

The MGM Grand Detroit senior vice president talks life, work, growing up in Detroit and the joys of motherhood.

## PARIS GILES

She's a woman in a high-powered executive position, but when Juliette Okotie-Eboh, Ph.D., walks into Lumen Detroit, it's clear that she doesn't take herself too seriously. Dressed casually but interestingly in a colorful tee, cargo pants and a plum-colored embroidered jacket, MGM Grand Detroit's senior vice president eagerly catches up with her old publicist friend and jokes with our photographer, Lauren, imploring her to not zoom in too close. But when we get down to business, she's got plenty to say, and why wouldn't she? Okotie-Eboh holds a doctorate in city/urban, community and regional planning, has a 30-plus-year career behind her and recently penned a book – 10 Things I Know: Secrets to Getting the Most out of Life. As we sit amongst the glass and funky light fixtures in the modern Beacon Park eatery beloved for its crab cakes, she talks growing up in Detroit, her extensive travels and her advice for young mothers.

What's your passion outside of work?

Music. I love, love, love the arts, but, in particular, jazz music. I like all genres of music. My daughter is a music fanatic, too. In fact, we just went to the Stevie Wonder concert at Caesars Windsor ... So, if it's music around, I'm going to hear it.

I know you're an avid traveler. What's your favorite place?

I didn't do much this year, but the last big trip my daughter and I took was to Spain last year at Thanksgiving. We went to, I think, six or seven cities in nine days, and it was great. In 2017, I went on a Safari in Tanzania and Kenya. In fact, I've got this Tanzanite bracelet from there (shows a beautiful cuff of silver and deep blue gems). That was life altering, I've got to do that again.

Are you one to try new foods when you travel?

I lived in Africa for a little over two years and traveled back and forth, and many of the foods I loved and some of them I looked at and said, 'I don't think so.' But I like new food.

What's your splurge meal?

My splurge meal is one that I cook, and I do some wicked chicken and dumplings. And the weather is about get to chicken and dumplings. So, that's my favorite, that and short ribs.

How do you think your travels have shaped you?

I think it's really important for people of African descent, in particular, to travel because it gets you out of the box of being confined to the culture and customs of the United States. And you get more of a feeling and a reality of being a citizen of the world, and that's what I love about it. It opens your horizons, it causes you to see the similarities between you and other people even when you don't speak the same languages. And it gives you a reason to live and to dream; it helps you work on your vision in life.

Do you find that people have misconceptions about Detroit when you travel to other places?

My daughter and I were in Switzerland a few years ago. There was this bar where the skiers would come, and we sit down and there's Anita Baker playing on a boom box, and so my daughter and I look at each other and say, 'Wow, we're in Switzerland, and there's Anita Baker playing.' The bar person was a woman, but she had 'Detroit' tattooed on her arms in old English. She didn't speak English and she had never been outside of Switzerland. We were able to get someone there to kind of interpret for us. We told her we were from Detroit, and she said, 'Oh, Detroit, Detroit. Electronica.' She was enamored with Detroit and the Detroit music scene. When I've traveled, I've never gotten what you would call a negative question. It was always positive questions and queries – whether I was in Europe or Africa or wherever I was – about Detroit and the people, and of course, people love the music. The only time I've ever gotten, in my travels, strange questions about Detroit is when I've traveled the continental United States. People have their own stereotypes.



How has growing up in Detroit prepared you for your career?

I always say that I learned everything about corporate life and my professional journey on the back of my father's vegetable truck. I learned about business, I learned about having a good work ethic, I learned about customer service, I learned about Detroit neighborhoods. I learned so much growing up, and that preparation from working with my dad had a real impact that stays with me now. Detroit when I was coming of age was a wonderful place; it still is but we had so many exciting things going on because Detroit had benefited so (much) from the manufacturing boom. So, I saw the heyday of Detroit. That can-do spirit in Detroit has always carried me forward.

From a woman's viewpoint, how would you say the landscape of corporate America has changed?

When you look nationally, women had real gains in workforce participation starting in the 1970s up through 1994, and then from there we've kind of flatlined. I think that the opportunities for women are there, and they can't be denied. Look at how many women have entered into fields and vocations that had been male domains, and that's something I'm really excited about. Young women don't think, 'Oh, that's a man's job' or they don't mind being groundbreakers as most women have been through the ages. That said, in the corporate life, there are still many initiatives to get more women on corporate boards because that's where some important decisions are made, to join the real upper ranks of management, the executive teams.

As a black woman, has racism or sexism been a bigger factor in your career?

It's a barrier, so you take your pick. I think in my career – in academic preparation as well – you never really know what column to put it in. Is it racism? Is it sexism? Well, they're both bad, so it really doesn't make that much difference. What you have to do, is take stock in it, determine that it's somebody else's problem not mine, and I'm going to move forward. Everybody's got something. Yeah, it's a double designation as a female and as an African-American woman, a black woman, but I'm happy to wear both badges. They're badges of honor and they're a mark of courage. They're a symbol of enlightenment; I wouldn't want to be anything else.

You're a mother. Is there such a thing as work-life balance?

No. You just work, and if you have a family, a partner, you take into account the needs of others, and that's just kind of what it is. I raised my daughter divorced, so it was just she and I from the time she was a baby, and I just made it happen. My suggestion is find balance wherever you can. When you're raising a small child there are very few times when you can sit down and enjoy a meal because something's going on, the baby needs something. You can't really enjoy a meal, so what was my best meal of the day? Lunch. I'd always have a great lunch everyday when I was working. Another thing I did was to make my surroundings at work as balanced and as comfortable as possible. Even right now, in my office, I have music, music, music. I come in listening to music. I put things on the wall that are comfortable or uplifting to me, so I strive very much to seek balance wherever I am, and I think people make too big of a deal in some ways about work-life balance. Balance is just where you take it.

What's one piece of advice that you would give to a young, professional mother?

My thought on that is this: if you can find a partner to share your life with, you're going to be well ahead of the game – if it's a good partnership – emotionally, financially, socially, professionally because you have a partner to balance your ideas, to give you advice, you'll have some financial stability so you can make moves that you otherwise might not be able to make. I love many young couples that I see, they share the responsibilities very much for child rearing. They don't have these assigned, fixed roles that a lot of people used to have. So many times, you put off looking and making those relationships work in your life in pursuit of career or in pursuit of educational attainment, and I think all those are wonderful, but I think that's an important component – finding a good partner. Now, single professional mothers, all I can say is bless you, my child, because it's a lot of work. I always give my daughter credit for making me a better person and making me a lot more ambitious, I think, than I was. Because when you have to be responsible for another person, you put things quickly in priority and you don't waste time on things that don't matter or things you can't change. You get a laser focus on yourself, your career and more than anything else, what is going to happen to my offspring, and that spills over into other areas of your life. Being a mother, that was the last peg in my maturation process.



What's something that us millennials are doing wrong?

I don't think you're doing anything wrong. People always have something to say. When I was that age, if you could hear some of the things I was up to. Life was a little different. We didn't have cell phones, we didn't have cameras, we didn't have police everywhere. I think that millennials are doing fine. I think you have more of a wide-eyed enthusiasm toward life. I don't think you feel the constraints that previous generations in your age group had felt. I think that you are experiencing a lot more freedom to choose your lifestyles – where and how and when you want to live. Every generation has its own style and makes its mark, and I just try to make young friends so you can keep me up-to-date about what's going on.

What are you most proud of?

My daughter.

What's one mistake you've made – professionally or otherwise?

I don't know. I can't think of any mistakes I've made, I don't ever think of life like that because I never look backwards. You do things and you have to live with them. I've probably had my share of missteps, but to quote one, I don't know. I'm always okay wherever I am. You know you could ruminate forever. There's always missed opportunities and different things but there's been a lot of luck and good things that've happened – serendipity.

What's something that's left on your bucket list?

I've got too many places to travel to. So, I've got so many things on my bucket list. I want to go to jazz festivals all over the world, and I would love to take at least six big trips a year. So, I could see myself on the road a lot. And on my bucket list, too – I haven't pegged any time for retirement – I enjoyed living out of the country and sometimes I wonder if that's how I would close my life out. I think that would be fun.

Lumen Detroit, on the corner of Grand River and Cass avenues is open for dinner beginning at 3 p.m. Tuesday-Sunday. New this month, they offer lunch Friday-Sunday from 11:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. During winter months, either meal can be enjoyed inside a cozy and festively decorated igloo. 1903 Grand River Ave., 313-626-5005. [lumendetroit.com](http://lumendetroit.com).

Paris Giles is BLAC Detroit's associate editor.

