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THE CORPORATE CALLING OF ERNIE SULLIVAN

His Classic Life Story Unfolds a Journey Filled with Purpose.

by Ella Coleman

Rarely in modern times does an individual have the career opportunity to sprout, develop, grow and mature successfully through just one or two organizations. Few have withstood the downsizing, layoffs, buyouts and mergers prevalent over the past two decades. But one executive has scaled the ladder of success at one of the largest corporations in America, straight out of high school and is there today. No, he is not a senior citizen. Ernie Sullivan, 48, is a highly energized and gifted corporate and community leader.

As Senior Vice President and National Staffing Manager of Bank One, Sullivan, sits at the table where decisions are made. With over 24 years of experience in human resources, including staffing, employee/labor relations, training and national management, he currently manages a budget in excess of 25 million dollars.

There is a classic life story behind Sullivan's success that unfolds a journey filled with purpose. Born the fourth of eleven children to Robert and Emma Sullivan, little Ernie learned early about sharing and contributing to the family household. Since their family lived in the inner city with limited income, Ernie created his first job at age seven. "This job was somewhat unique in that it developed into a 'small business.' Within the inner-city project, each housing group was assigned a trash bin. Each week these trash bins had to be cleaned by rotating families. I quickly realized that I could offer this service to the area residents at a small and reasonable rate. The money I earned was always given to the 'rock' of the family, my mother," Sullivan explained.

As a young boy, Sullivan also grasped other valuable lessons and principles. "I learned the values of

determination and self-confidence, and their relationship to success. I committed to myself early in life that one day I would not have to share one suit among three brothers, or depend on others to have just the necessities of life," Sullivan declared. Yet, in spite of scarcities, he clarified, "I was not unhappy as a child with family relationships or sharing. I was not satisfied with the standard of living, nor were my parents."

His family's struggle to make ends meet only infused Ernie with motivation and determination to pursue something better. "This desire to succeed was constantly reinforced by my parents, and therefore, became a key part of my outlook on life," Sullivan said.

Other key experiences impacted his life in elementary school. "One of these experiences centered around the relationship between the school principal, Merrill Stevens and I. I was in the fifth grade when I first encountered this impressive man. Unfortunately, the encounter was due to fighting in school, which I was prone to at that time in my life. I remember him being a powerful force, but also as a man who took the time to show genuine concern and compassion for children who were in desperate need to identify with someone who cared," Sullivan said.

It was Mr. Stevens who spoke life-impacting words into Ernie's life during his fifth grade year. "I remember being specifically singled out by this man as someone who had potential."

During Ernie's last year at Windsor Elementary, Stevens opened a door of opportunity for all sixth grade students who were maintaining at least a B average — the possibility of becoming student Mayor. Eight students, including Ernie, announced their desire to campaign for the office. "Each student was given four weeks to prepare campaign slogans and speeches. I remember telling the students, dur-



Photographs of corporate executive Ernie Sullivan during his teen years and college graduation, surround the portrait of his mother and late father, Mr. and Mrs. Robert and Emma Sullivan.

ing my speech that from north, south, east and west, Ernie Sullivan is the best.' I was elected by an overwhelming margin," Sullivan recalled.

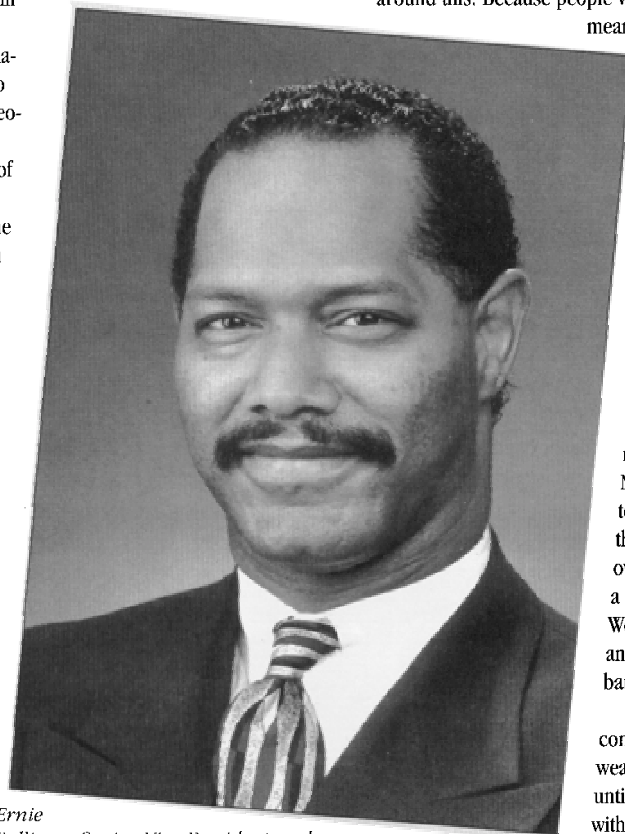
This political victory at such a young age initiated a pattern of high achievement that would continue as Ernie grew and developed. In fact, his junior high school days were filled with academic success which he said was fueled by the spirit of competition. Although Linmoor Junior High was much larger and more challenging than he had been accustomed, it made him even more determined to succeed. "It was this situation that gave me incentive to succeed." But his success at Linmoor was also influenced by another fellow student — Robert (Bob) Rea. "The friendship that Bob and I enjoyed was both genuine and unique. It was unique because we were both a part of an era in which Black and White friendships were not the trend. However, we both defied our respective races in order to enjoy both academic and social contact. The impact of this relationship in my life cannot be put into words. I learned that people were people and that race was not a good 'yardstick' for measuring the worth of an individual. I learned the value of friendship and its distinct place in the life of many human beings," Sullivan emphasized.

His years at Linden McKinley High School proved to be very productive and interesting to say the least. Sullivan excelled academically and socially in this inner city, predominantly Black school where student activists staged various forms of Black protest to address the issues of discrimination and racism which coincided with what was happening nationally at the time. In talking with various classmates who knew Sullivan, they stated that he was a "leader and diplomat" admired by his teachers and peers.

Upon graduation, Sullivan was hired by Bank One as a Management Trainee. In the corporate environment at Bank One Sullivan learned and advanced quickly. After two years he was promoted to

Fraud Investigator, then to Personnel Generalist, Professional Recruiter and to Employment Manager in 1979. He made these accomplishments while finishing his college education at Capital University in Columbus, Ohio, where he earned a Bachelors degree in Business.

He continued in that position until an offer was presented to him by Rockwell International to become their Professional Staffing Manager, an attractive opportunity he accepted. His first few years at Rockwell, 1981-85, were years of great career growth, he said. There he supervised a recruiting group of ten people and hired the staff that would be needed to build the 100 B1 Bombers, which worked out of Columbus, Ohio, Tulsa, Oklahoma, and Los Angeles, California. Sullivan performed well and advanced quickly at Rockwell and was promoted to Employee Relations Manager within a



Ernie Sullivan, Senior Vice President and National Staffing Manager for Bank One, is a focused, high-energy, gifted executive who recognizes the value of family, mentors and friendships in his life and success.

year, and then in 1985, to Staffing & Employee/Labor Relations Manager. "This was the first time I realized how much I really enjoyed business travel. It was a good feeling to be recognized in more than one location as a leader and having people looking forward to your visit, and actually planning a full business and entertainment schedule for you. This was a big boost to my personal self-esteem and confidence. Imagine, at 30 years of age I was a key person in meeting Rockwell's need to hire over 12,000 employees," Sullivan expounded.

Also, Rockwell offered Sullivan his first opportunity to work with a large number of minority professionals. "This was very positive as I was able to see other African American professionals who were successful and to build strong friendships with them. However, there was also some learning around this. Because people were of the same race, it did not necessarily mean they had the same values, morals and com-

mitment levels. Some of my early years of experiences at Rockwell taught me the importance of looking at the character of an individual as opposed to feeling safe because of our common ethnic background," Sullivan explained.

Once again, as at other critical times in Sullivan's personal and professional development, a mentor came forth to helpfully influence him. This time it was Arthur Norman, a senior human resources executive at Rockwell, who Sullivan worked for from 1983-86. "His counsel and private talks with me became pivotal in my ability to prepare myself for high level executive positions. Art Norman was the first non-Black person to talk to me openly about racial prejudice 'fitting in,' the importance of good relationships, and overcoming the obstacles associated with being a Black man trying to rise in the corporation. We would take regular walks through the plant and he would give me 'formulas' for overcoming barriers in the organization," Sullivan said.

One of those barriers, which Sullivan had to consider was dress. He had been accustomed to wearing bright-colored suits and platform shoes until Norman shared some important information with him. In the summer of 1984, Norman asked Sullivan to come to his office. Knowing Sullivan's career goal was to become a Human Resource Director, Norman gave him a book. "He pulled out a book that had profiles of all of the top Human

Resource directors in the country. He told me to take the book home and come back the next day and tell him what I learned. I pondered over the book and took the easy answer. The next day I told Art that all the executives were White and was he telling me my career goals would be unattainable? He took the book back and asked me to look more carefully. It was then that it hit me. Aside from being White, all of these executives looked the same. They had on black, gray or blue suits with very crisp white shirts. On that particular day, I was wearing an orange suit with light colored platform shoes. After sometime, Art said to me, 'You must look the part of what you are aspiring to.'" Of course, Ernie never wanted to look white but he could put on the proper "team uniform." Sullivan said this marked a difficult time in his and Norman's relationship because Norman had gotten

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personal. "I could have told him that he was off base, out of line, etc. Instead, I went out and bought three new suits. It was here that I learned that conforming without giving up your principles can be a good thing. I was soon welcomed into the Rockwell Club as a hard-working polished-looking executive," Sullivan said. In fact, his years with Norman were progressive to say the least. He was promoted three times and in 1986, was considered within the top four human resources professionals at the facility. He recalled, "I was very happy with my job, my personal life and some small wealth accumulation."

However, all his prosperity at Rockwell would soon come to a "screeching halt." In 1987, the federal government announced that it was ending the B1 Bomber program and that all B1 Bomber employees would be laid off by the end of 1988. "This was the first time in my life that I faced the prospect of not having a job. Also, because I was a Human Resource Leader, I was assigned to manage the layoff of over 12,000 employees. Many of the people were friends and co-workers," he emphasized.

Times were stressful for the entire Rockwell International workforce. So much so, until one employee just could not deal with the pressure. "One of my friends at Rockwell, Dan Marcus, committed suicide with a shotgun. The note to his significant other just said that he could not cope with losing his job and his mounting financial responsibilities. This was truly a sad time for me. I remember thinking that I never wanted my job to be that important. My job is what I do, it is not who I am. I can find another job," he said.

He did find a new job or, better stated, "a new job found him." Obviously, his talent was extraordinary, which led his former boss at Bank One, Ivan Harper, who had heard about the situation at Rockwell, to offer him a position. "He actively contacted me about returning to the bank as the Columbus, Ohio Employment Manager. The opportunity to return to Bank One was very appealing to me. I had always liked the environment and the people at the bank. On February 22, 1988, I rejoined the Bank One organization," Sullivan said enthusiastically.

Since Sullivan already knew and liked the people at Bank One, his transition into his new position was smooth. "They knew me and my capabilities. The lesson here is: never burn bridges and avoid creating conflicts with key people. You never know when your 'network' will be the conduit to your next opportunity," he explained.

His next opportunity to advance came in 1992, when Ivan Harper decided to accept another position and Sullivan was asked to

helps to get things done. It removes barriers and it makes people want to work with you. All of this is critical if one is to be successful at this level," Sullivan said.

As Bank One continued to grow from 1992-95, it went from having 18,000 employees to over 50,000. This growth created many new career opportunities because of the bank's territorial expansion into 12 states with more on the horizon. It was during this time that another key individual entered Sullivan's career life—Mike Hager. Sullivan expounded, "He had always been the Director of Human Resources for Bank One, but I had not reported to him directly. In 1995, he asked me to become the Bank's National Staffing Manager. This meant that I would have 250 people in 12 states and be responsible for all hiring in the Bank One organization. Other than Mike's job, this was probably the most significant position in Human Resources. I accepted this role with great pride."

Yet again, relations was key for effectiveness, and Sullivan's relationship with Hager was good. "Mike Hager was a hard worker. He had come through the ranks and truly understood the obstacles and the struggle of corporate life. More importantly, Mike was a good and fair man. I can truly say that he was the first boss who became a friend. I would go to his home, not to work but just to socialize. We both liked cars and would spend time discussing 'car care.' We talked about our futures beyond work, and the importance of family. Mike was a good listener and I learned that it was important to listen and try to understand people rather than just 'drive home' your own point of view. You can learn something from everyone regardless of level," Sullivan asserted.

In spite of the wholesome and helpful relationships, Sullivan had made at Bank One, his new job as National Staffing Manager was still quite challenging. Not only did he have to work in Columbus, but in Dallas, Phoenix, Indianapolis, Cincinnati, Louisville, Houston, New Orleans, etc. He recalled, "I was away from home a lot. This changed the amount of time available for friends and family. It changed how I would have to work with my long time assistant, Carol Capots. Everything had to become mobile. I had to get a laptop computer and have my mail sent to me in different locations. I had to take advantage of every minute of the day. My schedule had to be



a meeting in Chicago with other top leaders of Bank One.



Member of the Year Award for outstanding leadership with other colleagues.

replace him as the Manager of Executive Selection. He would continue to run the Columbus office, but also have the responsibility for hiring the bank's top tier leaders. This executive selection position was a whole new level for Sullivan, putting him in front of the bank's Chairman, John B. McCoy. "It took me into the place I had always dreamed of — the Board Room. This is where I really learned that building relationships was the most important thing at the top. Competency was a given. Relationship

altered constantly. In short, we had to develop a new way of working. We had to literally create and plan for personal and family time.”

Although Sullivan’s new job was a large undertaking and made him wonder if he was being consumed by it, he says he actually enjoyed it. “What was even more interesting is that I was happy. Yes, I had some bad days but I enjoyed the challenge, the visibility, and the good fortune that came with all of this success. Even more importantly, I had more to share with the people I cared about. The lesson for me during this time was to adapt, to accept change, and to be thankful for having good people partnering in your success. You cannot do it alone,” he declared.

Knowing this truth, Sullivan gives back to the community from which he came. He is president of the St. Stephen’s Community House Board, which provides training and recreation for youth and adults in his old neighborhood. He also chairs the Ohio Governor’s Workforce Policy Board and the Urban Advisory Board of Boy Scouts of America, and is a past president and current Executive Committee member of Jobs for Columbus Graduates Board.

Sullivan worked with Hager until 1998, when Bank One decided to merge with First Chicago NBD Bank. This expanded Bank One to a total of 95,000 employees and moved its headquarters from Columbus to Chicago. This major growth and abundance, as wonderful as it was, brought with it problems that had to be resolved. Sullivan explained, “The first six months of the merger was a difficult time because we had two of every job in Human Resources. You see, First Chicago already had a National Staffing Manager. This was the first time in many years where I had to compete for a job. I remember thinking, ‘Will Mike Hager get the top job?’ Obviously, I hoped that he would because then I would naturally be the National Staffing Manager and get to stay in Columbus. I did not want to move to Chicago. Everyone and everything I cared about was in Columbus.”

Well, things did not go as Sullivan had hoped. “I was disappointed to learn that Mike Hager would not get the top Human Resources job and that he would be leaving the new organization some time in early 1999. Tim Moen, the First Chicago Human Resources head, would run the new merged organization’s Human Resource function. My first thought was that I would probably not get the top staffing job because Tim would want his own person in Chicago, who he had worked with for many years. It was quite a ‘reality check’ to realize that you can work hard for many years but change is constant and you

must be ready at any time to move on,” he affirmed.

Sullivan said although he was being considered by Moen for a top position in Human Resources, the likelihood of being chosen was slim. He explained, “Tim made a personal visit to Columbus to meet me and talk about the future of the Human Resources function. I remember him telling me that he could not promise me a role in the organization. I remember him telling me that he wanted to get some information about me from senior managers like John B. McCoy, etc.”

To abbreviate what could be a long story,

Moen did choose Sullivan to be the National Staffing Manager of the newly formed financial conglomerate. Thus, Sullivan continues to use his extraordinary talents, skills and wisdom at Bank One today. Having answered his corporate calling, he proceeds in fulfilling his *purpose*.

“Give instruction to a wise man, and he will be still wiser; Teach a just man, and he will increase in learning.”

— Proverbs 9:9 NKJV

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