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## Alumnus Comfortable as a Difference Maker

From technology success to movies, Stephen Johnston produces

JANUARY 1, 2019 BY ANNIE RHOADES

**FaTvLiErCtSMPrSt**



The Johnston family at Taylor Grocery. University of Mississippi alumnus Stephen Johnston (BBA 93) is an operating partner with Forté Ventures and has had success in the areas of technology and movies.

OXFORD, Miss. — As the camera came into focus on the set of the faith-based movie “Same Kind of Different as Me,” **University of Mississippi** alumnus Stephen Johnston, operating partner with **Forté Ventures**, stepped into the role of Hollywood movie producer with an ease that came from months of prayerful consideration.

“I truly believe that God wanted us involved, and He had a plan for the movie and that the movie would change lives and really make a difference in this world,” Johnston said. “We felt very blessed because doors were opening, and things were happening that were atypical to your normal film process.

“If you had asked me in 2014 what I was going to be doing next in my life, I had no idea, but I can tell you being a movie producer was not on the list.”

A Jackson native, Johnston graduated from Forest Hill High School with plans to enroll at Rhodes College in Memphis on a full scholarship to be the school’s quarterback. However, a chance meeting with UM Chancellor Gerald Turner in March 1989 quickly changed his plans.

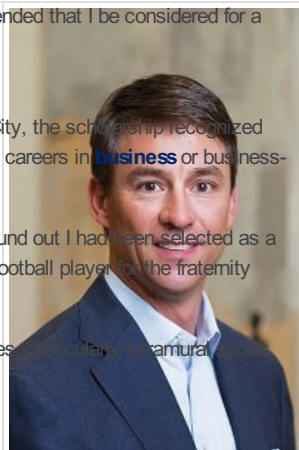
“Dr. Turner was the guest speaker for the groundbreaking of our (new) school, and as student body president, I was his chaperone to show him around the school,” Johnston recalled. “We started talking, and he asked if I had looked at going to Ole Miss.

“I told him I didn’t have a scholarship with Ole Miss, so he recommended that I be considered for a Hearin-Hess Scholarship, which was at the time a brand-new business scholarship.”

Created by Robert Hearin of Jackson and Leon Hess of New York City, the scholarship recognized students with outstanding academic records who planned to pursue careers in **business** or business-related fields. It ranked among the nation’s top business awards.

“It was essentially a full ride to Ole Miss for four years, so when I found out I had been selected as a recipient, I gave up college football and became a professional flag football player for the fraternity league instead.”

While at Ole Miss, Johnston was heavily involved in campus activities, including intramural sports, serving as the intramural chair for Sigma Chi Fraternity. He was elected Associated Student Body president his senior year. But for him, it was the relationships he formed that left a lasting impact.



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OXFORD, Miss. — Eleven University of Mississippi students spent their winter break learning about the people who work behind the scenes of the American government in Washington, D.C. Lead by Jonathan Klingler, assistant professor of political science, the students of Pol 391: Applied Politics met not with candidates, but with the people who make candidates’

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OXFORD, Miss. — Stephanie Jennings Teague, of Chicago, sees her commitment of \$100,000 to the Patterson School of Accountancy’s new building at the University of Mississippi as a means of saying “thank you.” “It is a way to show a small token of my appreciation to Ole Miss, the faculty and staff, and the accounting

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## Stephen Johnston

"I was very intentional about getting to know as many people as I could, so I had relationships with people from all walks of life while I was at Ole Miss," Johnston said. "Not only with students, but also with faculty members and administrators."

"When I think about people like Sparky Reardon, Gerald Turner, Dr. Khayat, who really impacted my life and encouraged me and helped me to become the best person I could be during that time of growth and mental development – those are my greatest memories."

### A Smart Move

After graduating from Ole Miss in 1993, Johnston accepted a position as an investment banker with First Union in Charlotte, North Carolina. Seven years into his career, he took a leap of faith and moved back home to Jackson to be part of the then-small startup tech company SmartSynch.

"No one's ever accused me of being risk-averse," Johnston said with a laugh. "I left a great-paying job to help start this company in a 1,200-square-foot house across the street from a Mexican restaurant, but I did it because I thought it would be fun and exciting to help build the business from the ground up."

"I didn't know anything about technology, so I learned on the job and was able to build a very successful company."

When Johnston delved into the business, he never thought he would be the company's CEO four years later and develop it into a company with 125 employees and offices in India and San Jose, California.

"We had 250 utility clients throughout the U.S. and were viewed as one of the most innovative technology companies in the world," he said. "One of the products we created was named the No. 3 product innovation in 2010."

"I really enjoyed innovation and the diversity of working in a company where everything is new all the time. I found that I really had a passion for helping companies grow and particularly creating value from nothing."

The company was sold in 2012, leaving Johnston searching for his next project. It was during this time, through an almost unbelievable set of circumstances, that the opportunity to be involved in the film came about.

"My wife, Melissa, gave me the (New York Times best-seller) book 'Same Kind of Different as Me' around 2010, a couple of years before SmartSynch sold, and it was one of my favorite books I've ever read," he said. "It was very moving and inspiring and reminded me a lot of my situation growing up in terms of relating to people of all different types."

He bought a couple of extra copies of the book and placed one on his desk. An employee, UM alumnus Darren Raybourn, saw it, and the two began a conversation about how it was their favorite book and what it meant to each of them.

### Fateful Meeting

"Several months later, (Raybourn) ends up flying on an airplane and happens to sit next to the producer that is helping the author (Ron Hall) turn the book into a movie," Johnston said.

After an email introduction with the producer, Darren Moorman, Johnston eventually met Hall and decided that he would get involved in the journey to help turn the book into a movie.

"My wife and I were scouting locations for the film in Mississippi and learned that Stephen was a big fan of our book and would possibly be interested in investing," Hall said. "We met with Stephen and a few other potential investors."

"He took us to the governor's office, where we met with (Gov. Phil Bryant) and the head of the Mississippi Arts Council, who told us about the Mississippi tax rebate incentive for filmmakers that want to come to Mississippi and shoot films."

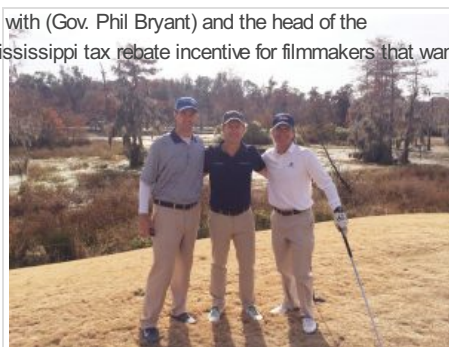
"They made us a very good offer, and Stephen said he could raise the balance of our shooting budget from Mississippi investors. Basically, within 24 hours or so after meeting him, we had a handshake deal and moved forward."

Johnston knew the movie business was a risky industry for investors and was initially reticent to take on the role of lead investor to raise capital to make the film.

"I had been praying about what was going to come next in my life, and I felt like God was saying, 'I want you to get involved in this project,'" he said. "I felt called to get involved even though I knew nothing about what they were doing."

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Stephen Johnston (left), actor Greg Kinnear (Ron Hall) and director of photography Don Burgess spend a day off from shooting at the Country Club of Jackson.

His faith and hard work quickly paid off.

"Within three months, we had raised \$15 million to make the movie," he said. "We started principal photography on Oct. 27, 2014, and wrapped the movie on Dec. 10, 2014, so the whole process was nine months from beginning to end, which is incredible. That never happens in the film business."

### **Made in Mississippi**

Originally signed on as a producer and lead investor, Johnston thought he would spend his time on the sidelines observing. But as the film process started, he found himself in a much more active role.

"If I was going to be involved in the movie, it had to be filmed in Mississippi," he said. "As we began selecting locations (in the Jackson area), I learned that I had relationships with people that had places where we wanted to film, so I found myself more involved in the day-to-day operations of the movie.

"My wife and I, in particular, were there to help make Mississippi an attractive place to be. We viewed our role initially as a hospitality role and were here to serve the people coming from all over the country to film this movie."



**Melissa Johnston, actor Djimon Hounsou (Denver Moore) and Stephen Johnston at the wrap party for 'Same Kind of Different as Me.'**

For Johnston and everyone involved with the film, it was important that the message of the movie be brought to life and have a positive impact on both the city and its residents.

"We ended up filming scenes at this community center on Farish Street, and one of the things that was really important to us was to not just shoot in this community center but leave it in a better place than how we found it," he said. "We ended up investing over \$100,000 to improve the interior and exterior of the building, including a new kitchen that would allow them to better serve the people in that community. All of that happened after the movie wrapped.

"Making a difference in a community was an awesome experience."

Hall said he couldn't have selected a better investor and partner in the film process, and Johnston ultimately became a close friend.

"Stephen is a remarkable, very straightforward and personable young man," Hall said. "You could not have asked for a better partner – one that was fully engaged and fully committed and, more important than any of that, fully trustworthy.

"He did everything he said he would do on time and was always available."

After filming wrapped, Johnston took on the role of marketer and promoter, speaking to various groups and organizations about the impact of the film in hopes of garnering interest and momentum.

"I did a lot of speaking at different places about the film, and that was fun," he said. "We went to the Hollywood premiere event at the Fox Theater in Los Angeles, which was a fantastic experience.

"But my fondest memories of the film are the relationships that we were able to develop with the cast and crew and the people associated with the movie. I can't imagine my life without knowing all of those people today, because they became such an important part of our lives."

### **Investing in the Future**

A member of the Ole Miss Alumni Association Executive Committee, Johnston has worn many hats throughout his career, including venture capitalist, CEO and film producer, but it's the role of entrepreneur that befits him best.

"During that time period of working on the film, I started an advisory business, SDJ Investment Co. LLC, where I could leverage some of my core skills and do business development and strategic advisory work," he said. "I'm an entrepreneur and love building and creating things."

In May, Johnston began a new chapter, accepting the position of operating partner with Forté Ventures, a venture capital firm focused on making equity investments in early-stage, high-growth technology companies across North America.

"Stephen and I met in 2004, when I was a partner with Siemens Venture Capital, and we invested \$5 million into his company, SmartSynch," said Tom Hawkins, founder and managing partner of Forté Ventures.

"(He) is a successful entrepreneur with strong

interpersonal skills and relevant business connections in the venture capital ecosystem as well as the energy technology market. He is also a self-starter with a strong work ethic, so when you combine all of this together (along with the amazing support of his wife, Melissa, and their four children), you have a very good recipe for success."

Johnston is most grateful for the firm foundation his parents provided that gave him the confidence he's needed to take risks and persevere.

"I had the best parents in the world," he said.

"We had no money growing up, but I had a father who never told me what to do but always encouraged me to be the best I could be. He was my mentor and the person that always supported me in a very positive way.

"My mother taught me the importance of serving others and helping those in need and encouraged me to do whatever I wanted to do in life. I want to keep looking for opportunities to make a difference in the world."

*This story was reprinted with permission from the Ole Miss Alumni Review. The Alumni Review is published quarterly for members of the [Ole Miss Alumni Association](#). Join or renew your membership with the Alumni Association today, and don't miss a single issue.*



Stephen Johnston and his wife, Melissa, with their children Bennett, Charlie, Isabelle and Mary Hunter at the 2016 Sugar Bowl



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