumni of all diverse backgrounds. You would be hard pressed to discuss this topic without the mention of Peter Johnson. He's made an indelible mark within our community and on so many individuals around the world; past, present, and future.

So, if I were to try to say this in as few words as possible, I would say that I know that I am a better professional and educator because of Peter. I am a better Columbian and community member because of Peter. But most of all, I am a better person because of Peter. And I say that knowing that this sentiment rings true for everyone in this room and the thousands upon thousands of lives who have had the fortunate opportunity to cross paths with this incredible human being.

And through all of the stories, anecdotes, and moments that were shared with me, the most obvious and glaring sentiment shared by every single person was overwhelming sense of gratitude. That they, for whatever period of time, had the opportunity to be influence by Peter's radiating presence. Peter's generous and delightful spirit is something people carry with them and it is so wonderful to see that it has been and will continue to be magnified by all of those that he has touched. And I have to tell you, that is the kind of educator, Columbian, and person we should all aspire to be.

So, with that, please join me in welcoming to the stage, the 2016 Black Alumni Heritage Awardee, the legend and our beloved, Peter V. Johnson.

-Whitney Green