

MICHAEL A. FOLEY/VELOCITY ASSOC.

The real Donna James

Everything appears to come so easy for the Nationwide executive and Coca-Cola board member. Looks can be deceiving.

BY ALICE
HOHL

It seems as if Donna James has it all. She's a high-level Nationwide executive who appeared recently on the cover of the national magazine *Black Enterprise*, which featured successful African-American corporate leaders. James lives with her husband, prominent lawyer Larry James, at an exclusive downtown address, and they move easily in the same circles with well-known Columbus politicians, civic types and business people. She's smart, diplomatic and approachable. One other thing: She's gorgeous. Much to her embarrassment, a few years ago Donna was voted Sexiest Woman in the City by readers of *The Other Paper*.

Life got even better in July when Coca-Cola announced James was its newest board member. It's a sweet gig—not only more national exposure, but also the potential to earn \$90,000 a year or more for part-time work. Of Coke products, she says, "I am a loyal customer." Pause. "Now." Her serious expression dissolves into peals of laughter.

It's easy to laugh when you're on top of the world. But things haven't always gone so smoothly. Thirty-two years ago, before the marriage, the career and the accolades,

Donna James on the balcony of her Miranova home.

she was a teenager sitting in a doctor's office, trying to absorb the news that would change her life.

In high school, Donna Scott (her name at the time) was a star track athlete and a good student in Greensboro, North Carolina, with plans to attend college. But she was young and thought she was in love. Infatuation led to "a mistake," according to James, which led her to the doctor's office. She was alone when she heard the earth-shattering words: You're pregnant. Becoming a mother in high school is not usually considered the path to a charmed life.

Just as she is about almost everything, James is matter-of-fact now when recalling that moment. "I knew it would humiliate my mom and my family," she says. "And I was disappointed in myself." Not knowing how her parents would react, she didn't tell them until she was four months along. Christopher Michael Scott was born Dec. 15, 1973, halfway through her junior year. Despite her fears, her family worked together so she could continue her educa-

tion. Little Christopher would still be sleeping when she left for school in the morning. Her mother looked after him until her shift at the textile manufacturing plant started at 3 pm each day, when she would drop him off with James's grandmother. Meanwhile, James would finish classes and go straight to her waitressing job. When she finished at 11 pm, she would pick up her son, put him to bed and then do her homework.

James graduated from high school in 1975 with good grades in difficult classes. For most teen moms, it would have been enough to make it that far. She wanted more, though.

James, 48, is president of Nationwide Strategic Investments, a division of the insurance and financial services giant. She oversees a venture capital fund and several affiliated businesses. Besides Coca-Cola, she is a board member for Limited Brands and served a stint on the national United Way board.

Not a lot of African-American women have offices on the executive floor of *Fortune* 100 companies. "There's a pride and a disappointment in that," she says. "You question, 'Why are you the first? Why hasn't this been done before?' And then you pray and push to make sure you're not the last."

James doesn't shy away from talking about race, and she acknowledges she probably has received preferential treatment because she's a minority. "If people single me out and they are more interested because I'm African-American and a wom-

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an, it doesn't bother me. I wish more people would do that, because there would be more people of color and women in positions like mine."

And she doesn't mince words about whether she was qualified to hold any position she has filled. "If someone were hiring me as a token, that perception wouldn't exist for very long."

Dimon McFerson, retired CEO of Nationwide, handpicked James to be his as-



James with her son, Christopher Scott, at her Nationwide office. As a single mom, James would bring Christopher with her to work on Saturdays.

sistant, bringing her into the inner circle of the company. Later she was promoted to chief administrative officer, overseeing human resources and corporate communications. "She had what I consider to be outstanding interpersonal skills—people skills. She blended in beautifully into every situation, yet she was also so very smart and insightful," McFerson says.

Her rise began with a pragmatic decision. Although she dreamed of becoming a psychologist, she knew she needed a steady income in the short-term to give her son a decent life. So she pursued a career that wasn't necessarily her passion—accounting. Having a high school algebra teacher she admired didn't hurt. "She made it seem easy," she says. "It's a problem, you solve it and there's usually one answer."

She enrolled at North Carolina A&T State University, a historically black college close to home in Greensboro, and made her mark. Quiester Craig, dean of the university's business school, says, "It didn't take long to recognize she had no use for mediocrity." He says she is "exhibit A in our recruitment of students." James worked her way through college, continuing to lean on her family to care for Christopher.

James and her son came to Columbus for her first job in accounting, far from family and friends. The inevitable overtime of a CPA's schedule competed with the demands of single motherhood. She says the memories of bringing her young son with her to work on Saturdays now make her a more understanding boss. After his mom

joined Nationwide in 1981, Christopher, who turns 32 this month, says as the years went by, the elevator ride to her office grew longer and the floor numbers climbed higher. For a while, he had no idea what she did for a living. When his friends asked, he just said, "She works at Nationwide."

Women, especially black women, look to James for advice on making it big in the corporate world. She embraces the role, speaking to large groups and individuals. In the most unusual case, being a mentor meant taking in a homeless woman and her young daughter. She tells the story nonchalantly, as if there is nothing remarkable about inviting strangers to live in her house for a couple of weeks.

The young woman, Michele Beaty, was in the audience when James gave a presentation to teen moms 10 years ago at Whetstone High School. She gave her phone number to the girls in case they needed advice. At the time, Beaty faced a choice between moving yet again with her transient mother or finishing school, so she phoned James for help. James took in Beaty and her daughter before finding them a safe place to stay. Beaty says James has been a steadfast, levelheaded influence in her life ever since, even when Beaty says she "just kind of snapped" after her daughter was severely burned in 1997 while in the care of a baby-sitter. Beaty went after the woman with a knife. "I cut her," she says. "The first person I called after it happened was Donna. She said, 'OK, you know you're going to jail, so here's what you're going to do.'"

Beaty, who served time in prison for

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the stabbing, is now a proud homeowner working full time at a collections agency and cleaning houses for her start-up business. "I think Donna's the first successful teenage mom I've ever seen in my life and she was black, too, and I was like, 'Wow, does that ever really happen to us?' There's nothing I can reward her with for giving me a life outside of destruction and despair; I just make it a point to continue on my path to success so she can continue to be proud of me."

James's generosity extends to her own family and her husband's. Donna and Larry have underwritten a small business venture by her brother-in-law, provided college educations for extended family and paid for family reunions and cultural experiences for nieces and nephews. "If you can't share it, what's the sense of killing yourself?" Larry James says.

Her son now is married with children and also an accountant (at Columbus State).

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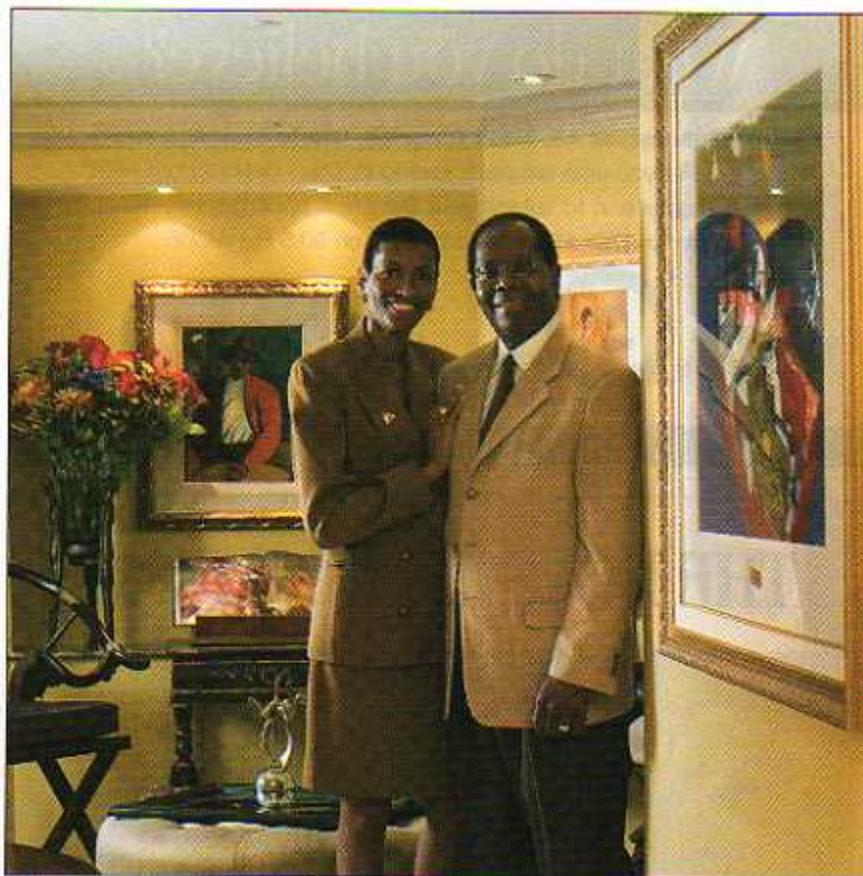
Before his marriage, he and another woman had a child together—James's first grandchild. James is currently paying for the former girlfriend's college education. The woman is a wonderful mother, she says, and deserves a chance to get her degree.

James "really changed the trajectory of that young woman's life," says a friend, Yvette McGee Brown, president of the Center for Child and Family Advocacy at Children's Hospital. "That to me really tells me who she is."

Donna and Larry James met at a fundraiser for the King Arts Complex in 1987. Donna was a volunteer model in the fashion show and Larry escorted her down a set of stairs. They continued to cross paths at the Nationwide building in which the law office Larry worked for was renting space. They dated for just six months before marrying in 1989.

Growing up, Larry James had battled his own desperate circumstances, moving between his grandparents' sharecroppers' quarters in Alabama and his unemployed mother's overcrowded house near Cleveland. He worked his way through college and law school to become an influential Columbus attorney, serving as the public safety director under Mayor Dana Rinehart in the 1980s. He is now a well-connected partner at Crabbe, Brown & James with high-profile clients. Donna and Larry sponsor many exhibits at the King Arts Complex, where he is president of the board.

Politically savvy, with friends in both parties, Larry is a registered Republican. Donna, meanwhile, is socially liberal—pro-choice and supportive of gay rights. "We do disagree on certain candidates and certain ideologies, but we really respect each other's opinion," Larry says. The couple's ability to talk about issues from opposite ends of the political spectrum creates a safe space for others. "Where we really have a great time is when we have dinners or parties at our house," Donna says. Guests have included Columbus school board president Stephanie Hightower, State Rep. Joyce Beatty, *Dispatch* associate publisher Mike Curtin and United Way of America board president Johnnetta B. Cole. "Sometimes



At home: James and her husband, attorney Larry James, with a sampling of their impressive art collection.



I remember once, while my husband and son were still asleep, my daughter and I slipped out of our cottage into the quiet of the morning, past white picket fences, down sandy paths to the beach. With the sun following in our footsteps, we walked and talked for hours. The beach seemed endless. We could have gone on forever. At that very moment, there wasn't a more perfect place in the world.

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they're fun and easy," Donna says, "and sometimes they're tense."

Larry and Donna live in Miranova, the downtown high-rise that overlooks the Scioto River and the skyline. In Donna's study, she points out a knitting project she has begun. Judging by the soft yarn holding a few long rows of color together, it appears to be the start of a scarf. James glances at the ribbon of fabric and laughs. "It's a throw," she says. "Call me in five years and I'll let you know how it turned out."

Other projects, though, engage her completely, such as designing their home. James says the first time she met with an architect, he arrived with his collection of pencils and rulers and paper. James started to ask so many questions and make so many suggestions, he finally pushed the pencils and paper to her. "He said, 'Here, why don't you take this and call me back.' I had the most fun!" she says, laughing.

Their condo is a showpiece filled with works by local and international artists, including acclaimed Columbus artist Aminah Robinson. Family photos rest alongside African sculptures. Some of the couple's impressive collection has been loaned to art museums, including five pieces displayed at the King Arts Complex this fall.

The contrast between this high-rise address and Larry's childhood home couldn't be starker, but old habits die hard. The art in the penthouse is highlighted by carefully placed lighting, but Donna says her frugal husband routinely turns off the switches. Sometimes, she says, he will put out the lights in a room where she is reading. Not long after she makes that comment, Larry arrives home from work, sticks his head into the living room and then flicks off the hall light.

Christopher Scott says when he was in middle school his class went on a field trip to a halfway house. Students were introduced to residents and told that many of them were teen mothers, or the children of teen moms. They talked about abortions and babies being placed for adoption. When he came home from school, he asked his mom about when she learned she was pregnant.

"I'll never forget the conversation," Scott says. "I thanked her for not getting an abortion. She said there was never a question in her mind."

During their talk, James told her son it was mature of him to thank her for her decision.

Years later he learned that after his mom left the room, she cried a little. ■

Alice Hohl is an associate editor for Columbus Monthly.