#Celebrating

My 35 years

in the Insurance Industry

01 JULY 2021

Volume 01



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Thirty-five years ago today I joined Old Mutual as a pensions administration clerk, working from their offices at Mutual House on the corner of Speke Avenue and Second Street. I had applied for a clerical job shortly after receiving my O' level results for the October 1985 exams. Back then, jobs after O' level were not that much of a problem, we had many opportunities and choices especially after posting good results.

As I left home that morning of the 1st of July, The Customs and Excise department, one of two organisations that merged in the 90's to form ZIMRA expected me to start work with them also as I had passed my interviews with them, one of only two successful candidates of a rigorous recruitment process, alongside Chakuvinga Katsukunya who would become a life long friend. I would decide to join Old Mutual on the morning of that day for two reasons. First, Old Mutual was a private enterprise, my young mind reasoned, so rising within the ranks would be easier than in a government institution. Secondly, the salary I would get working for Old Mutual was a dollar more and that made a big difference back then.

Back then, working for the Customs and Excise Department was as prestigious as it is working for ZIMRA today. Talk was, there were huge opportunities once one was posted to one of the busiest ports in Africa, Beitbridge and fortunes would be made overnight doing deals with importers and exporters. I was tempted but quickly dismissed the thought thinking I wasn't cut out for deals. Soon reports of staff caught on the wrong side of the law would come out in newspapers and I thought I may have saved myself the loss of a job and possible jail time by walking straight up the road from the bus at charge-office bus terminus instead of walking a few steps to the Customs and Excise offices a stone's throw away.

When I started at Old Mutual I didn’t think I would last long there, why? Because at heart I was a motor mechanic in waiting. I would work for a few months waiting for my break to become a motor mechanic apprentice, I reasoned.Soon I would be called for interviews including one at Duly's Masvingo. I was excited thinking this was my break. As I boarded the Express Motorways bus to South Africa, my heart was filled with joy. I would get the opportunity to train as a motor mechanic, after which I would set up my own garage repairing cars making lots of money, I thought. Long story short, the interviewers had other ideas.

I didn't make it. Disappointed, I came back to my Old Mutual. After two years of trying to get an opening for apprenticeship training I gave up and started looking at what I could do to enhance my career at Old Mutual and rise within the ranks. After looking for courses I could study, I settled for IMM. Marketing came naturally for me as I had been selling everything at work including taking photographs for a living during my spare time. Also it was cheaper than most courses including those from the UK as the rand was weaker than the Zim dollar. At intermediate diploma stage I was again unsettled. Now wanting to practise Marketing instead of sitting at the desk doing clerical work. I started looking for openings as a marketing intern attending many interviews in the process including one at Flexible Packaging now majority owned by Mr Fanuel Muhwati after its unbundling from Hunyani.

Chubb Alarms was another company I interviewed for without success. It was now almost five years after joining Old Mutual as a pensions admin clerk and I had experienced very little movement up the corporate ladder, I was frustrated. I had a steady girlfriend and looking to getting married soon. I would be able to buy a house and be comfortable given the housing and car loans available at Old Mutual but I always thought about starting and running a business of my own. How would I do it?In 1991, I married my childhood sweetheart Mavis. In 1992 I decided I had had enough of sitting at the desk doing clerical work. I joined the Old Mutual field force as a sales rep and my enthusiasm for work was rekindled. I worked hard selling Old Mutual policies. In no time I would be promoted to an Executive sales rep. Promotion to Financial advisor followed soon after and I joined the Old Mutual elite field force at FAS, the Financial Advisory Services, by invitation, as the youngest Financial Advisor. Times were good!!

In time I would rise to the top of the financial advisory services ladder becoming the top financial advisor for five years in a row. As I went about my business selling policies, clients would ask if Old Mutual could develop a funeral assurance product. I gave management the feedback, 'We don't do funeral policies, we can't do that as it is too low for our station', came the response. Because there were so many enquiries about funeral policies, I thought it would be a good idea to register a funeral assurance company. What name would I give it. After agonising over many names I settled for Nyaradzo.

Why Nyaradzo? Because Zimbabweans were moving away from kurova guva and chenura. They were now doing memorial services a few months after burial which in Shona are called Nyaradzo and I settled for it as the name for the new funeral assurance company before getting it registered.At about the same time, Old Mutual announced the launch of a 100million dollar small to medium scale businesses fund and I thought I stood a good chance of accessing the funds since I had worked well and hard for them. I made my application hoping to get the one million dollars minimum capital required for licensing by IPEC. At that point I was prepared to cede majority shareholding to them for the million dollar capital I needed. Like what happened when I gave management feedback about what the market wanted, funeral policies, they didn't see merit in my proposal.

In 1993 I had bought a house in Marlborough for 400k which with inflation was now valued at 1.4million. One Ambrose Matika Assistant General Manager Mortgages at CABS would facilitate the remortgaging of our family home giving us the princely sum of a million dollars needed for licensing, I was ecstatic. On the 1st of March 2001, I would walk into 9th floor, Livingstone House, an Old Mutual property, not as an Old Mutual employee but a tenant marking the beginning of my Nyaradzo journey.

Today I celebrate thirty-five years in the insurance industry, thankful to Old Mutual for giving me the opportunity to work for them and exposing me to the insurance industry. It was from them also that we got our first office shelter, the iconic Livingstone House.

While my Nyaradzo journey could have been easier with their support at the formative stages of Nyaradzo, I am thankful for the training and exposure they gave me. A number of times during our twenty years of Service Excellence, we have turned to Old Mutual for assistance, hitting a brick wall with most attempts. For instance in 2004 we were desperate for a financial bailout after we bought our first funeral parlour, 120 Herbert Chitepo on debt, sold to me by my good friend Newton Madzika who had bought Doves from the Hammer-Nel family. I will forever be grateful to Newton for breathing life into Nyaradzo when he sold us this very important asset. Soon after we did the 120 Herbert Chitepo transaction there would be a new sheriff in town in the name of the RBZ Governor Doctor Gideon Gono.

As part of his efforts to stabilise markets, he said, he allowed interest rates to rise to a thousand percent within a few months, resulting in our initial debt of 800million dollars ballooning to 8billion dollars, unintended consequences, he used to say, we would soon become insolvent, if we didn't take action. I sought refuge again to who else? You guessed it, Old Mutual. We went knocking at their door bowl in hand and on our knees begging. By now we had ten buses, and we thought rather than beg, we would put a deal beneficial to both parties on the table.

Because burials in Zimbabwe are done from 11am to 3pm, we used our buses to ferry Old Mutual staff from town to their head office in Emerald Hill and they would pay us monthly in arrears. We proposed that we sign an annual bus provision contract so they could pay us a discounted annual fee upfront which would help us settle the ballooning debt. Our buses had helped Old Mutual staff get to work on time for months if not years, helping management to plan their work schedules without interruption, from the time they had contracted us to be their transporter.

For months they stringed me along, requesting for this and that security including title deeds to the few properties we had by now acquired and I obliged. Right at the dearth, they would tell me that it wasn't possible, I was distraught. I went down on my knees in tears as I knew that I stood to lose all I had worked hard to establish up to that point. That was possibly the lowest point in my life. Instead of being shattered and putting my hands up in surrender, it strengthened my resolve to succeed. A few months later, I would structure a deal that got us out of trouble and clear the multi-billion dollar debt we had, giving us another chance to not only survive, but experience phenomenal growth. My appetite to dance with Old Mutual was not finished.

In 2009 Old Mutual would launch their own funeral policy, the Flexi-Plan, a cash paying product. They asked some of their senior executives to arrange a meeting with my team so we could be the services provider of that funeral cash plan, as they soon realised that a funeral policy is not about cash, but actual services.In the meeting we proposed that they recommend a 10million dollar mortgage loan to us from sister company CABS, so we could put up more service centres across the country for the benefit of theirs and our clients. We didn't think this would be a big deal given that CABS is in the business of giving out mortgage loans anyway.

"We are the Green Giant, and will not be cornered into doing such kind of deals by upstarts like you", came the response, from one of their senior executives". But it was you who called us to this meeting in the first place" I said quietly to myself. When you were calling us to this meeting, had you forgotten that you were the Green Giant, I mused.

After the meeting we resolved that we would work hard to build a robust and strong branch network to ensure that we served our clients better. We ran many customer service courses so we could deliver on our promises. We bought more hearses and buses using own resources and without borrowings.My cardinal sin was that I was always optimistic and hopeful that Old Mutual was my refuge when in trouble. How could I think of anyone else. I was raised and brought up there. I had no friends outside of Old Mutual. Their values were my values too, I thought. Even as I would do a private placement document to raise capital later, my first port of call would be Old Mutual, again without success. To their credit though, The Green Giant have now come around, working with us in efforts to regreen our environment. We are now partners in our efforts to export our services to the rest of Africa, starting with our mutual project Mtunzi in Malawi. It is our hope that we can replicate this partnership in other places on the continent for business growth and development.As I celebrate my thirty-five years in the insurance industry today, thanks to Old Mutual who gave me the opportunity to work for them and learn, I am mindful of what could have been had I not decided to part ways with them twenty years ago. I would have been celebrating thirty-five years in the industry as an employee of Old Mutual. I look back over the thirty-five years and see how little I knew about insurance until I joined them. Ironically before I was asked by one Steve Matosi, an employee of Old Mutual to submit my application, I didn't know what they did, let alone know anything about insurance. After fifteen years of training, I knew enough to want to set up my own like John Fairbain did in 1845, naming it Nyaradzo which today is the second largest life office in the land, second only to Old Mutual themselves. I have learnt many lessons from my experiences.

I often think about John Fairbain, the Scotsman, who in 1845 with the support of his friends incorporated the Mutual life Society of South Africa in Cape Town, changing it to Old Mutual after another group of friends had incorporated a new entity, Colonial Mutual. The board and management of the Mutual Life Society of South Africa would change the name of their enterprise to Old Mutual to distinguish themselves from the upstarts, Colonial Mutual, who had also set up shop in the city.

When I am faced with challenges running Nyaradzo today, I try and go back to 1845 and the years after for inspiration. I think about the many challenges Old Mutual has faced on their journey to where they are today, the Russo-Japanese war of 1905, two Anglo-Boer wars, the great depression and two world wars, apartheid and many others and yet they came out of it, survived and thrived. I think about what John Fairbain would have done faced with challenges back then and now. Usually I get inspired and move forward. Assuming he together with his buddies had created a founders club to which only founders of insurance companies would belong, I would have been allowed to join that club on the morning of the 1st of March in 2001 when I walked into Livingstone House, an Old Mutual property as a tenant, as CEO of a new enterprise Nyaradzo.

Maybe he and his colleagues would have set rules that only founders of organisations that survive ten years would be allowed membership. In that case I would have been a member of the founders club on the 1st of March 2011. At Nyaradzo at 20, I am sure I would have been ready to put my name in the hat for the chairmanship of it.

I hope that one day there will be someone enthused enough to set up a founders club to which names of founders of insurance companies deceased and living would belong. It would be an honour to have mine alongside that of John Fairbain today, more so in 100 years time.