

Olugbenga Erinle

An Early Start

Today, Olugbenga “Benga” Erinle and his family are spread all across the globe, from the United States to Europe, the Middle East, and Africa. But at age three, growing up on the West African coast in Nigeria, Benga was inseparable from his older brother, who was about to start first grade. On the morning of his brother’s first day, Benga insisted that he come along with his brother and their mother in the car. When it was time to watch his brother walk into the school, Benga couldn’t restrain himself. He fussed and pleaded until his mother, who was friends with the school proprietor, allowed Benga to stay at kindergarten for the day.

Then the same thing happened the next day, and the next. After three days, the proprietor and Benga’s mother could see that Benga could hold his own with the older children. They decided it would be best just to get out of his way, and with that, Benga became a three-year-old kindergartner. Now the President of 3eTI, Inc., they wouldn’t be the last to realize there was no stopping him. “I went through life early,” Benga says today.

The kindergarten was part of an elite private school, as Benga’s parents, who were exceptionally entrepreneurial, gladly invested in private education for all their children. In the early 1970s, while his seven children were in school, Benga’s father had left his position at a local bank to import color televisions to Nigeria from Italy, selling them out of the family’s garage. He shortly expanded to kitchen appliances, and then began working with Italian businessmen, importing raw materials and assembling and selling appliances locally. He built a business of 250 people, establishing a factory and shops. Benga’s mother, able to manage a household of seven children with time left over, went into beverage distribution and became one of the largest distributors of Guinness

Stout in Nigeria in the late 1970s and 1980s. “I have entrepreneurial DNA,” Benga laughs. “Although my parents had their businesses and were quite busy, they really focused on our education.”

Neither of Benga’s parents had attended college themselves, but in the oil boom of the 1970s, they could see their country developing rapidly around them. They had also exposed themselves through their business ventures to the rest of the world. They knew that a good education would be critical to their children’s success.

“Life in our home was very simple,” he recalls. “You went to school, you came home, you studied, you ate, you studied some more, and then you went to bed. The future was not really a question for us. We would of course finish high school, but we were always going to go further than that. College was a given.”

At the time, Nigeria was not a highly industrialized nation, but seeing his parents’ entrepreneurial success set a strong example for what Benga knew was possible for an individual in the global economy. His family was very comfortable by Nigerian standards, and they would travel to Europe and the US on vacations, but the number one priority for Benga and his siblings was always education and hard work, and his day-to-day life was structured around this concept. In the summer, they would work at his father’s show room for a nominal salary of one dollar a day. “Our job was school,” he remembers.

And so it came to be that Benga was applying to colleges in 1981 at the age fourteen. “After ten years of primary school, I was ready,” he explains. He applied both locally in Nigeria and to schools in the United States. He was accepted to Bowie State College in Maryland, where two of his sisters had gotten degrees in



accounting and sociology. Benga decided to follow in their footsteps by accepting the admission, initially planning to study accounting as well. However, his father nudged him toward a different path. He wanted his son to study engineering and later return to Nigeria to help run the factory, so he offered Benga a deal: Benga would study engineering for one year, and if he didn't like it, he could transition over to accounting. "After that first year, I couldn't imagine being an accountant," he avows. "Everything in me is an engineer. I'm very data driven and rational. If you ask my wife, she would certainly say the same thing."

Benga had a strong aptitude for engineering, and through a dual degree program he obtained a math degree out of Bowie and an electrical engineering degree from Howard University without much difficulty. But soon he would hit the first great obstacle of his life. While in graduate school, without appreciating the possible applications, Benga found himself studying material that was most relevant to missile defense, like trajectory planning and how to intercept objects in space. It was the era of President Reagan's strategic defense initiative, also known as 'Star Wars,' and it became clear to Benga that he would be unemployed if he did not return to Nigeria. He did not see a path to employment in missile defense in the U.S. being a foreign national. Even worse, a return to Nigeria would not assure employment in his field of study. "Nigeria," he says, "obviously had no need for missile defense. The problems there were broader than defending against missiles."

It was also around this time that Benga's father's business began to struggle economically. Thus, he made the decision not to return to his country of origin but to instead find work in the U.S. He settled on the best he could find in engineering: doing federal highway research and development. "That was a rough time for me," he remembers. "It wasn't what I wanted to do. It was tough to transition from control systems, which I loved, to highway safety research. I was crashing vehicles into barriers on computers to predict the impact of vehicles of certain sizes hitting various roadside barriers at varying speeds and angles, which wasn't exactly my cup of tea. It was challenging, but I wanted to get back to communications."

However, even though the position was so

far removed from what Benga wanted to do, he persevered. "You can't worry about what you don't have," he says. "You have to focus on what you do have. The challenge was that I didn't think I was any good at civil engineering... but I was able to find a way to apply what I did know to understand what I didn't. The struggle in those years was not to lose self-confidence, but rather, to be successful in the job I had."

Although it was not his area of specialty, Benga performed so well that he was made a manager of a team of graduate students more highly trained than he was. "My vice president there saw that I was dumb enough to bang my head through things until they got done," Benga says with a smile. "He gave me a chance to lead projects focused on highway research, and we delivered on time and on budget. That marked a seminal point in my career in terms of setting me up for leadership."

Benga's hard work on highway safety testing paid off as the company employing him helped him secure permanent residency in the United States. And after five years there, in the early 1990s, an opportunity came to join a company doing federal contracting called AEPCO, designing communication systems for the US Navy. After just a few more years, Benga was given the greatest opportunity of his life thus far, in what would begin a career-defining role in wireless communications and systems engineering.

It was the mid-1990s at the time, and the dot-com boom was ramping up. As an initiative to tap into the growing tech industry, AEPCO founded AEPTEC Microsystems at the end of 1995 to develop miniaturized sensors that would help improve the performance of laptops. After a couple years, with very little success, AEPCO asked Benga to partner with Steven Chen to re-focus the company towards the U.S. DOD. Benga, Steven, and their team rebuilt the business with a focus on wireless sensor networking and with a new name that it still operates under today: 3eTI.

Unlike many Washington DC-area federal contractors that work in technology, 3eTI did not focus on technology services. Instead, it developed new technology for the US Navy in the form of wireless sensor interface devices that dramatically increased the efficiency of control systems on Navy ships with less labor. "During one of my first times actually going to visit a Navy ship," Benga

recalls, "I saw an individual with a notepad walking around, reading gauges and recording data. Then he would go to the engineer's office and enter the data manually. I asked them, what use is all that information an hour later?"

Many of these systems measured temperature, vibration, pressure, and other time-sensitive data. Benga and his team developed systems that could measure and control those facets in near real-time, a capability extremely valuable to the US Navy.

From 1997 to 2006, Benga and his team built 3eTI to a \$25 million dollar business, as a subsidiary of AEPCO, employing up to 130 people. They extended their offerings beyond wireless sensor networks to include wireless security products that are approved by NIST and the NSA for use by the military and federal enterprises. But as they struggled to reach the \$30 million mark, they decided to sell the business. What followed was a series of sales that nevertheless kept Benga and, for some time Steven as well, leading the company.

First, they were acquired by a public company, EF Johnson out of Dallas, Texas, in 2006. "It was a challenging time during the EF Johnson years," Benga admits. "It was our first experience being part of a public company. We realized very quickly that the strategy had to be about meeting certain goals in a 90-day period. When you're an entrepreneurial bunch used to developing nifty things that solve unique problems, and then you shift into an environment where, yes, you can do great things, but 90 days later you have to meet certain financial targets? An approach like that starts to dilute one's focus."

About four years later, EF Johnson had to go private, and Benga was part of the team to execute that transaction. They were purchased by Francisco Partners, a private equity firm, in 2010. Then in February of 2011, 3eTI was acquired by Ultra Electronics, an international defense, security, transport, and energy company.

In considering the reason for his success and the source of his strength in the face of adversity, Benga says with certainty that it was his upbringing. "My parents never allowed us to rest on what they had," he says. When he had asked his parents for an allowance when he was little, they asked him what he could possibly need it for. He remembers them saying, "You have a driver that takes you to school and brings you home.

You have breakfast before you leave and dinner when you get home. We clothe you. What do you need money for?"

On Saturday mornings, Benga's mother would have him and his brother thoroughly wash the balcony that ran around their house. "She wanted discipline," he explains. "We worked in spite of what we had, and we worked very hard. It became a large part of who I am."

Equally as important to the fabric of his character is his faith. "I remember very well the single time we missed church on Sunday," he recalls. "That was the Sunday my father had come back from Europe with a VCR. We were very excited as my father set it up. He had brought back one VHS tape: *The Bible* on video. We stayed up all night watching it, and by morning everyone was too tired to go to church." After Benga came to the United States, he began attending church with his brother and sisters in Washington, DC, where he says his personal experience really began. "In my personal Christian faith," he explains, "you have the latitude to pursue your passions and dreams, but you have a responsibility to follow certain guidance and teachings as established in the Holy Scriptures. As you give yourself to that, you find discipline and you find you are able to achieve in spite of the invisible barriers we all face.

"This applies to business leadership and vision as well," he continues. "If you can see the end goal with your own eyes, there wouldn't be much to challenge people. Vision in business is about being able to see something that may or may not be clear. But when you have faith, you have a vision you can obtain."

Today, Benga has a family of his own. "My wife, Cara, has been a stalwart in my life," he avows. A graduate of the Rhode Island School of Design, she gave up her career when she and Benga had children. "She couldn't stand to imagine our children in day care," he says. Cara is also the reason Benga has an MBA. As he struggled to turn 3eTI into the mid-\$20 million company it would eventually become, his wife encouraged him to go to school to learn how to run a business.

"I told her that I was running a business," Benga says, "and that I knew how to do that. But then she opened my eyes to other truths, and to what I needed to do. And of course, she was right. She supports me, and she is my biggest fan. If I

had nothing else to do, I'd want to spend my time traveling the world with her."

Benga sees similarities between his relationship with his wife and the marriage of one of his role models, Colin Powell. Benga, who was considering quitting his job to work for Powell's presidential campaign if he were to run, had always admired Powell's respect for his wife and his soft-spoken nature. "When I talk to Cara, I say that you have to watch people who are accomplished and face adversity," he says. "They handle themselves well and don't get belligerent. They don't get overly emotional or misspeak or say things they will regret. That's how I aim to operate as well." He would urge other young entrepreneurs entering the business world today to maintain that same level-headed, down-to-earth character, and, of course, to propel forward with the same intransigent attitude that started him early through kindergarten, through his

professional development, and toward success.

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– By **Gordon J. Bernhardt, CPA, PFS, CFP®, AIF®**

About Gordon J. Bernhardt

President and founder of Bernhardt Wealth Management and author of Profiles in Success: Inspiration from Executive Leaders in the Washington D.C. Area, Gordon provides financial planning and wealth management services to affluent individuals, families and business-owners throughout the Washington, DC area. Since establishing his firm in 1994, he and his team have been focused on providing high-quality service and independent financial advice to help clients make informed decisions about their money. For more information, visit www.BernhardtWealth.com and [Gordon's Blog](#).

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