

She lives in Trump Tower and is part of the president's inner social circle. Now, the 'powerhouse' former banker Suzanne J



The First Lady Melania Trump

The president Donald Trump

Friends in the

Johnson is about to descend on London, with her husband, the US ambassador to the UK. By Daisy Prince

The event Melania and Donald Trump attend Woody Johnson's 'Wig Out' 60th birthday party, with Suzanne Ircha, 2007

The ambassador Millionaire and owner of the New York Jets

His wife A former equities manager and actress

high places

Being named as ambassador to the Court of St James's is the highest social achievement any American can obtain. It is a trophy coveted by all political bigwigs, not only for its diplomatic status during the posting, but because forever after, the US government bestows one of its few honorifics – The Honorable – on those who served. The latest couple to have been awarded this diplomatic cherry: Woody and Suzanne Johnson, billionaire supporters of



Power couple The Johnsons

President Trump. Robert 'Woody' Johnson IV, 70, is the great-grandson of the co-founder of the eponymous pharmaceutical company. According to government disclosure documents, he has a net worth of about \$4.2 billion.

Before this, Woody was best known for having bought the American-football team the New York Jets in 2001, for \$635 million. His wife Suzanne is a former equities manager and actress. The couple have two young sons, 'Brick', 11, and Jack, 9, and the family divide their time between their estate in East Hampton and their apartment in New York's Trump Tower.

The Johnsons' long-standing friendship with the Trumps is part of the reason for the new

ambassadorship. And that appointment was unofficially announced by Trump at a Washington luncheon in January, at which he introduced a guest as 'sitting next to the ambassador going to St James'. Another explanation is Woody's emergence as one of the Trump campaign's biggest fundraisers, even after originally supporting Jeb Bush.

Trump and Woody have known each other for over 30 years, and their wives are close friends – Brick and Barron (Trump's only child with Melania) are the same age – and the Johnsons lived at 1 Central Park West, Trump Tower International, for years before Trump even considered running for president. The Trumps have been frequent visitors to Jets games, always attending in the Johnsons' private owner's box, and were guests at their wedding in 2009. Melania has even modelled Jets T-shirts as a favour to Suzanne.

Politically, the couples are very well aligned. Woody has been a committed Republican fundraiser for years, and was an enthusiastic Mitt Romney supporter, once telling the *New York Observer* that he spent as much as 25 hours a week on the phone raising money for Romney. Last year, Woody was the head of Jeb Bush's finance committee – but he changed his allegiance in May to team Trump and has been well rewarded for his efforts.

Woody had his hearing in front of the Senate's Foreign Relations Committee on 20 July. Pending a vote, he will be duly sworn in as ambassador to the Court of St James's by the State Department, and the couple will become the latest inhabitants of Winfield House, the ambassador's glorious residence in the middle of Regent's Park, once owned by the Woolworth heiress Barbara Hutton.

Notable past US ambassadors include: Averell Harriman (who later married Pamela Digby Churchill), Joseph Kennedy, the father of John F Kennedy, and the publisher and philanthropist Walter Annenberg. Obama's choice, Matthew Barzun, was the Harvard-educated descendant of a founder of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. His wife, Brooke, is heiress to the Brown-Forman distilling empire. Barzun was known for his outgoing personality and political adroitness. He set up a programme called Young Leaders

UK, and on his return to Kentucky earlier this year was awarded the Marshall Medal for his dedication to strengthening US and British relations.

The ambassador to the UK is the highest-ranking representative of the US abroad, but it has traditionally been the wives of the ambassadors who have been the social face of the nation. Brooke Barzun was the epitome of controlled glamour. She was known to be a champion social 'mixologist': a woman who was delighted to have Annie Lennox

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Melania Trump

perform at Winfield House and comfortable enough to serve the Prince of Wales fried chicken. Winfield House acquired a reputation for throwing the best parties in town.

It will now be up to Suzanne to decide who will mix and mingle: her new position will give her access to a previously unimaginable sphere of influence.

The New York Jets MetLife Stadium, normally packed with 77,000 chanting fans, was eerily silent on a late August morning in 2012. I was the newly appointed editor of *Avenue Magazine*, a society publication covering Manhattan's elites, and we were in the midst of shooting our annual October 'Power Cover' with Suzanne Johnson. Earlier that morning, the

Team work With the Jets



photographer, hair and make-up, the photographer's assistant and I had all driven out to the stadium, located in East Rutherford, New Jersey, about 50 minutes outside Manhattan. Suzanne took her helicopter to meet us.

She and I had talked weeks earlier on the phone. She spoke in a low conspiratorial tone, a leftover from her days in equities sales when she worked cheek-by-jowl with other salesmen and didn't want the competition overhearing her deals. As it happens, all we were discussing was what she should wear.

Suzanne Ircha was born the daughter of a first-generation Ukrainian immigrant father and a second-generation Ukrainian-American mother and grew up in Manhattan's Little Ukraine in the East Village. Her father was an electrical engineer and builder, and her mother was a housewife. Money was tight but her father instilled a fierce drive to succeed in Suzanne. As she told *Avenue's* Janet Allon, 'When I was about 17 or 18, my father sat me down and said, "You won't have any trouble finding boy-friends, but just in case your Prince Charming doesn't show up, make sure you have a back-up plan."'

She took his words to heart and applied herself diligently at school, eventually attending the prestigious Cornell University, where she first read engineering, later switching to business. She graduated in 1985. 'With that kind of background,' she said, 'you don't expect to just get things handed to you.'

During summer breaks she

worked at Bear Stearns bank, where her cold-calling skills were so impressive that after a couple of summers the bank offered her a job right out of university. She sold large- and small-cap stocks to institutional investors. Suzanne was an asset to the firm with her instant ability to make strong relationships with clients over the phone before she was unleashed on them in person. And what a person. Tall (5ft 10in) and blonde-bombshell gorgeous with a 1,000-watt smile she can deploy at will, Suzanne was the employee who could stay out until the early hours and still get in for her morning sales call at 7.30am. It was no surprise to anyone that she made her first million by 26.

But Suzanne's real dream was to be in showbiz. At 26, after making that million, she managed to persuade her firm to give her a year off in order to become a talk-show host and actress in LA. The dream never panned out, though she got parts in a couple of B-list movies – *Pontiac Moon* (1994) and *Return to Two Moon Junction* (1996). She came back to New York when her old boss and mentor, Herman Sandler, persuaded her to join his firm, Sandler O'Neill, whose offices were located on the 104th floor at 2 World Trade Center.

On the morning of 11 September 2001, Suzanne was heading to work late, after staying out late entertaining clients. She was on the phone with her boss at 8.30am when she heard the explosion. The last thing she remembers Sandler saying was, 'Goddamn terrorists,' before the line went dead. Neither he nor 65 other people in the firm survived. Suzanne helped to restructure the company. 'I just worked through it all,' she said. Something had changed, though, and Wall Street lost its appeal. It was time for a different role.

But it wasn't until 2004 that life put her in touch with Woody. There are various accounts of their first encounter. One says they met in Beverly Hills at a conference given by Michael Milken. Another says she met him at a Jets game – introduced by a mutual friend. Regardless, their second date was an unqualified success. Suzanne showed him how to use his new BlackBerry and he fell for her. ('He calls me his "red hot chilli,"' she said.)

A year later their first son,

'Brick' (nicknamed after D'Brickshaw Ferguson, a Jets player; his real name is Robert Wood Johnson V) was born, and, two years later, Jack. (Suzanne said of naming her second son, 'Woody felt that guys named Jack were never the last ones picked for teams.') The couple were married in 2009. Suzanne admits to being a 'Tiger Mom' and Johnson approves of her work ethic. 'As a second-generation immigrant, she embodies those qualities that make our country great,' he said. 'It comes out in everything she does, including the way she handles the kids. She's raising them to work hard and

something of his wild spirit, once riding his Harley-Davidson cross country in the company of Jann Wenner, the publisher of *Rolling Stone* magazine, and Michael Douglas. But not withstanding the occasional motorcycle adventure, he has settled into a more grounded life, even regularly attending the local Presbyterian church with Suzanne (a compromise between his Episcopalian/Anglican religion and her Catholicism). His faith might have provided solace after his daughter Casey, a diabetic, died in 2010, aged 30. He has two other daughters – Jaime, 34, and Daisy, 30. Both are photographers.

Fey. Designer Georgina Chapman and her husband, the producer Harvey Weinstein, are close friends. Georgina even created the limited-edition Jets T-shirt that Melania modelled. Of Suzanne, Melania says, 'Suzanne is a powerhouse. She has so much energy. She is a very strong and passionate person.'

It is no surprise that Suzanne is as passionate about her politics. 'I've always been a Republican. And I will try and raise my children with the same values I was raised with. I feel those who work hard should be rewarded and recognised. For example, in sports, not every kid should win a trophy. As adults, working

From here... Trump Tower



... to here Winfield House

'In working hard to achieve your goals, money is a good motivator. I'm a big fan of capitalism'

achieve, and not to think everything will be handed to them.'

Up until now, the children have been educated privately on Manhattan's Upper East Side and Suzanne is a typical Upper East Side mother. According to an article in *NY Family Magazine*, Suzanne says, 'I am a total 1960s housewife. As glamorous as it all seems on the outside, I am a wife and mother, and that's first and foremost... I put on the black leggings and the black turtleneck and coat, and take my kids to school. It's not all fabulous.' Woody takes the children off her hands once a week so she can organise everyone's lives. 'Our relationship just works,' she says. 'We are very compatible, and I am married to the greatest guy in the world.'

Woody divorced his first wife, Nancy Sale Frey, in 2001. Known as a party animal and frat boy at the University of Arizona, he cleaned up his act after college but still retained

Suzanne is all about her Woody. Observing them together at the stadium and in their hospitality box there, they seemed to get on extremely well. She was bubbly and outgoing, danced with their friends and chatted happily to visiting celebrities. He was shyer and more reserved but clearly enjoyed watching his wife work the room. She looked to him for approbation and assurance. Theirs is an old-fashioned relationship. Upon first appearance she seems to be the one running the show, but Woody's quietly in charge behind the scenes.

They are regular attendees on Manhattan's benefit circuit, but their social hub is the owner's box of the Jets. Suzanne and Woody entertain around 80 guests at a time, an array of friends, family, business contacts and celebrities. As Suzanne says, 'I try to create interesting mixes.' On any given day, you might run into Suzanne's best friends, socialites Somers Farkas and Joanne de Guardiola, writer Jay McInerney and his wife Anne Hearst, veteran American football star Joe Namath, Ben Stiller, Kristen Wiig, Jimmy Fallon and Tina

hard to achieve your goals can often lead to higher compensation. I like that – money is a good motivator. I'm a big fan of capitalism.'

Even though Suzanne likes to extol the virtues of the American dream, it's clear that she and Woody are Anglophiles. In 2015, they brought the entire Jets football team over to the UK for a visiting game at Wembley Stadium and beamed the Jets logo, *Batman*-style, on to the Tower of London.

With the confirmation hearings behind them, it won't be long before Suzanne can get started in her new post, but she may find her path in the UK thornier than expected. The Johnsons are riding into power on the coat-tails of the most unpopular US president abroad in recent history. As political novices, neither of whom have lived outside the US, theirs will be a steep learning curve.

For now, though, Suzanne can relax on her estate in East Hampton, enjoying some of the tomatoes she likes to grow herself, and thinking of the moment when she will become the latest *châtelaine* of Winfield House. ♦