

CHAPTER

I

The Fortitude Factor

PROFIT ON THE PLAYGROUND

“It is the child in the man that is the source of his uniqueness and creativeness and the playground is the optimal milieu for the unfolding for his capacities and talents” - Eric Hoffer

It was springtime and I couldn't wait to go outside. Sitting in my classroom I was daydreaming. My yellow and brown-checked catholic school uniform was getting

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on my nerves. Oh how I wished I could wear regular clothes to school. My teacher was talking about a trip she took to the mountains and I was eagerly trying to count how many pieces of candy I had. I attended St. James and St. John's, a catholic elementary school on the eastside of Baltimore, MD. I attended the school from kindergarten until fifth grade. Oh how I loved my elementary school days.

Looking back at my experience I never thought that I was in a highly volatile area. I attended school in the heart of east Baltimore, a few blocks from the Latrobe projects. I mention this fact because people seem to think if you come from a certain part of town or if your environment isn't perfect, you have no chance in life. The mean streets of Baltimore, can any kid survive? Of course, your background and your environment do not determine your future. Although my school was located in a rough area, the kids and staff inside the school were great. My parents and teachers taught me that I was the only person that could determine my destiny. I truly believed that fact and this crucial belief stuck with me throughout my life. I believed that I could accomplish anything and I did.

The bell rang and it was time for recess. I ran to the front of the line so I could get outside first. I had to set up shop. Earlier that morning, I asked my mother if we could stop by the corner store so I could purchase some penny candy. She said "yes" and my business mind started to focus. I had purchased five types of candy so my customers could have a good variety. Before I actually

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walked outside to recess I turned to see if Aisha Burden was behind me. I asked Aisha, "What kind do you like?" She said, "I want the red now later," I put some candy aside for us before I reached the playground. Aisha was my elementary school best friend; we were inseparable. We stuck together through thick and thin. I had my side order finished so I could get down to business. The store was now open. I yelled, "I have candy 3 for 5, I have candy 3 for 5", and the line started to form. I sold out of candy in fifteen minutes. My job was done. This was my daily routine to sell candy at recess and I absolutely loved it. It made me pretty popular as well. I knew every kid at the school.

Of course in any candy business venture you have to make a profit. I purchased the candy for one cent each. I sold 3 pieces of candy for five cents. I made a two-cent profit on each transaction. In my mind this was the natural thing to do. Find a product and a starving market and by gosh a business was born.

All the kids wanted candy during recess but no one thought to buy the candy before school then sell it at recess. I started this great playground business back in the third grade. I think that was the first time that I became an entrepreneur. I would reinvest my money into purchasing more candy each week. I eventually upgraded to larger pieces of candy like the large Sugar Daddy's and Mary Janes. Life was good.

The next day was pretty gloomy; it was raining. Pop Pop told us to hurry and cross the street so we could make

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it to school on time. Pop Pop was my great -grandfather and he taught my cousins Lil, Eric and I, how to ride the bus to school. We loved it when Pop Pop took us to school because we would laugh the entire ride. Pop Pop was from the old school so he used to tell us "Hush that fuss, we are on the bus." He was born in 1906 so he believed in respect and proper etiquette. We listened or we knew that we would be in trouble but we also laughed hysterically as soon as we got off the bus.

On this particular day it was raining so Pop-Pop, Lil, Eric and I rode the 13 and 15 buses to school. We had to transfer and ride two buses. I started to think that my candy sales would be down because of the weather but when we finally went outside to recess, I was in for another surprise.

Whenever a good business starts to grow competition is sure to show up. Another kid on the playground started to sell the penny candy. His incentive was to undercut my price. He sold four pieces of candy for five cents. The customers would save a penny and gain an additional piece of candy. I had to think quickly. I went home that evening thinking "What am I going to do now? I have to get the new Michael Jackson poster." If my candy business was going to suffer I wouldn't be able to collect enough money to buy the poster. I actually went to the corner store on North Ave. and Washington Street everyday. I loved getting my favorite candy and chips. I also loved the posters and bracelets. When I entered the store, there it was. The poster of Michael Jackson, with the yellow and

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white outfit, was on the wall. I couldn't believe it. I had to get that poster. My mind started to process a way to get it and the candy business was my only source.

I used what every kid wanted to solve a problem. Selling the candy solved the need for a sweet treat at recess as well as a means for me to get the Michael Jackson poster. I took my time each morning to carefully choose the best variety of candy to make sure that my customers were happy. I was watching The Electric Company on television and an idea came to me. I decided to use my allowance money to increase my inventory of candy.

The next morning I purchased ten types of candy. I also purchased two and a half times my normal amount. My thought process was to offer a better variety of candy and to have a lot of it so I could service as many kids as possible. I never changed my price. For two weeks the other kid and I sold candy at recess but I had the latest candy. Boston Baked Beans, Pop Rocks, Lemonheads, Red Hots, Mary Janes, Tootsie Rolls, Mike & Ikes and Sour Cherry, just to name a few. We were both yelling at recess to let everyone know that we were open for business.

For two weeks straight the candy wars were waged. I could always rely on my faithful friends, Earle, Tamika, Dana, Alese, Melinda, Brian, Aisha and Claude. Claude was a year older than me, but we lived around the corner from each other. Claude would slowly convince the other kids to check out my new variety of candy, and the kids my age and younger never left, the customers that they were.

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It took exactly two weeks to run my competitor out of business and I still made my two-cent profit. You see, you can learn valuable business lessons on the playground. Initially some of the kids became my competitor's customers for a discounted price but eventually the quality, quantity, and variety beat out the saving of a penny. My customers wanted the latest, and more of it, so they decided to pay the additional penny to have access to my candy. The other kid decided he didn't want to be in the candy game anymore. The one-cent profit was not enough money to buy more candy and he ended up eating his leftover inventory. He learned quickly that he was losing money instead of making money. You see if you discount your services too low, you will not make enough money to service your customers and will make a small profit. This was a valuable lesson that I learned and I kept that data in my experience database for the future. An entrepreneur was born and I would continue to start and grow different businesses throughout my entire life.

When I was really young at St. James & St. John's, my principle Sister Katherine McElden was being honored with a channel 13 salute. Richard Sher and Oprah Winfrey were the hosts of a local talk show called "People Are Talking". Yes, it was Oprah, can you believe it? Both Mr. Sher and Ms. Winfrey awarded local people in Baltimore with a golden 13-broach pin for being an outstanding community leader.

My principal had been nominated and won the honor. Everyone in the school was excited when my

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teacher, told us that the television anchors were going to be at our school. Everyone in the class started to talk. We could not contain our excitement. I went home that evening daydreaming about being on television. If they were coming to the school, I knew the cameramen would have to take a few camera shots of the students.

The next morning the entire school was assembled to watch the pinning of Sr. Katherine. My yellow and brown checkered jumper was starched just right and my white crisp shirt gleaming. Everyone was so excited to see the news anchors from television at our school. All the cameras and the lights made me feel like I was on a movie set. Remember I was only in elementary school. When my class arrived in the library it was so crowded. I couldn't wait to see Mr. Sher and Ms. Winfrey. We were shorter than the other kids so my entire class moved to the front of the library.

Everyone was assembled to start taping the show, but Ms. Winfrey suggested that one of the students should pin Sr. Katherine to put a nice touch on the story. Everyone agreed, and which student do you think was selected? Yes, it was I. I was so excited that I licked my lips three times to make sure I had the perfect look on camera. Oprah told me what to say and I rehearsed it two times. The lights clicked on and it was show time. She gave me the shiny golden 13 pin and I placed it on Sr. Katherine's suit lapel. A star was born. That evening my entire family was sitting around the television to watch the news. I learned quickly that you

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must be ready to seize the opportunity and be confident in yourself.

After my television debut my confidence was at an all time high. I believed I could accomplish anything, and for years I lived my life as if there were no limits. My personal and business awareness was nurtured early on in my life. As a result I developed a high self-esteem and learned valuable business lessons on the playground.

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Lessons Learned

I realized that back in elementary school, I was fearless. I would try a new sport, a new instrument or a new business idea without reservation. We all need to go back to the way we felt as a child. I was not afraid to make a mistake. The lesson of being excited to go in a different direction or implement an idea was so simple. As we grow we make things and relationships complicated. Keep it simple and go for it.

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| 1. Keep It Simple |
| 2. Go For Your Dreams |
| 3. If it works fine, if it doesn't its still fine |
| 4. Let your imagination take you to another place |
| 5. Be ready to seize your opportunity |
| 6. You never know who you may meet before they discover their greatness -Oprah |
| 7. Solve a problem and make it a business |

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Entrepreneur Effect

Starting a business can be a really simple task and it is wonderful to start at an early age. You can find ideas in any direction you look. Encourage a young kid today to open up a lemonade stand or sell candy as I did. It is never too late to start your own business. Start by solving a problem and being creative. Remember you don't have to reinvent the wheel to be successful. You can take a proven business model and tweak it to solve a new problem. Investigate the resources below to get started.

www.ebay.com - Sell your own products.

Selling products on e-bay is a great way to start your own business with low overhead. Both children and adults would benefit from selling personal things or new products on e-bay.

www.entrepreneur.com - Read the startup section of the website. I love to read the magazine from front to back. The actual magazine has plenty of information each month about being an entrepreneur. Several companies are featured each month and their stories will motivate you to try something new.

www.google.com - Search google for business ideas. Google is the number one search engine on the internet. Entrepreneurs startup websites are plentiful.