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A CEO's Life Story of Building
the World's Most Popular Brand

NEVILLE ISDELL WITH DAVID BEASLEY

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One

FROM ULSTER TO AFRICA

I was born in Downpatrick, a small town in Northern Ireland, on June 8, 1943, the only son of Protestant parents. My mother's family was originally from Scotland, my father's from Ireland.

My father, Edward Neville Isdell, was a fingerprint and ballistics specialist with the Royal Ulster Constabulary. Belfast was a shipbuilding hub and therefore a frequent bombing target in World War II. The police headquarters were moved to the countryside about twenty miles away until the war was over, so it was in Downpatrick where I first saw the light of day.

I was christened in a little stone church in Downpatrick built on the site of St. Patrick's first church in Ireland. My daughter and grandson would later be christened there as well.

Northern Ireland was then and is still part of the United Kingdom, but has a large Catholic population loyal to Ireland. The friction between Protestants and Catholics was palpable even to me at an early age. There were Protestant neighborhoods

and Catholic neighborhoods as well as Protestant schools and Catholic schools.

My grandfather was a member of the Orange Order, a fraternity dedicated to Protestant supremacy, and every year he celebrated the Battle of the Boyne, when the army of William of Orange defeated the Catholic king, James II. My father, who maintained close ties to Ireland throughout his life, refused to join the order. He had the somewhat dangerous view, which I inherited, that Ireland should be one country but only through democratic means. The “troubles” as they were called were subdued in those days and would not resurface for two decades. Yet I would encounter these types of human conflicts for the rest of my life. The ability to understand them and get past them was a key business skill that served me well throughout my career at Coca-Cola.

My childhood in Northern Ireland was a typical one, solidly middle class, with a large and loving extended family close by. My paternal grandfather was a postal clerk. My mother’s father was a shipbuilding engineer honored by King George V for his service to British shipbuilding. I remember clearly when a Nigerian policeman came over for ten days of training and stayed at our house. At that time a black man in Northern Ireland was really unusual. The officer gave me a fluffy little toy that I called Calabar for the city in Nigeria where he lived. It was my favorite and my first link to Africa. I also remember tasting my first Coca-Cola in Northern Ireland, at an old tea shop with bullion windows. It was considered an exotic drink!

During those postwar years there were still Jewish refugees from the Holocaust living in refugee camps, and I donated some of my toys to the children there. Gasoline and other products

were still being rationed and on weekends we sometimes drove to the Republic of Ireland, which had been neutral in World War II, to buy items hard to find in Belfast.

My father was a tall, barrel-chested man who had tried on three occasions to leave Northern Ireland, but had been prevented from doing so because he was deemed “essential” at the police department. Positions in Greece, British Guiana, and Sierra Leone passed him by.

Unable to get out of Northern Ireland, my father channeled his excess energy into rugby, a tough, hard game, with kicking, passing, and tackling, but no helmets or pads. It’s often said that soccer is a gentleman’s game played by hooligans, while rugby is a hooligan’s game played by gentlemen. My father was the president of a rugby club and my uncle was also involved. So I spent many weekends with my cousins at rugby matches, kicking the ball around on the sidelines during the games.

After serving twenty-five years with the police department, my father retired on half pension and took a position in what is now called Zambia—then the British colony of Northern Rhodesia—as head of the fingerprint department of the Northern Rhodesia police. This was 1954. I was ten years old.

Finally my father had the opportunity to live abroad, but relatives and neighbors in Belfast were baffled at our move. I’ll never forget sitting as a ten-year-old does in the corner of the room, as the adults, who forget you are there, talk. One of the family members said, “What are you doing this for? What about Neville?” My father replied, “I believe that by doing this I will be able to afford to give him a university education. I am doing this for him. I want him to have more opportunities than I had.” That stuck in my mind. My parents were aspiring for me. They

were investing in me. They'd been through a war and they'd lost opportunities as a result. The big possibilities had passed them by.

I was excited by the move, having always been interested in geography and nature, collecting leaves and pressing them in books, poring over atlases to learn the names of countries. Although my father had wanted to leave Northern Ireland all along, my mother, Margaret, was not at all eager to go. She was a very good mother and doted on me, but throughout my childhood she was never a very well woman, suffering from bronchial asthma.

On the journey to Africa, I saw London for the first time. En route to Africa, the ship stopped in Las Palmas de Gran Canaria off the coast of Spain. Flamenco dancers came aboard. There was bright sunshine and beaches. The exotic nature of it all hit me. We were not even in Africa yet but we were in an entirely different world.

Our first stop in Africa was Lobito Bay in Portuguese West Africa, now called Angola. There, I experienced the harshness of the colonial system as white overseers lashed black dockworkers with hide whips. My father pulled me away and said, "I'm sorry you had to see this, but this is the way the world is. And it shouldn't be like this." To this day, that horrific scene is etched in my memory.

Our next port of call was Cape Town, South Africa. We were told that if we were up at 5:00 A.M., we would see the most wonderful sight. It was January, summer in South Africa, and my father and I were up on deck. All of a sudden, through the early morning mist, a piece of wondrous land emerged from the seem-

ingly flat sea. It was Table Mountain. The order of magnitude was stunning. Ireland had its beautiful green hills but here was a nearly four-thousand-foot mountain jutting out of the sea. It was the most beautiful sight I'd ever seen. I fell in love with Cape Town, in my estimation, one of the three most beautiful cities in the world. The other two are Sydney and Rio de Janeiro.

During our four days in Cape Town, we feasted on the sunlight, juicy grapes, oranges, and melon pieces with dollops of ice cream in the center that we purchased from cafés. I also saw the first signs of apartheid: whites-only signs on park benches. It was a shock, but at the same time, it seemed to be the natural order of this society. It didn't seem right to me, but I did not suddenly become a ten-year-old activist. I must say that I accepted it, but it did make me uncomfortable. After all, the Nigerian police officer had stayed at our house two years earlier. Why had he been able to stay with a white family when black South Africans weren't even allowed to sit on a white's park bench?

After Cape Town, we traveled for three-and-a-half days on a coal-fired train to Northern Rhodesia. I stood on the metal railing between the cars for hours, looking at the varied landscapes including the bleak semidesert of Botswana, peddlers selling their wares, and women breast-feeding their babies. We passed one of the seven natural wonders of the world, Victoria Falls, which straddles Southern and Northern Rhodesia. Part of the great Zambezi River, the falls are a mile and a quarter wide and drop 365 feet to the gorge below. The spray can be seen for miles, which is why in the local language the falls are called Mosi-o-Tunya (the Smoke that Thunders). Everything in Africa, it seemed, had a totally different order of magnitude.

In Lusaka, the capital of Zambia, we were met at the train station by my father's former fingerprinting colleague in Great Britain, Paddy Greene, and his new wife. My father was replacing Greene as head of fingerprinting at the Northern Rhodesian police force. Even though Lusaka was the capital city, the train station had no platform, just red earth.

Our family moved into a brand-new three-bedroom government house in Lusaka. With its beautiful shiny concrete floors, the house sat on a half-acre lot that backed up to the bush. For the first time, our family had servants. And they would wax the floors with brushes on their feet and I'd slide delightedly across the rooms as a young boy would.

During the first nine months, we had no electricity, only candles, Tilley lamps, and a wood-fired stove. However, for a young child, Africa was an explosion of new sights and sounds: frogs, crickets, spiders, and loud thunderstorms. I was soon thriving in Africa, riding a bicycle five miles each way to a government school with a British curriculum, sleeping under a mosquito net, and playing sports.

Schools were segregated by race and gender. Racial segregation overall in Northern Rhodesia was not as strict as it was in South Africa but cafés, restaurants, and bars were whites-only. Whites and blacks could shop in the same retail stores, though the blacks tended to shop in different stores because the residential areas were separate. Many of the shop owners were immigrants from India.

Lusaka had a local newspaper and only one cinema, where we'd go on Saturday mornings for movies. There was no television. At night we'd listen to BBC News on the radio. On Sunday

nights a radio station in Portuguese East Africa broadcasted the Top Twenty pop songs. Sporting events were available only on short-wave radio. Pocket money was used to buy the latest hits on 78-rpm vinyl discs. Within a few miles of the Lusaka city limits, the occasional lion was still to be seen.

Abject poverty prevailed. Most of the Africans in Northern Rhodesia walked around without shoes and wore ragged clothing. Yet in many ways, the poverty was not as severe then as it is today in some parts of Africa, a result of the displacement or migration of so many people from rural areas to the desperate slums of the cities.

I was amazed by the friendliness and happiness of the people in Northern Rhodesia, despite their poverty. They appeared somewhat content. It was a society that seemed to work, to be at peace with itself. Some educated Zambians, however, were becoming discontented and political rumblings for independence—which would occur in 1964—had begun. Yet even the process of gaining freedom occurred with far less disruption in Northern Rhodesia than it did in other African countries and was cheered by a number of European expats, including my family.

Many tribal languages are spoken in Northern Rhodesia, but in school Africans were taught English, and because of the tribal differences English was and still is the official language of government. My parents and I studied a little bit of Chinyanja, also known as Nyanja. We knew enough of this language to get by if we encountered anyone who did not speak English, but that only worked in a Nyanja-speaking area.

At school, I first encountered Afrikaners, descendants of Dutch settlers who over decades had developed their own language,

Afrikaans. During recess, we played a rough, physical game called bok-bok in which several boys would make a human tunnel while the other team tried to collapse it by jumping on their backs.

Living in Africa, though, took its toll. I suffered from sunstroke, dysentery, and eventually malaria. In those days there was no air-conditioning. Yet, I generally thrived in the new environment, as did my father, who loved his new job and quickly became active in the local rugby scene. More than anything, he was determined to train Africans as fingerprint specialists, something his white colleagues believed was not possible. By the time he retired from the Zambian Police Force in 1967, he handed over a department of twenty trained fingerprint specialists and his successor, his first trainee, later became deputy commissioner of police. At that time it was the only fully Zambian division of the police department.

My mother, however, with servants to do the housework and me away at school most of the time, was at first bored and homesick. She eventually took a clerical job at a government medical dispensary. She counted the days until the end of the first three-year contract, when we would return for six months of mandatory leave in Belfast.

In Africa, the entrepreneur first emerged in me. I grew maize in our garden, roasted it, and had the family gardener sell it to workers on their lunch break, with the gardener being given a commission. In many respects, he was my first employee and I could have “ordered” him to do the work. However, the concept of reward for incremental effort seemed right.

In the summer of 1957, we returned to Belfast on the leave my mother had been longing for. I was thirteen at the time and

younger siblings of my friends in Belfast were greatly disappointed to see that after three years in Africa, I was not black, as they had expected.

After the first round of visiting relatives and friends I recall a dinner-table discussion between my mother and father in which my mother commented on how our family and friends had changed. I will never forget my father's reply, "No dear, it is we who have changed and we will never be the same again." How true.

In a sign of my growing attachment to Africa, I wrote a letter to BBC television complaining about a story on Lusaka that aired while we were back in Belfast. The show featured old footage of Lusaka, portraying the city as a dusty wasteland. "Lusaka looks much nicer than that," I wrote the BBC. "My Dad has much better camera footage which I am sure he will lend you."

My parents knew none of this and were shocked when the BBC invited me to appear on television, paying for my flight to London. In a June 30, 1957, broadcast entitled, "A Boy from Lusaka," I defended my new hometown and narrated film my father had taken of Lusaka. I was honored to appear on my own program. Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh, the husband of Queen Elizabeth, appeared just after me and introduced the International Geophysical Year, during which sixty-seven countries cooperated on scientific research. I thought I was in illustrious company as I was shown the set for the program.

Back home in Lusaka, my television appearance produced headlines and accolades from the city council. The mayor later presented me with a mounted reproduction of the city's coat of

arms and a citation signed by all the councilors which read, “Your obvious pride in Lusaka and your display of civic mindedness have been noted.”

I was in love with Africa, so much so that three years later, I decided to stay behind in Lusaka at boarding school when my parents took another six-month leave in Belfast.

I lived at the Gilbert Rennie School and under the British system was assigned a first-year student, called a “fag,” who as part of an initiation process had to fold my clothes, make my bed, and run any other errands I might have. I played rugby, cricket, tennis, and soccer. At the time, I wanted to be a geography or history teacher, although a part-time job at a grocery store during vacations and a friend whose father owned a clothing store piqued an early interest in business. I was also placed in my first real position of responsibility as a school prefect and head of my house, of which the school had four, as a way to promote internal competition.

I graduated with honors from high school and was offered a scholarship from the city of Lusaka—in part because of my defense of the city on the BBC—to attend the University of Cape Town in South Africa. My life very nearly took a much different path, however, one that would have left me with the legacy of livestock thief, not CEO of Coca-Cola.



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