Errol Unikel

Changing the Game

A beginning less than humble. A drive to find your way out, even if it takes everything you have. Strife, then success, followed by the kind of indomitable will that says, "If I never stop striving, I'll never slip back to where I was." The University of Chicago psychologist who interviewed Errol for a job opportunity in later years called it Southside Syndrome. And though Errol Unikel grew up on the West Side of Chicago, he has a Southside soul.

Errol's is a story not only of exceeding expectation, but of evading much less favorable

outcomes. Growing up in a cramped one-bedroom apartment with his parents and older brothers, it might have been easy to suspect that the Unikel boys would live life confined to the same hardworking blue collar existence that defined their youths.

But even in those early years, Errol recognized the power of going beyond what people expected to change the game. "Some kids at school called me Errol Unicorn because it sounded

like my last name, and I embraced that," he remembers today. "Being different, unique, and creative became my mantra."

Errol's father had immigrated to the US with Errol's grandmother from Ukraine in 1919 when he was seven, shortly after his father was killed. After two years, mother and son settled in Chicago, where they had no family and virtually no support system. The boy quit school at the age of sixteen and got a job at a print shop. He would work as a printer until he was 75 years old. He married Errol's mother, an intelligent and traditional woman. Their first son was born, followed seven years later by their second son and then Errol eleven months after that. "Our mother, especially, was supportive beyond belief," Errol recalls. "For her, the sun rose and set on her boys, and she was totally devoted in wanting us to be happy and successful. That meant a lot."

The three boys shared the one bedroom in the apartment, while Errol's parents slept on a pull-out couch in the main room. His father worked a second job at a men's haberdashery on 22nd and Michigan, where Al Capone used to buy his shirts. "It was the era of rough-and-tumble Chicago and a bit before my time," Errol recalls. "As the breadwinner, my father worked hard to support the family and was incredibly responsible and self-sustaining his entire life, setting a great example for us."

As kids, Errol and his middle brother played softball and basketball and flew kites in the park. He remembers moments spent with his mother listening to The Lone Ranger on the radio while waiting for his father to come home from work, and the day their eldest brother introduced Errol to the spectacular delicacy known as pizza. And while the family lived frugally, they found ways to take modest summer trips driving to places like Mackinac Island and

Atlantic City. "Those were special times together as a family," Errol says.

To escape the neighborhood as it got rougher, the family moved to Chicago's Northside when Errol was ten. Though they still lived in a modest apartment building, the boys now attended school with wealthier kids. "Material stuff had never been a big deal to us until we moved, and I was one of a few kids without a bike," he recalls. "My brother got a job at a drugstore, which I took over when he quit. I saved up \$12 and bought an old bike that I could use to make drugstore deliveries, which earned me tips. Then at age twelve I started delivering meat orders for a butcher shop. I remember that being cold and windy."

Later, while still a young teenager, Errol got a job making milkshakes at the third McDonald's in the world, in Chicago. He worked

his way up to the window, where he dealt directly with customers. A short time later, he was promoted to grill man making a whopping \$1.15 an hour. "I was ambitious," he reflects. "I was always working hard to pull myself up. I took a job as a janitor, at a warehouse unloading trucks, and later selling shoes. I liked working—the feeling that I was always in the game, and that life was unfolding."

Though Errol and his brothers were smart, they often pushed the envelope at school and often wound up in the principal's office for goofing off. Because he had skipped a grade in elementary school, Errol started high school at age thirteen. Sometimes distracted by friends and girlfriends, there were certainly times when education took a backseat for Errol. During his junior year, he cut class to be "one of the guys," until a teacher sat him down and reminded him that he was smart, and that if he applied himself, he could do better in life. "I began to get the idea that maybe I wasn't just destined to work in a factory," he recalls. "My parents were very intelligent, but they never got the chance to pursue an education They wanted something more for us. They pushed us to excel in school so we could move ahead in the world."

Aside from the encouragement to do well in school, Errol's parents gave him absolute freedom, which built in him a sense of independence and responsibility that became central to his character. His grades earned him a scholarship to attend the University of Illinois's Chicago campus. After going "downstate" to the Champaign-Urbana Campus in his junior year, he focused his studies in mechanical and industrial engineering, and fortuitously took his first computer programming course. He received a \$500 award for outstanding industrial engineering work from the American Society of Tool Manufacturing Engineers, was appointed an officer in the Industrial Engineering Society, and received the distinct honor of being named an Edmond James Scholar. "Those recognitions were surprising because I just didn't see myself that way," he recalls. "I didn't think I was exceptional."

Errol worked for Illinois Bell during the summer after his junior year and then graduated very high in his class in industrial engineering. He landed a job at IBM in Poughkeepsie, New York, during the summer after his senior year where he worked on computer programming in their development lab. Influenced by his brother, Errol

considered law school and patent law, but the lack of financial aid led him to pursue engineering graduate schools instead. He was offered a full ride to New York University with a NASA fellowship, and a full ride to Northwestern University with a living stipend. He preferred Northwestern, which then came up with a NASA fellowship of their own, and Errol remained in his beloved Windy City. "Through that whole process, I understood more and more that I had some good things going for me, and that that mattered," he says.

When he finished his master's degree in engineering with a focus on management sciences and computer science, Errol started with AT&T at Illinois Bell. He then spent six years at AT&T's Bell Labs in New Jersey working on advanced computer systems development before returning to Illinois Bell. During those exciting days in the computer industry, he worked on a number of leading edge projects, including the installation of the first emergency 911 system in the world and the first mechanization of the telephone book.

Around that same time, Errol made his first trip to Yankee Stadium, where he happened to drive past an attractive young woman who had a flat tire in the parking lot. "It was an extra inning ballgame, and we had both left early," he says. "I stopped to help and we ended up married with three kids. That was a life-defining moment for me. Betsy and I have been married for 45 years now and are still going strong."

A big shift came when Errol moved out of the "systems" world and into operations. Soon after came a promotion at AT&T in New Jersey in the role of network operations planning. When the AT&T Divestiture was decreed around 1981, Errol was assigned to work on the extensive team that would dismantle and reassemble the one million employees, \$100 billion in assets, 24 operating companies and subsidiaries of the Bell System. There were some amazing people on that team all over the country across the Bell System, and Errol ran the "war room" at AT&T headquarters, the nerve center of the operation. "It was one of the biggest project management challenges ever undertaken," he recounts. "It was a monumental task that took two years of my life - days where I'd come into the office at 6:30AM and work straight through to 5:30 AM the next day. That's Southside Syndrome. That's being goal-focused and getting it done. If it was humanly possible, I was going to

stick to it and try to make it happen."

He excelled on the tech side of the company and also in operations, but his managers saw something else in him-his signature willingness to step outside the box and take on challenges. After the Divestiture, he was given several marketing assignments, including involvement in AT&T's marketing initiatives at the Olympics, United States Telephone Association shows, various sporting events; the launch of an early initiative to create internet-like infrastructure under AT&T's Universal Information Services program; and supporting sales teams all over the country. An interesting situation occurred in 1985 when he was handling the marketing program for the U.S. Telephone Association Show in Las Vegas. AT&T's Network Systems Group was hosting a cocktail party at Caesar's Palace, planning for 2,000 people to come. When a top competitor set up an ice cream social in the front ballroom and might intercept the AT&T guests, Errol quickly hired twenty attractive greeters and strategically placed them at various points to entice the guests past the competitor and to the main event. "That move created quite a buzz among the AT&T people and guests," he reflects. "Not long afterward, I was fortunate to get some backing to become one of several AT&T employees to be granted a Sloan Fellowship to pursue a Master's in Management degree either Stanford or MIT."

Errol was sent to Stanford University, where he joined a class of 42 exceptional individuals from around the world. His family went with him for the year-long program, and he still feels it was one of the most meaningful experiences of his life. When he returned to AT&T from California, Errol was assigned as Regional Director of Sales in the Washington DC area. He was soon moved to a national sales team focused on new markets, where his team grew sales from around \$250 million to over \$600 million in about three years. During that time, he created the "Golden Unicorn Award" that he gave ceremoniously to people he worked with who demonstrated "unique unusual" and performance - characteristics Errol valued and felt important to recognize in others.

Errol's success and rise at AT&T did not come without sacrifices, however, and he particularly remembers Betsy's support as he traveled extensively for work. She was often left

alone to raise three young children, "Behind every successful man is a strong woman," Errol quotes. "She was a rock for me, and she did an incredible job raising our kids into responsible, competent, successful adults."

Through his various positions, Errol was known for his unparalleled enthusiasm. Colleagues and managers observed how he threw his entire self into the task at hand, whether personal or professional. "Someone told me that, when I work, people think that's all I do," Errol recalls. "And when I play, people think that's all I do. Whatever I'm doing, I go all in and am fully committed." He also gave the impression that he would take on the impossible—a trait that came in high demand during several of his assignments.

One interesting opportunity came around 1990, after California passed a law requiring its public utilities to make twenty percent of their purchases from women and minority-owned firms, AT&T's Network Systems Group decided to set up a women and minority-owned business program, and they chose Errol to head the effort. "The company truly wanted to enact real change," Errol recalls. "I thought they were crazy for picking me, but in four years, we managed to do \$2 billion worth of business with women and minority-owned firms." Thanks in part to Errol's efforts, the company was selected as Corporation of the Year by the U.S. Department of Commerce in 1995. He spent the next year or two as a marketing vice-president working on the spin-off of Lucent Technologies, among other marketing projects.

After 31 remarkable years with the company, Errol retired from AT&T/Lucent Technologies and decided to pursue other business interests. He created and founded Unicorn Technologies LLC to serve as an umbrella company for all the things he might do. He then got the unique opportunity to join a team going to Brazil to run the privatization of the Brazilian telephone company. In that capacity, he was able to apply the best practices he had learned about network operations through the AT&T divestiture. After taking the company apart and helping to launch a number of new companies, the sale of all the pieces brought in \$19 billion for Brazil. "Beyond the business activities, I came to love the Brazilian people," he remembers. "I was the only American on our team who put in a significant effort to learn Portuguese, which meant a lot and

helped me make many new friends there."

When he returned to the US, Errol considered a few options and attended a meeting put on by the Marino Institute Entrepreneurship, announcing that he had recently retired. "I told them I was a cashed-out executive looking for things to invest in, and the room full of entrepreneurs almost imploded," he recalls. "I did angel investing and venture capital for the next four years, becoming a managing partner of a small venture fund. Later, I became a consultant, CEO, and even did some executive coaching for small entrepreneurial companies. One important aspect of that period was that I started running large venture conferences in the DC area and Boston, some attracting five hundred attendees. I put together speakers and panels addressing topics like 'The Best Deal I Never Did' and 'Pitchfests' that gave numerous startup companies the opportunity to pitch their companies to investors. When you own a small business, you're doing a little bit of everything. You're the last one there at the end of the day, making copies and cleaning up before you turn the lights off. It's not like the corporate world, where you have people to take care of things for you. I don't mind getting my hands dirty; in fact, I love it. I love getting in there, taking on the challenges, and making things happen. It was a fun time."

After venture capital and the "dot com" bust, through Unicorn Technologies, Errol was asked to come to Boston to help reinvent the Massachusetts Electronic Commerce Association. Working with a small team, they created the New England Business and Technology Association, running programs on timely topics including information technology, financial services, retail and logistics, medical technology, and pharma, among others. They also launched leadership roundtables addressing important topics of the day. After three years and considerable success with that organization, he was asked to come to Syracuse to work on the economic revitalization of upstate New York. "Our mantra was that technology is the enabler of business growth," he says. "We ran programs on information technology, alternative energy, biotechnology, nanotech, medical technology, and pharma, and also had a strong focus on higher education. In that endeavor, I felt like we fell short in the end. At that time, the challenges in Upstate New York included a perception of too much regulation and

high taxes. It also seemed that the young people coming out of the many excellent universities were leaving the area for greener pastures elsewhere. I do believe, though, that someday they'll come out of it."

Errol "retired" again in 2012, only to find himself soon itching for a new challenge. Around that time, he and Betsy were getting a new home insurance policy. Years earlier, someone had come to their house to create a photo inventory of their possessions. He thought about doing it again, but this time, he would do a video inventory. It stirred in Errol a strong interest in film and video, something that he had been involved with a number of times during his careers, so he and Betsy decided to pursue a new business opportunity.

They decided to start a business doing home inventory videos for insurance and estate planning purposes, naming it Home Contents Videos. At their daughter's suggestion, they expanded their video services to include marketing and promotional videos to help companies create personal connections with potential clients and increase revenues. "Once you had a powerful message on video, you could reach countless people through a variety of channels," he says. "Video is a way to make a good first impression every time. We soon changed our name to Rainmaker Video, which we were fortunate to get. The rainmaker is normally the person who brings in new business."

The company's mission was further defined in 2013, when Errol became acquainted with the Association of Personal Historians, a group specializing in books, videos, audio recordings and other means to document personal and family histories and life stories. They quickly added personal and family life stories to Rainmaker's repertoire—the product line that has now become Errol's passion. "I love diving into a person's life, ancestry, experiences, lessons learned, and dreams," he says. "It's deeply meaningful to me. I think of how much I'd love to see a video of my own grandparents or great grandparents telling me in their own words who they were and what their world was like."

The personal story work is most valued by families with aging parents and grandparents. At the outset of the process, Errol does extensive interviews with family members and the subject of the story to get a good handle on the project's goals and storyline. Maybe a grandmother wants to create a video tribute to her deceased husband so their grandchildren can know the man she fell in love with, and not just the man they lost in his old age. Once the project's goals are delineated, Errol pulls from his extensive series of outlines and questions to help design that particular life story video. He also uses interesting perspectives and vantage points, ancestry data, defining life moments, old films or photographs, and small details to add color. "I especially love the questions that detail the subject's ethical will-Who are you? What are your values? What do you believe in? What do you want to pass on?" says Errol. "You see a lot of the same themes—do good, do the best you can, make a contribution, and leave the world a better place. It's an opportunity to connect your audience with the human spirit in the most profound, personal way."

Today, Betsy is co-owner of Rainmaker Video and handles the financial and human resources aspects of the business. "She's always been a great life partner, and I love having her as a business partner now," Errol says. "Our relationship is deeper and better now than it's ever been, enriched by our work together. We're a great support system for each other and I'm very grateful for the relationship we have."

The Unikels also focus on their five grandchildren, who all live nearby. Errol has also been a part of Planning for Senior Life, a group that helps guide people in all aspects of their lives as they transition to and through their senior years. He also worked in past years with Capital Commitment, a DC metro area jobs program to underemployed equip unemployed and individuals in the inner city with valuable life skills, work skills, and support. "I've never been to a Capital Commitment graduation that hasn't brought tears to my eyes," he says. "We changed peoples' lives, and they changed my life. It was a phenomenal program."

In advising young people entering the working world today, Errol underscores the importance of going for it. "You can't achieve big if

you don't try," he insists. "Whether it's that graduate program you'd love to attend, that job or career you want, or that person you'd love to dance with, you have to just go for it and see what happens." He also describes goals as mountains that leaders must stand atop, inspiring others to join them. "Leader's don't push, they beckon," he explains. "They get out ahead and then summon others forward. The best you can do is to motivate others so their will and motivation is self-generating and self-initiating."

Beyond that, Errol's example is a testament to the power and possibility of breaking through the status quo in reaching for new levels of success. "Breakthrough is achieving beyond what's predictable. You do that by changing the game," he says. "Say you're on a trajectory for a ten percent increase in revenue, but deep in your gut, you want so much more. You need to look for a way to generate a discontinuous shift, break out of the linear pattern, and get yourself or your company on a totally new level. It's about getting on a higher trajectory. Look for unique, unusual, and sometimes daring approaches. Let your enthusiasm loose. Love it. Embrace it. That's how you change the game."

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