

Black History Month

A Florida Focus

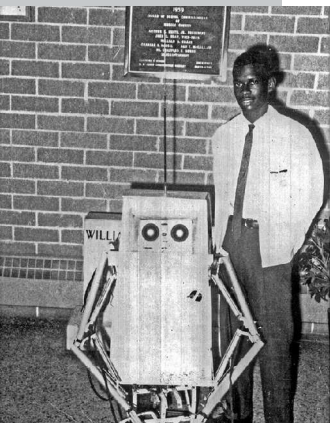
A CIVICS IN REAL LIFE SERIES: CIVICS CONNECTION SPOTLIGHT

Spotlight #21: Lonnie Johnson

Self-described as an African American inventor, scientist, and super smart guy, [Lonnie Johnson](#) is not a name that many people recognize. Yet one of his inventions is a toy almost everyone has played with, and his contributions to the U.S. Air Force and NASA remain relevant and important today. [Lonnie Johnson](#) was born in 1949 in Mobile, Alabama. He grew up with five siblings in a hardworking household where his parents had little formal education. From an early age, Johnson was curious about how things worked. He earned the nickname “the Professor” because he was constantly taking toys apart or building his own. Johnson attended segregated schools for both middle and high school. In 1968, he represented his school at the state science fair, where he was the only Black student in attendance. He took home first prize for the robot he built. After graduating from high school, Lonnie Johnson went on to earn a bachelor’s degree in mechanical engineering and a master’s degree in nuclear engineering from [Tuskegee University](#). He went on to build a successful career with the U.S. Air Force, working on the [stealth bomber program](#), and NASA, contributing to the [Jet Propulsion Laboratory](#), developing the nuclear power sources for the [Galileo mission](#) to Jupiter. Despite these achievements, it would be one invention in particular that made him widely known: [the Super Soaker](#). Lonnie Johnson first [came up with the idea](#) of a powerful toy water gun in 1982 when experimenting with nozzles in his bathroom sink for a different, much more complex project. After eight years, the Super Soaker (initially called the Power Drencher) made it to stores. The toy became immensely popular and has earned over \$1 billion in sales. Eventually, Johnson would reimagine his water gun design, replacing the water with toy projectiles, and become the inventor of the N-Strike Nerf products. Despite the success of his inventions, Johnson had to [fight in court](#) for the royalties he was owed. In 2016, he was awarded \$73 million from Hasbro. Today, Johnson runs three companies and continues to work with the government and NASA. Holding more than [250 patents](#), he is part of a group of African American inventors [who account for just 6%](#) of all U.S. patent applications. Johnson [says](#) that “*the key to success is perseverance. Nothing else is going to make a difference.*” Kids everywhere on a hot summer day would likely agree, and be grateful, that Lonnie Johnson never gave up on his dreams.

CONNECTION QUESTIONS

- Who are some other significant African American inventors? How do inventors/inventions contribute to the common good?
- What advantages does the economic system of the United States provide inventors?
- How did civil rights expand over Lonnie Johnson’s lifetime? What history/civic events contributed to the change?
- Why is it important for the United States Patent and Trademark Office to track demographic data on patentees, and what impact might that have on encouraging modern innovation?



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