



Chicago Bears and Ethiopia,What do They Have in Common?

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The answer is, Michael McCaskey, the current Chairman and CEO of the Chicago Bears in the United States National Football League.

The Chicago Bears are a professional American football team based in Chicago, Illinois. The Bears have won almost 17 championships including Super Bowl XX a title as prestigious as winning World Cup Soccer. In 2008, Forbes magazine reported that the Chicago Bears franchise is worth \$1.1 billion dollars.

George Halas started the Chicago Bears in 1920. When he died in 1983 his oldest daughter Virginia McCaskey, took over as the majority owner of the team. Her husband, Ed McCaskey, succeeded her father as Chairman of the Board. It was at this time that their son Michael McCaskey was appointed president of the Chicago Bears. In 1999 Michael McCaskey was promoted to CEO, and Chairman of the board. He has been serving in that capacity ever since.

The Peace Corps years

It is 1965. President John Kennedy's call for public service is reverberating across America. Young people are volunteering by the thousands to serve. One of the young people at that time who heeded the call for service was Michael McCaskey.

He joined the Peace Corps fresh out of college. After doing research of different countries where the peace corps was in service McCaskey was very intrigued with Ethiopia. The beautiful country, long history and tradition, outstanding weather and people [that had great pride in what they had accomplished over hundreds of years] appealed to him.

In June of 1965 Michael McCaskey arrived in Ethiopia. He was assigned to a little town called Fitch (Fee-chay) located north of the capital Addis Ababa, right on the edge of the Rift Valley. For the next two years Fitch would be his home. This was the first time for McCaskey to live and work outside the United States. The school he was assigned to was named Asfa Wossen, and McCaskey started teaching 6, 7, and 8th graders, Science and English.

"My students were astounding, they were highly motivated. You've heard stories about students walking barefoot for 6 or 7 miles every day to go to school, and that fit my students," McCaskey says. "My days as a teacher in Ethiopia changed my perspective on the rest of the world for which I am very grateful," says McCaskey.

Community organizer

The Ethiopian Community Association of Chicago (ECAC) established in 1984, is a non-profit charitable organization committed to serving the cultural, psychological and socioeconomic needs of refugees and immigrants in and around metropolitan Chicago. Skyline in the city of Chicago, the so-called 'Windy City'

Shortly after the organization was founded its Executive Director and Co-founder Dr. Erku Yimer placed a call to the Chairman and CEO of the Chicago Bears, Michael McCaskey. "He had heard that I served in the Peace Corps in Ethiopia," McCaskey says. Yimer asked McCaskey if he would join the advisory board for the Ethiopian Community Association of Chicago. At that time however, McCaskey was starting a new job as CEO of the Chicago Bears. "Give me a little bit of time and I would be happy to serve," was McCaskey's reply. A year later Yimer and McCaskey got together and according to McCaskey it has been a good association ever since.

Right away, McCaskey started exploring ways to help the Ethiopian community in Chicago grow and prosper. Working with Yimer, McCaskey helped start computer training and education program as well as help raise funds to get computers and classrooms. Yimer was also interested in starting an entrepreneurship training seminar. McCaskey and his wife were very receptive to the idea and immediately constructed a program for training. They brought in a very successful Ethiopian entrepreneur [who used to be McCaskey's Amharic instructor in his Peace Corps days] to help.

"Out of that training program any number of businesses including several restaurants were started, and some of them are prospering today," says McCaskey.

This for McCaskey was one way of addressing the challenge of being under-employed. "In Chicago we have very well educated, hard working honest group of Ethiopians who are under-employed. They are working as parking lot attendants or in the service industry, and really they can and should be doing things that bring a better financial reward and more prestige in the community," McCaskey says. "For the entrepreneurial inclined and are willing to take the risk of starting a restaurant, or a messenger service, or a jewelry outlet, all they need is some training, encouragement, and support and they can do very well thank you," says McCaskey.

Give peace a chance

40 years later Michael McCaskey returned to Ethiopia. The year is 2005. War is about to break between Ethiopia and Eritrea. McCaskey and four other Peace Corps volunteers who served in Ethiopia wanted to use the good will the Peace Corps had built over the years to talk to the leaders of Ethiopia and Eritrea and move the brewing conflict away from a war setting and try to get it to the negotiating table.

According to McCaskey it was only because hundreds of Peace Corps volunteers had served in Ethiopia and Eritrea that they were able to talk to the leaders of both countries as well as business, religious and civic leaders, to try to initiate a dialogue between the two countries, instead of going to war.

“Ultimately we were not successful but I think it shows the spirit of the Peace Corps and the good will the Peace Corps had developed over the years,” says McCaskey. They were able to talk to both sides. It turns out the leaders of each country had been trained by Peace Corps volunteers and had a very good memory of them as teachers and people dedicated to try to improve the quality of life both in Ethiopia and Eritrea.

“Both men [Ethiopia’s Melese Zenawie and Eritrea’s Isaias Afewerki] were very intelligent and dedicated to the well being of their own country. But they were stubborn on certain points. We could see it was a complex situation. There were huge forces in place that try as we may; our ability to push was limited. How do wars break out? Why do countries get into a fight with each other? It’s hard to understand,” laments McCaskey.

Amharic volleyball

“I played soccer and plenty of volleyball with my students in Fetchie,” remembers McCaskey of his years as a Peace Corps teacher in Ethiopia. “I learned to play volley ball in Amharic. After I left Ethiopia the next several years it was hard for me to play without giving out the call in Amharic,” says McCaskey.

McCaskey also remembers parent’s day. This was the day parents were invited to the school to see how their children were learning. The occasion was very festive. There was food and drinks, music and dance, and plenty of sport related contests. One of the sporting contests McCaskey remembers participating in was the, thug- of- war.

There are very few level places in Fitchie so the thug- of -war competition between parents and the teachers was held on a slope in the field. “I assumed that we would be playing the thug-of-war pulling across the slope,” McCaskey says. That way neither side would have a particular advantage. That was not the case. To McCaskey’s surprise the parents lined up downhill and the teachers were uphill. First round the parents won. Next the teachers lined up downhill and the teachers won. The final match the parents were downhill and they won. After the contest there were shouts of cheer and jubilation. There was plenty of laughter and excitement. The occasion it dawned on McCaskey was not to see who is stronger, the occasion was how to generate an event that is going to be fun for both sides in which there is no loser.

“I hadn’t thought about it this way. This is very different from the way Americans look at things. For me the incident opened my eyes to another way of thinking about sporting events,” CEO of the Chicago Bears explains.

“All of us who served as volunteers in Ethiopia felt like we learned a lot more from our stay there and from the people that we came to know and love, than we ever thought them. We are honored and privileged to have had the chance to serve there,” says McCaskey.