

# ELLE

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## DEBRA L. LEE CHAIRMAN AND CEO OF BET NETWORKS

When Debra L. Lee began her career at BET, it was barely more than a start-up. Lee had been on the path toward becoming a typical Washington legal wonk—with public policy and law degrees from Harvard and a stint clerking for a federal judge under her belt—but was restless, wondering if she missed her calling in the arts. So she jumped at the opportunity to serve as legal counsel for the fledgling broadcaster. “I took on any new responsibilities that were offered to me—I didn’t ask about the salary, I just did it,” she says, “and the more I learned about the business side, the more I loved it.” Her multitasking paid off: When BET’s founder, Robert L. Johnson, stepped down in 1996, Lee was named president and COO, and then CEO in 2005. “It wasn’t that big a jump. By that time, I’d been pretty much running the company for 10 years; I just wasn’t getting credit for it,” she says.

She’s presided over incredible growth—BET now reaches more than 90 million homes and critics have recently lauded its foray into original scripted programming—and has become one of the most influential businesswomen in the country, serving on the boards of Twitter, Marriott, and Washington Gas, and as president of the board of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. She also started the annual Leading Women Defined Summit to bring together prominent African American women from her intersecting circles of business and politics. Lee was a huge supporter of President Obama—“it was a magical eight years,” she says—and is troubled by the current landscape. “I’ve lived in DC for 36 years, and the divisiveness is at a level I’ve never seen,” she says. “It’s going to take time for everyone to recover. The media plays a role in shining a light on what’s going on, and I take my position and BET’s role seriously.”