

# Black Entertainment Television - Media Giraffe Profile

## Black Entertainment Television

Debra Lee - Chairman & Chief Operating Executive

"You get to a point in your life where you have to really make decisions for yourself and you have to figure out what you really want to do. I took a step back and said "this is something that I want to do, even though I don't know whether it will be successful."

*Debra Lee, at the Brown Entrepreneurship Program's 10th Annual Forum February 2007*

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## About

Debra Lee grew up in a racially segregated hometown of Greensboro, N.C. in the 1960s. The former sixth-grade class president said she "developed a firm sense of self" growing up in a segregated but "proud" middle-class black community. (from the Brown Entrepreneurship Programs 10th Annual Forum February 2007).

She graduated from Brown University in 1976 with a bachelor's degree in political science with an emphasis in Asian politics (she studied abroad in Southeast Asia her junior year). She earned her jurist doctorate at Harvard Law School, while simultaneously earning a master's degree in public policy from Harvards John F. Kennedy School of Government in 1980.

From August 1980 to September 1981, Lee served as law clerk to the late Honorable Barrington Parker of the United States District Court for the District of Columbia. Lee moved on to the Washington law firm Steptoe & Johnson, where she worked on the Black Entertainment Television (BET) account, an entertainment and media company targeting African Americans. She left to join the cable network as its first full-time in-house lawyer in 1986.

During her tenure at BET before her appointment as chairman and CEO of the company, she has played some of the most pivotal roles in the company's history in addition to being its lawyer, including executive vice president of BET's legal affairs department, corporate secretary, president and publisher of BET's publishing division, which publishes *Emerge*, *BET Weekend* and *Heart & Soul* magazines. Lee has also served as the network's executive vice president of strategic business development. In 1996, she was appointed president and chief operating officer of the company.

On June 2, 2005, BET founder and CEO Robert L. Johnson formally announced the appointment of Lee as his successor as the company's CEO. When Johnson retired in 2006, Lee also assumed the title of Chairman of the company.

"I could not have chosen a better chief executive and outstanding leader to succeed me at BET than Debra Lee, and that's what makes this announcement so important to me and positive for BET's future," said Johnson. "Few executives in this industry have exhibited the ability to manage a unique growth company and shown the commitment to building a successful brand the way Debra has in her nineteen years at BET. She mastered the cable programming industry long ago, and has a strong executive team in place to support her as she leads BET within the Viacom family."

"I am convinced that BET's legacy is in great hands with Debra at the helm," Johnson concluded.

"When you've dedicated yourself to a mission like I have since coming to BET, it's truly gratifying when leaders the caliber of Bob Johnson and Tom Freston express without hesitation their utmost confidence in your ability," said Lee. "The positive momentum and tremendous optimism for BET's future are the dividends of Bob's leadership over these twenty-five years and the strength of our executive team. I look forward to working with Tom on the continued development of BET as a powerful, successful enterprise for Viacom and its shareholders"(taken from a June 2005 BlackPressUSA.com article).

Lee has shown over her career a propensity to multi-task, such as overseeing the entire construction of BET's corporate headquarters in northeast Washington, D.C., while simultaneously running BET's public division, acting as BET general counsel, and facing the birth of her first child. The sprawling BET campus is now an economic development magnet and symbol of access in an area of the city that had previously been overlooked by both government and commerce.

As a network, BET was the first of its kind in television history. Since its founding in 1980, BET, according to its , has successfully pioneered an entire genre of music, entertainment, news, sports and public affairs programming for African-Americans. The majority of that success has come under the leadership and direction of Lee.

At a time when most cable and broadcast networks are seeing virtually zero growth, Lee has delivered six consecutive seasons of ratings and audience growth. She has also led the network's evolution into original movies, documentaries, concert specials, news, late-night talk shows and public affairs coverage. BET claims to represent the "total package" for the African-American audience, now reaching more than 100 million households through various media outlets in the United States, Canada and the Caribbean. Lee has also said that BET is pursuing fresh sources of revenue, for example making the network's content available through iTunes and Verizon VCast.

BET is also a dominant consumer brand in the urban marketplace with a diverse group of other branded businesses: BET.com, the number one Internet portal for African Americans; BET Digital Networks " BET Jazz, BET Gospel and BET Hip Hop " attractive alternatives for cutting-edge entertainment tastes; BET Event Productions, specializing in a full range of event production services, including event management, venue selection, talent recruitment, sound, lighting and stage production; and BET Books, the nation's leading publisher of African-American themed romance novels under the Arabesque imprint, which also publishes compelling fiction under the Sepia imprint and inspirational fiction and nonfiction under the New Spirit imprint.

Lee's sphere of influence also extends well beyond BET, where she is regarded as one of the country's top female executives in the realm of Fortune 500 companies. She serves on the corporate board of directors of global business icons Marriott International and Eastman Kodak Company, and regionally for Washington

Gas & Light Company. Her business acumen and strategic approach to management make Lee a popular speaker and lecturer on a range of business topics.

Affiliated with a number of professional and civic organizations, Lee is also a member of the national board of directors for the National Cable & Telecommunications Association (NCTA), Cable & Telecommunications Association for Marketing (CTAM), Alvin Ailey Dance Theater, Girls Incorporated, National Symphony Orchestra, Telecommunications Development Fund, Center for Communication, the Kennedy Centers Community & Friends Board, and the National Womens Law Center. She is also a Trustee Emeritus for Brown University.

Lee has been no stranger to industry awards and accolades as evidence by her receiving the 2003 Distinguished Vanguard Award for Leadership from the NCTA, a first for an African-American female executive; 2003 Positively Visionary Award from Cable Positive; 2003 Quasar Award from the National Association of Minorities in Communications; 2001 Woman of the Year Award from Women in Cable and Telecommunications; the Wonder Woman Award from Cablevision magazine; the 2000 Tower of Power Trumpet Away from Turner Broadcasting System; the Silver Star Award from American Women in Radio and Television; the Par Excellence Award from Dollars and \$ense Magazine, and frequent recognition among the industry's Hundred Heavy Hitters by Cable Fax magazine. Outside the cable industry, Lee has also received special recognition, including the 2005 Madame C. J. Walker Award from Ebony magazine for best exemplifying the entrepreneurial spirit of the pioneering black businesswoman.

Lee, and her husband Randall Coleman, reside in Washington, D.C. with their two children.

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"I fundamentally believe that you either are or are not an entrepreneur. I really don't think you can aspire to be an entrepreneur."

*Debra Lee, at the Brown Entrepreneurship Programs 10th Annual Forum February 2007*

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Debra Lee, in a December 2006 Spirit Interview:

"Bob Johnson asked me to come over to his company in 1986 from the corporate law firm where I'd been for five years. I stayed with BET because it was interesting work. At a growing company, you're involved in many aspects of the business, like overseeing the construction of our first studio in northeast Washington, D.C. I was responsible for strategic business development and was chief operating officer for ten years. So, yeah, I've been doing this a long time and at the same company. But to be able to be the final decision making and put together a great team, which I have, and watch this network grow even more, which it is doing, it enormously satisfying."

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