

Foreword

By

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It is an honor and a privilege for me to offer a few thoughts as a foreword to Carrie Johnson's *From the Pits to the Palace*. Carrie is an extraordinary woman who held an ordinary dream – to earn a decent living in order to provide for herself and her young sons. As a single mother, it became quite clear to Carrie that she would not be able to achieve this most basic of dreams with the meager wages of the low paying jobs which were available to her. She knew she had to start her own business. Carrie became what I call an entrepreneur by necessity. As wages have stagnated over the last thirty plus years, more and more women have found themselves launching their own businesses in order to make ends meet while also juggling the demands of raising children.

I first met Carrie when I was planning the opening of the Center for Women & Enterprise in 1995. I asked a local banker for names of a few successful women entrepreneurs who could serve on a panel during a grand opening ceremony for the center. In particular, I was looking for women who would serve as role models for the women the center sought to assist. We were located in Boston's inner city, and while we planned to be a resource for all women, we focused our programs and services on those who came from socially or economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

Carrie inspired many women that morning in October of 1995 when she told her story at the grand opening. Yet behind her confident veneer was a woman who was struggling to keep her own dream alive. Not long after we met, she came to me to ask for help. Sparkle Cleaning was on the brink and had fallen behind in paying payroll taxes to the IRS because they could not get sufficient bank credit to serve as working capital for their cleaning contracts. I suggested she join a facilitated peer group we were about to launch for existing women business owners – the Women Leaders Forum. With the advice and support of her peers, Carrie and Sparkle found a way to overcome the problem.

Over the years, I asked Carrie to sit on numerous panels so that she could share her story with more and more women from all backgrounds. She spoke at my alma mater, Harvard Business School. She presented to politicians. I asked her to join my Board of Directors. She appeared to have it all together.

What I didn't know until I read this book was how much of Carrie's life at home was a deep struggle – with alcohol, drugs and depression -- and how much of this struggle was a result of low self-esteem and an underlying sense that she was not worthy of good things in life. In my nine years at the Center for Women & Enterprise, I met hundreds of women with bright hopes to start and/or expand their own businesses. While they cut across the spectrum in age, race, and

social and economic status, the one constant was that all too many of them were plagued by these same feelings of inferiority and low self-esteem. In some regards, it is truly a silent epidemic among women. Sadly, I see it this epidemic growing exponentially among our adolescent girls. That is what makes Carrie's journey and Carrie's story so important to share as broadly as possible. Carrie's journey with Sparkle Cleaning was not only about providing for her family, it was about proving to herself that she was worthy. Knowing that we are worthy should be a starting point for all girls and women in our lives, not an ending point.

I can't say how many times women came into the center and sat with someone on staff for a few minutes to share their dreams, and broke out in tears because someone finally listened. So many of them had heard from others, "Lady, you don't have 2 nickels to rub together—how on earth do you think you could run your own business?"

While we took great care not to fuel false hopes at the center, we always listened and asked the tough questions. We provided the tools for our clients to do their own research, answer those tough questions and choose whether or how to move forward with their businesses. And as each woman's journey through business ownership continued, we continued to believe at the same time that we continued to ask the tough questions.

In closing, I would like to share what I believe are some of the most important lessons we can learn from Carrie and the Sparkle Cleaning story:

- Believe in yourself. We are all born with skills and talents. Find them, take advantage of them. But don't forget to explore your weaknesses. Look them in the mirror, shore them up and work hard.
- Surround yourself with people who believe in you. At the same time, ask people you trust to tell you the truth about your strengths and weaknesses and tell them not to hold any punches. You need both cheerleaders and honest critics to help you along the way.
- If someone doesn't believe in you or your dream, try not to take it personally. Ask him or her for specifics and try to glean some helpful nugget from what he or she has to say.
- Ask for help. Ask early and ask often. Women especially struggle with this. We are so good at helping others but afraid to do it ourselves.
- All entrepreneurs need guidance – not just to get started, but all along the way. Starting a business is the easy part. Making it successful is the real challenge. Find every available resource before you fall into trouble.
- Measure twice and cut once. Planning is critical. Have a financial forecast for your business with both an expected and worst case scenario. Make sure you have plans for what you will do with respect to finances in a worst case scenario.

Carrie Johnson has been an inspiration to me and so many other women. I hope her story will help you ride out the peaks and valleys as you pursue your dreams.