

Dawn Eidelman

Sencer: This is just formality. Now I'm David Sencer. I'm interviewing Dawn Eidelman [Daughter of Andy Agle, CDC Operations Officer] on the third of April, two thousand and eight at CDC. Dawn knows that she is being taped and has signed permission.
How old were you when you went to Africa?

Eidelman: When we went to Africa I was five years old so I started my formal schooling in Lome, Togo at L'ecole de la Marina, not speaking a word of French on day one and it was a rather traumatic first day of school. I about half way through the day had to use the facilities but didn't know how to ask. They figured out what I needed but then when they showed me the facilities I had no idea how to use the drain in the ground. So luckily we had a long school day and a long lunch and I went home for lunch and my ingenious mother noticed that I had an outfit that was almost identical, persuaded me that nobody would know the difference. I went back for the afternoon and she clued me in how to use the little drain in the ground and astonishingly within a month I was starting to understand the French. They only white kid in the class, pigtails, we had the little inkwells in the desk and by the end kindergarten my father was I think a little bit jealous that my French was pretty solid and quite effortlessly. So, in my line of work now I'm a huge advocate of total immersion for English acquisition. I don't believe in segregating students for a lingual education because I know that children are really like sponges.

Sencer: How long were you in school in Togo?

Eidelman: In Togo I was there through middle of the third grade. So kindergarten first and second, at L'ecole de la Marina, French system but African private school. Third grade was an interesting experience. The first half of the year we were still in Lome and the first house that we had lived in, the bottom floor - excuse me - the bottom floor had become Boutique Togo Agogo and the top floor our school house for the American kids. And we used Calvert which is still in existence now for distance learning and one or two of the moms who had teaching experience facilitated. And we had assembly in the living room and the two bedrooms were I think the odd grades and the even grades. So we did distance learning in an American program and that's when I first started formal studies of English.

Sencer: In addition to learning about how to use the toilette what are some of your other interesting experiences in your formative years?

Eidelman: So many. As I shared on the way over here I really did not like the Sunday ritual of having to take Aralen. It was really nasty and bitter and ugh I just couldn't abide it. So, I didn't take it on a couple of occasions and I became quite ill with malaria and I remember that fever and sitting in the tub taking baths, trying to get that fever to break. That one is definitely a distinct memory. It was actually an idyllic childhood. We didn't have TV. I had a record player and a few records and I know those lyrics to this day backward, forward, inside out. Just a couple of toys and what that really did was promote a comfort level with time in solitude, time for recollection, time to develop an expansive imagination and I regret that more children don't have that experience in childhood now because I think it's very important for really becoming who you're capable of becoming. Having some quiet time and not being programmed all the time with activities. And we had a lot of really cool pets. A family of bush babies, we had a parrot, feisty Senegalese parrot Bud who came back to the States with my mum and lived another twenty years or so in captivity and remained feisty all the way. We also had a podo and that was quite the dramatic story and a small python.

We kept mice in a cage. Every Sunday after waffles and Aralen we would in the afternoon watch the python devour a mouse. That's what we did for kicks. Some men came to paint our ceiling fans, let the mice out of the cage. One of the mice bit the podo and the podo was probably our closest family pet. She would pluck out my dad's chest hairs when he was taking a nap. She got into my mum's birth control pills. Very, very intimate family member and so it was really tragic when she got rabies and she also bit my mother. So the whole family went through the rabies series and I remember Dr. Henn would clean up the syringes and obviously get rid of the needles and everything and make them suitable for water fights so my brother Dave and I would have water fights. But Christmas that year we had a rabies shot because we were going through the series at that point.

So memories of pets and lazy days, a lot of reading, listening to music, very few toys but the ones we had we really cherished. Halloween was fun. We would -they thought that we were absolutely nuts. My mum was a really fun hostess and I remember one year we put sheets over the clothes line to make a tunnel of terror and we dressed up in all kind of different costumes that our tailor made for us and wondered what the crazy Americans were up to. I remember some rollicking fun. There was some great adult parties and they never seemed to mind that we were kind of milling around.

Sencer: I remember visiting your house. It was probably in

seventy, no sixty eight, and George (Lithket) and Don Millar and I we were making our big tour of Africa. It was a very pleasant evening I remember. What was your feeling about life in - of other people in Africa?

Eidelman: Of the Africans or the other Americans?

Sencer: Africans.

Eidelman: Interesting again from a child's perspective. I did have an awareness of being very privileged and I remember one day standing out on the balcony with my doll and looking across the street at an African girl who was about the same age who was also holding up her doll. And just noting the disparity in the quality of the houses that we were living in and feeling that somehow that wasn't fair but I loved the experience of going to L'ecole de la Marina and I think that too has had a profound impact on my world view as an adult. A lot of what I do professionally is - most of our charter schools that we start up and manage are in the inner city and Inc. magazine has something called Inner City 100 the fastest growing companies that serve, that revitalize, generate jobs for, really enhance inner city populations in the U.S. and our company for three years in a row was in the top five. So the need is really great in neighborhoods where children live poverty.

And so much of what I feel really deeply about is not prejudging what children are capable of accomplishing and really holding a high standard and a high expectation for everyone and rising to the occasion as adults to serve that need. And a lot of it I think goes back to how I felt on that first day of school looking around me at the all these kids, African kids who understood everything that was going on in French. I didn't understand a word. It was a hugely humbling experience and I think that that childhood experience and being a minority having - really I recall that it was just a very happy culture. It was a wonderful time in life and I think that that had an impact on the way I see these children in the U.S. living in poverty and not all of them. We serve children in affluent neighborhoods too but I think that even as a child I was keenly aware coming back to the States in seventy two how marginalized African Americans were in this country and just being astonished by that because I'd really idealized the States living overseas and it was - it was a surprise.

Sencer: Were you stationed in any of the other countries in Africa?

Eidelman: We were in Nigeria for a year and we lived in Kaduna in the Hogan's house after they moved out. That was - it was a huge cavernous house great for telling ghost stories. There were parts of

the house we never even went into and that was during the civil war so we stayed very close to home. There we ended up going to a Catholic school, Sacred Heart and that's when I had my encounter with British education and it really for years I had some issues with my spelling as a result. But it was - Nigeria was a positive experience for my brother and me as children but unfortunately that was the time that my parents' marriage was starting to come apart. So that was for them I don't think nearly as positive as Togo had been.

Sencer: You were in a Muslim culture in Kaduna.

Eidelman: Hmm.

Sencer: Did that hinge upon you in any way?

Eidelman: Not in a way that I can recall. I don't really - maybe it had to do with the fact that we were going to a Catholic school but I think I was a little bit oblivious to that because it was never much of an issue with my parents and I don't think that that really registered.

Sencer: I would think that the environment in Togo was a much happier environment then?

Eidelman: It really was. It was just such a positive place and really all the other expats there that we met I loved the Peace Corps volunteers for years as a kid that I aspired to serving in the Peace Corps and it just - it was a great culture. Wonderful gatherings, great music. The music too that my parents had on the reel to reel tapes that we played over and over again. The top one hundred hits of nineteen sixty six Bob Dylan, Blood Sweat and Tears, Beach Boys, but they made for some really wonderful gatherings.

Sencer: You spent some time in Bangladesh with you father?

Eidelman: We did. My brother and I spent about half of the summer. The year must have been seventy five and we went to Bangladesh first and stayed in (Aham) and he was wrapping up some work and then we went together to Nepal and stayed in Dave Newberry's house in Kathmandu and we went to India and we were in New Delhi almost the whole time we were there. We did a couple of side trips. I think my brother and I went to see the Taj Mahal one day and we spent a week on a houseboat in Kashmir as well and that was an interesting experience because the only meat that one could eat there was lamb. So we either ate lamb or things cooked in lamb's grease. The left an impression too. French toast in lamb's grease.

Sencer: Do you still like lamb?

Eidelman: I really don't. Not so much, not if it's gamey.

Sencer: And I think that's - to me that's one of the problems with lamb today is not gamey enough. You hardly know you're eating it. Were you in Bangladesh long enough to have any feeling for the country?

Eidelman: I remember the crushing poverty of the country and seeing a body on the street and I couldn't discern if the person was sleeping or dead. It was, I was just really aware of the poverty and it was also so incredibly muggy. That also left quite the impression. Almost hard to breathe there and in India and you know this was in the back half of the summer so it was incredibly hot and humid. No I just - I remember Bangladesh as being - and I was a little older too. I was fourteen when we visited Dad that summer so I was very aware of children living in poverty and begging and you know missing limbs. It was very hard especially coming from living in the States for a few years then, living a very comfortable middle class lifestyle and then experiencing the poverty was - it was a lot more shocking at that point.

Sencer: Is there anything else about your experiences that you would like to get on the record?

Eidelman: Yeah. I think what's really most remarkable to me about those years besides the fact that it was truly an idyllic childhood and a time to be able to enjoy family, friends, gathering, time for reflection, time to really, to read, to sing, to get to know a few texts really, really well because there weren't a lot of other distractions. And I'm very proud of having been a part of smallpox eradication as a child experiencing that because it was such an amazing endeavor and I remember upstairs in the bar you know the house in Lome dad kept scabs in the freezer of the things of that - we just never went into that refrigerator. It was also a bar. We weren't supposed to be there but I remember even at the time - I remember even at the time being very proud of the work that my dad was doing and really liking the people he was working with and finding it really interesting to hear the stories of when he was breaking bread with the chief of the village and trying to negotiate access to the veiled women so that he could vaccinate them.

I loved the time that I got to spend with both of my parents with that lifestyle. Dad and I used to play chess all the time and that was a lot of fun and we spoke French together and that was enjoyable. From my perspective today it's - I'm very proud to have been a part of something so historic and huge and I loved doing the reunion a couple of years ago. The reflections about how the young doctors and - what were they called? The operations...

Sencer: Operations officers.

Eidelman: Officers, operations officers, really in many ways didn't know what they didn't know. That's something as an entrepreneur that I can really appreciate and it's something that I think it's what's truly remarkable about this global endeavor that was really impressive [inaudible 19.40] at the time. Sometimes not knowing what you don't know, not knowing the magnitude of the project that you're taking on is a blessing and thank goodness, thank goodness we had courageous, bold, ambitious, tenacious, brilliant, dedicated people who with all those qualities didn't know what they didn't know and they kept at it and they chased this disease from the face of the earth.

Sencer: And most of them were very kind people.

Eidelman: Absolutely. Absolutely so. It was, it was a great community to be part of and I remember that vividly even as a child. These were - several of these folks I called uncle for years to come and even at the time I knew that it was special and we were part of something that we could be proud of.

Sencer: Thank you.