



Janis Smith

Board of Governors, National Housing Conference



Name: Janis Smith

Membership Contribution: Currently, the Vice Chair of WHF Communications Committee. Served as the Chair of WHF Communications Committee from 2001 to 2002. Contributed to building WHF media engagements and effectively disseminated information to WHF members and external affairs before the use of social media and the WHF website were integrated into the communications strategy.

Hobby: I am a family person and enjoy cooking for my husband, children and grandchildren. I am also an avid reader and enjoy reading in my quiet time. I am very crafty and enjoy knitting and sewing, making things, and being creative.

Hometown: I am from New York City and I lived in the Virgin Islands when I was growing up, but I came to the Washington, DC area in 1977 to attend Howard University. Since I have spent most of the past 40 years in the area, I suppose the DMV is “technically” my home.

1. How long have you been a member of WHF and how has the organization benefited you? My original membership with WHF goes back to the early 1990s. WHF has created a platform for networking through the various events that it hosts. Networking is one of the most valuable aspects of WHF, and it even created an employment opportunity for me. I secured a position at Fannie Mae, where I worked for 10 years, after seeing the opening posted in a WHF Newsletter. When I applied, several WHF members already at Fannie Mae knew me and provided references. Over the years, I have maintained my connection with people who, though we now work in different places, come together for WHF events. Secondly, the educational aspect of WHF membership is unmatched by any other local organization. WHF always attracts noteworthy and timely speakers. It is distinguished by the fact that top-level professionals and policy makers in housing, housing finance and in the regulatory arena will speak at WHF. They value the forum that WHF provides and recognize the importance of addressing our audience.

WHF really does a great job of providing its members and others with access to thought-leaders and policy makers who keep us up to date on topics like housing and financial services reform, Fintech, cryptocurrency and even anti-money laundering. The WHF Annual Congressional Reception is another great event for the access and networking opportunity it provides with Hill staffers, Senators and Congressman.

2. You are currently a Member of the Board of Governors of the National Housing Conference (NHC) and also Vice President and Member of the Board of Housing Unlimited, Inc. How do you continue to contribute to the housing and housing

finance fields in these capacities? NHC is a Washington-DC based housing organization with members across the United States in all segments of the housing, real estate and housing finance industries. As Chair of NHC's Communications Committee, I have helped the organization with its branding initiatives and I provide leadership to help NHC communicate its mission and strategic objectives to ensure safe, decent and affordable housing in America. In this capacity, I also help to broaden the understanding of affordable housing challenges through effective communications to the public.

Housing Unlimited is a small non-profit organization in Montgomery County, Maryland, with an exclusive focus on providing affordable housing for persons in mental health recovery. As the Vice President of the Board, I serve this organization because I believe that affordable housing for everyone is necessary for strong communities and beneficial to American society (and to anyplace in the world). I provide communications counsel to Housing Unlimited as well. Forward looking, I believe I will always find ways to be of service to the housing industry and the infrastructure that finances it.

3. What was your role and contribution to MERSCORP Holdings? MERSCORP owns and operates the MERS® System, which is a national electronic registry that provides free public access to servicer information for registered home mortgages. I am the recent- past communications executive for MERSCORP, where I led strategic initiatives, media relations and media risk management, and provided leadership to the communications team. My time at MERSCORP was very productive and rewarding. I joined the organization at the peak of the foreclosure crisis, when there was a lack of awareness and understanding about MERS, what the company does and exists for. I educated the media and public about MERS and the MERS® System and changed the conversation from a negative and speculative conversation to one that was factual and forward looking with the focus on the benefits that e-commerce can bring the mortgage industry.

4. Take us along your journey working in the financial services industry. Highlight how the networking aspect has helped you advance to a Communications Executive in this regard. I first entered the financial services industry in 1982 as an administrative financial assistant to the treasurer at the Federal Loan Bank of Boston, where I learned to underwrite and price advances (loans), and perform cash management duties. However, I'd majored in Communications at Howard University, so when a position opened up in Communications, I took the opportunity. I spent four years there and when we moved back to Washington, DC I went to work with the Federal Loan Bank Board. The Bank Board was abolished by Congress in 1989. The Office of Thrift Supervision was then chartered and I worked there until 1993 when I went to work with the Office of the Comptroller of the Currency to work on Community Reinvestment Act (CRA) reform. I left the OCC in 2000 and joined Fannie Mae. Thereafter, I worked with MERSCORP for six-plus years and have been elected to the aforementioned organizational boards.

5. To expand on the last question, was the transition from Boston to Washington or from the industry side to the regulatory side easy or difficult? Was there any difference in the environment? And what helped you to transition so smoothly? I went to college in Washington, so coming back was easy. Networking is extremely important. We make transition from one place to the other more easily when we stay connected with people, when we know people and people know us. Even so, knowing people is not a panacea to successfully transitioning from place to place. In this regard, nothing replaces hard work. If you are seen in the context of your industry as someone who

is eager to learn, will ask smart and informed questions, and who is very involved, you will be seen, not only for your past experiences but for your potential as well. All these help your professional advancement in this industry. However, increasing diversity and opportunity for women is a huge challenge in this industry. I also belong to the Mortgage Bankers Association's mPower Network, and have supported the Five Star Institute's American Mortgage Diversity Council since its inception.

The industry side versus the regulatory industry side is not as different as it seems. You may notice some differences in terms of bureaucracy if you go to work for a small organization. However, if you work for a large private sector entity or government agency, things are very similar.

6. As a professional who has seen the financial services industry evolve over three decades, how do you perceive FinTech and technology's impact on professionalism?

Fintech makes it possible for people to work and to complete a myriad of financial transactions without having to see or speak to each other. There is a younger generation that thinks differently and grew up using new technologies so this is what they're comfortable with and Fintech will eventually change the way we do business. There are efficiencies and cost benefits to using technology in the financial services industry, which is a strong positive.

Regarding professionalism, I still believe that the financial services industry is one of the more conservative business segments left, and I do appreciate some aspects of the conservative business world. For example, when I dress for business, it is as if I'm getting into uniform. It becomes part of my persona and mindset. I guess you can say that I'm happy if I DON'T wear jeans! If you dress in casual attire for everything you do, it's comfortable, but I don't think that it projects a professional demeanor. On the other hand, this may become increasingly less relevant as technology use grows and less business is conducted in person.

7. What do you think about WHF Mentorship Program? WHF had a Mentorship Program around 15 years ago. I am happy that WHF has resurrected the Mentorship Program. It is quite timely as mentorship has become very important in many organizations today. Fannie Mae had a great mentoring program, and new hires were matched with peer mentors to help them acclimate. Mentorship is very useful and I appreciate that WHF is offering this component to its membership.

8. How do you make the best use of your day? I think we all have days when we're not sure we "made the best use," but you really have to be flexible enough to go with what each day presents. If you successfully accomplish the challenges presented, that is the best use of your day. You deal gracefully and calmly with whatever happens. I've always liked the quote, "life is what happens while you're busy making plans."

9. What do you like most about what you do? In the context of housing and finance, I value the opportunity this field has given me to play a role in something that makes a difference and benefits society. There is always something new happening in the housing and financial services industry, so it's a perpetual learning opportunity.

10. What inspires you? My family inspires me.

11. What is the best advice you have ever received? Always look your best and conduct yourself appropriately in public because you never know who sees you.

12. What do you look up to the most and why? I look up to God, my faith and, specifically, to the Anglican/Episcopal church. I use the principles that I have learned in the church to guide everything that I do in my personal and business decisions.