**Chapter 8　Starting Insurance Business**

　It has been more than ten years since I started this business of studying abroad. Although I have been successful in lowering the cost of studying abroad, students still have a lot to cover for other expenses, especially overseas travel insurance. They were areas which I wanted the services to be improved.

I left it untouched because starting an insurance company requires a tremendous amount of money. Thus, I have been using an existing insurance company ever since the foundation of the company.

To attend my language school 'Free Bird Institute', the entry and arrangement fee for studying abroad is 100,000 yen, the annual tuition fee is 787,000 yen, and accommodation fee to stay 364 nights at the hostel is 109,200 yen. This is all we receive from each student for a year of studying abroad.

On the other hand, overseas travel insurance fee for one year is be around 250,000 yen at any insurance company. This is about 20% of the total fee to study abroad.

It seems impractical because Fiji is a very safe country, incomparable with the safeness in the United States. Nevertheless, the premium for studying abroad is exactly the same amount, a flat rate whether it be in a country with great public security or a country where a war is about to break out.

I have other dissatisfactions towards insurance companies. For places such as Hawaii and Guam, insurance companies have a 24-hour service window, but for a place like Fiji where there aren't so many tourists, there isn't such a service.

There had been many times where our students got in a dispute with the insurance companies. In most cases, it was because the company had not promptly responded to the students contacting them from Fiji. As seen in the aforementioned "Dengue Incident", it took four days to settle payments for the private medical jet used for an extremely serious case. Even an ordinary person without medical expertise could tell that the health condition of the hospitalized student was getting worse. It was so bad that the staff at my language school took turns to fully support him.

Dissatisfaction with the insurance company's support system was building up. At the same time, I was starting to think, if we could start an insurance business on our own, we would be able to reduce the economic burden of the students and more easily settle payments for serious cases.

But, in order to establish an insurance company in Japan, a minimum deposit of 10 billion yen (I think) to the Financial Services Agency was required. It was not a realistic option for our company that was finally making annual sales that exceeded 1 billion yen. I was ready to give up on this idea when I had quite an inspiration!

"Hey! Why not start an insurance company in Fiji?"

In the same sort of tone as JR's ad of “Hey! Why not go to Kyoto?"

I found out it wasn't that easy. Unlike establishing an insurance company in Japan, I still had to make a deposit to the Financial Services Agency. However, the amount was not unrealistic like in the case of Japan. The required deposit was not 10 billion yen, but 55 million yen (1 million Fiji dollars) in the case of Fiji.

Great! Now this sounds more practical! Okay then, let's get that 55 million yen (550,000US Dollars) ready!

And for financing, let's get listed!

So, our listing plan, once abandoned due to the Lehman shock, started again, incredibly casually. At first, I thought about listing as Mothers in Japan, but I realized I would not need to spend as much money to list on the "South Pacific Stock Exchange" which had just established and structured itself in Fiji. I changed plans to list in Fiji instead of Japan and formed a team with members from the Stock Exchange, securities companies, auditing firms, and consultants.

　This is how the listing plan of the local corporation of Free Bird started.

In order to apply for listing in any country, whether it be in Japan or Fiji, we had to submit audit reports of the last three (?) years. We have been pursuing our listing plan since 2014, and we were blessed with an unexpected luck. Fiji's Financial Services Agency showed us an understanding of our insurance business and approved our business without deposit as long as we limit it to a specific client (students).

Without waiting for the listing approval at the South Pacific Stock Exchange or preparing deposit money, the insurance business at Free Bird was approved by the Financial Services Agency. On February 1st, 2016, we began sales of a studying abroad program with insurance included (because sales of only the insurance would violate laws in Japan).

The student's burden of an annual premium was now reduced from 250,000 yen to 12,9240 yen.

I had already been declared with terminal cancer at Keio University Hospital on January 19th. Thinking that this may be my last job, I drafted and finalized the 200-page clause of our insurance policy, sacrificing sleep. Sales of our insurance premiums started from February 1st. Coincidentally, it was the same day that I was officially diagnosed with Stage IV cancer from my primary physician, Dr. Shimizu, at Keio University Hospital.

All the while I was being treated for cancer, we pursued our plan to listen to the South Pacific Stock Exchange. I wanted to see it through so that in the unlikely event that something happens to me, the company will still be able to run smoothly.

I think it was an exquisite timing that we started the preparations for the insurance business and stock listing. I could feel my physical strength deteriorating, slowly making its way toward death, so I was relieved to know everything was under control. I appreciated that it all happened at this timing.

As it is every time we try something new in Fiji, where time just slowly creeps, there are so many landmines and pitfalls along the way. Waisale, our CFO (Chief Financial Officer) and board members in Fiji did not explicitly report to me their correspondences with the Financial Services Agency and Stock Exchanges, so as not to put the burden on me.

I had given them instructions with specific deadlines, such as "Do so-and-so by this date", and often found myself flipping out on the hospital bed because it had not progressed as much as I had expected (lol).

Fijians really do not know the concept of time. For example: The hostel of the language school was close to completion and I arranged a move-in date with considerable margin. But the hostel was still not finished, even though the students were to move in the next day. Yet, the carpenters tried going home as soon as the clock struck 4. So, we locked the barbed cat fence (fencing with the spiked wires on top) that surrounded the hostel. We had to confine the carpenters in a state where no one could escape and make them work until 6 am the next morning. The construction was completed in the nick of time.

Fijians also pretend they are out and do not pick up the office phone or cell phone when I am angry. This tactic of "pretending to be out" is important for Fijians, who do not like fighting, to sustain their relationships. However, this tactic is annoying as hell when they mindlessly do it for a week. Nothing gets done.

Honestly speaking, the listing plan was not progressing well at all with me trying to remotely control the situation from the hospital room. We were facing people who regularly pretend to be out, even when we are physically in a vicinity. How could I confront them so far away? It certainly wasn't the time for me to leisurely fight cancer. I gathered all the strength I had left, and on September 26th, 2016 I went to the Tokyo office for the first time in seven months.

I returned with a knitted hat on my still quite-bald head and a surgical mask! Both my white blood cell and red blood cell count was only half of an ordinary person. Returning to the office under such condition was not so easy. I quickly became short of breath and risked getting a fever. I decided to work only for three hours a day at the office, but to be honest, that was not enough to realize my dreams. I decided to go to Fiji to take command on-site. Two weeks after returning to work at the Tokyo office, on October 10th, I returned to Fiji. It was also Fiji's 46th Independence Day.

I arrived at Nadi Airport via Hong Kong. Despite it being early in the morning, Principal Baleilevuka and CFO Waisale came to pick me up. I had a brief meeting with them and decided to head to the capital city of Suva from Nadi the following day with Waisale to meet with the people at the securities company and Stock Exchanges. They were sure to pretend to be out if I had called them.

Fijians are best to have as friends and worst to do business with. Although they say yes to any and every proposal you make, once it gets started, they run away or sulk. When prompting, you must do it at just the right frequency or they will start pretending to be out if they feel pressured. Plus, you should prompt them in person if possible, not by phone. And even if I am able to set up a meeting with them, there is this hierarchy similar to a Confucian society, whether it be the young or old, male or female. They start boasting or complaining about being kin to the royal family. This was something a person who just became a Fijian could not understand.

　Anyway, I was able to have a meeting with the Financial Services Agency, the Stock Exchange, and securities company in Suva.

　I instructed them again about the listing plan, shared with them that my goal was to get approval within the year again and told the goal of taking the listing approval within the year, and returned to Japan.

At this point, my cancer was not completely cured. Cancer is not "completely cured" but "in remission", a state of the patient in which cancer cells cannot be found by examination. After finishing my anticancer drug treatment, I was diagnosed as "in remission" at Keio University Hospital. However, malignant lymphoma, the blood cancer I had, have a high possibility of recurring in about two years.

I consulted my pharmacist friend and she suggested I get a second opinion. She introduced to me her acquaintance, who was a malignant lymphoma specialist at Edogawa Hospital.

It is truly a blessing to have a doctor as an acquaintance. Dr. Myojo at Edogawa Hospital saw my much-reduced tumor in the scanned CT image and told me about "ibritumomab tiuxetan+yttrium", the most advanced treatment. I told him I desperately wanted to receive this treatment. He asked if I would like to become the first test patient. So, on December 15th, 2016, I became the first test patient of "ibritumomab tiuxetan+yttrium" at Edogawa Hospital.

When I was injected with ibritumomab, a molecule-targeting drug, doctors at the Edogawa Hospital, were not the only ones that came to observe. There were also many chemists and pharmaceutical manufacturers. Dr. Myojo later became an authoritative figure for this treatment. He thanked me, instead of the other way around.

But anyway! I was given the most advanced treatment of modern medicine.

When I finished my new treatment, I headed to Fiji again. The reason why I badly wanted approval for stock listing within the year was because there is a special tax system for companies listed on the South Pacific Stock Exchange in Fiji. Normally, the corporate tax is 20%, but with the special system it is reduced to 10%. By doing so, we would be able to further reduce tuition as well as offer bonuses to school teachers and host families.

Yet again, the Fijian tactics of pretending to be out started.

When Christmas is approaching, or more like from a month before Christmas, Fijians do not work more than usual. Not only the officials at the Financial Services Agency but also people at securities companies, who we are PAYING for consultation, were not in working mode during this time. With no exception, the enemies were in my company too. Our company board members were no different.

They all lived freely.

Under such circumstances, we did not get approval to list our stock within the year. It became hopeless to receive tax incentives for the fiscal year of 2016.

The new year rung in.

My birthday is on January 10th, so as soon as business started for the new year, I immediately headed to Suva to petition. I told the director of the stock exchange,

"I very much want to get our company listed on January 10th!"

"Because it's my birthday!"

When she heard this, Director Lati at the stock exchange said,

"Sooooooo Sweeeet!"

I was convinced that our company would finally get approval for listing. Yet, nothing happened on my birthday.

We got the approval seven days after my birthday on January 17th. I received our listing approval certificate from the South Pacific Stock Exchange.

We then had to decide our schedule for listing. After thorough discussion, we decided to stock list on February 1st and throw a ceremony the same day, inviting concerned high-ranking government officials.

Though we would need to make a bit of sacrifice, we decided to extend our invitation to all management employees above department director, board members, and shareholders to attend this ceremony in Fiji with expenses covered by us. We were making sufficient profit, and this was a good opportunity to show our appreciation to shareholders that have supported us.

We sent out invitations and 14 people from Japan replied they would attend the ceremony. We also sent invitations to people who supported us in Fiji. It was going to be a big listing ceremony and thank you party with 70 guests at Fiji's best hotel. We started preparing for this party to be held at Intercontinental Hotel.

Now this was a job cut out for Fijians! They worked hard to prepare for the party such as decorating the venue, ordering food, and making name tags. You would think that all of those pretending to be out were a big joke.

On January 29th, our guests from Japan arrived safely in Fiji. It was the start of their 4-night/6-day whirlwind tour. The ceremony was to be held on the fourth day, so we had them visit our two campuses of our language schools in Nadi and Lautoka as well as our national high school. We also arranged a cruise out to one the smaller islands of Fiji on the day before the ceremony to allow them to enjoy this beautiful country.

Both Waisale, the CFO, and I were busy while the shareholders were out cruising. Nevertheless, Director Ali Director of the South Pacific Stock Exchange suddenly notified us that she will be postponing the listing itself because she would not be able to participate in the ceremony.

This was the day before our listing ceremony...

The venue was all set up. Both catering and MC were arranged for. Everything was all set to go. We had to fight for the hard work we had already put in.

Early in the morning on the day of the listing, Waisale and I sent our guests from Japan to Intercontinental Hotel by bus and then returned to the office to start making calls here and there. We were busy trying to persuade Director Ali who was now bent out of shape.

Fortunately, I was familiar with Director Ali's husband, Zarin, so I went to ask him to persuade her. He made calls for us to related places while mumbling, "You know my wife doesn't listen when she already has her mind set. I don't think you should prompt her too much."

The Stock Exchange closes their stock dealing window in the evening. If we don't get a yes from her before noon, we will not be able to make it in time for the ceremony at the Intercontinental Hotel, far from Suva.

Minute by minute, it was approaching noon and we had not yet accomplished our mission.

Our efforts paid off. That evening, Lati who succeeded in persuading Director Ali called to say that it would be fine if we list the next day. However, the shareholders who came to Fiji on a 14-hour flight from Japan were to return home the next morning.

I headed straight to the Intercontinental Hotel where the shareholders have been waiting for the ceremony since morning. I then explained the situation and kindly asked if their schedule permits to change their flight and extend their stay to participate in the postponed ceremony.

Only four were able to attend the ceremony the next day despite the fact that there were fourteen guests that had come from Japan. The shareholders told me that it was of great disappointment that they wouldn't be able to attend the ceremony, but they were satisfied with this trip because they got to see with their own eyes what I was doing. The next morning, I saw my guests off at the airport and went to the ceremonial venue.

The Intercontinental Hotel went out of their way to let us keep the venue that our employees worked hard to decorate for another day, despite that we had only reserved it for a day.

At the launch, the MC, the former Miss Hibiscus in Fiji, Lenora Qereqeretabua introduced us all to start the ceremony. CEO Ali of the South Pacific Stock Exchange; Mr. Sakishima, corporate auditor of South Pacific Free Bird (the parent company in Japan); Mr. Whiteside, president of the Reserve Bank of Fiji; Principal Baleilevuka, my right hand, my Fijian mother, and principal of Ba Provincial Free Institute; and myself.

For your information, Mr. Sakashita was the former commerce officer at the Fijian Embassy who responded to me when I inquired about getting a driver's license 15 years ago. After his retirement at the embassy, he joined our company in Japan as the corporate auditor. Life surprises us in many ways.

Principal Baleilevuka always treated me like a son, and in fact, said so in her speech. In the midst of her speech, she started tearing, so by the time it was my turn, everyone's face was messed up from so much crying. The room was silent, and you could clearly hear people sniffling. I gave my speech:

Ni Sa Bula, ladies and gentlemen. Thank you very much for coming today and to share the wonderful moment with us.

Especially, our invited guests, Governor of the Reserve Bank, Mr. Barry Whiteside, Chairman of the South Pacific Stock Exchange, Dr. Nur Bano Ali and representatives from all accounting firms, banks, government agencies, and all honored individuals who are present here today. Thank you very much for coming all the way to this beautiful place.

And I don’t forget you… Thank you very much. Our shareholders and our parent-company’s shareholders, [who have come] super far away from Japan. I hope you enjoy the beautiful weather in the Island closest Heaven.

Finally, today, Free Bird is going to be listed on the South Pacific Stock Exchange market.

As you know, Free Bird started its history in 2004. When we started the business, we were using a small classroom in Ratu Navula Secondary School with only three students from Japan.

Exactly, we started language school as the smallest language school in the world. I was the only director, I was the only shareholder, I was the financial administrator, I was the student supporter, I was the human resource manager.... Honestly, I was everything. Free Bird was only MY company, when it was born in Fiji.

Then within three years’ time, Free Bird was getting popular. Once, I was invited to an ICEF party in Florida. ICEF is the world’s biggest language school association and marketing network. It was unbelievable! We were the 2nd largest language school in the world in 2007.

When business goes smoothly and very successfully, we always become greedy. We want to make it a bigger school. [We want] some more students, some more teachers, some more profit…

And it was very best timing, I was a part of a venture business competition in Japan. Japanese shareholders here [today], most of you were judges in the competition. I remember after the competition, we did capital increase with your support and suggestion.

Then "My company" became "Our company."

It was my first time to see that much money in my life. With the money we collected & increased, we tried to build student dormitory. [Amid this construction] We faced "Economic Recession." It was the worst time. We were building two dormitories, one in Nadi and another one in Lautoka. 　And after the "Economic Recession", the number of our students really decreased. And at the same time, some friends and some investors who were working for the company left the company. I told those friends who were leaving the company,

"Pinch is chance."

"THIS is the opportunity!"

But for them, it didn’t sound good for them.

During the Economic Recession, I had realized something. Many companies were paying a lot of money for people who were suddenly fired by the company. And it was bigger than our 12 months tuition fee.

Then I did my best to go around companies who were supposed to fire their employees. Why are we here to celebrate our listing today? [It is because]　I found many students finally in that situation. I could prove "Pinch is Chance."

Through the experience, I have learned people were really negative. Maybe I am a super positive one in the society. They still say, "Are you really trying to list in the Stock Exchange Market?" "You must be crazy!" They couldn’t believe one day, dream comes true if you work the hardest.

Anyway, "My Company" became "Our Company" and our company becomes public company today.

Honestly speaking, I have experienced so many problems on the way to this listing. While we were preparing application and IM, we lost one of our board members, Mr. Toganivalu. Suddenly, company laws in Fiji changed in 2014. [In] 2015, finally, I was diagnosed to have stage IV cancer... exactly a year before February 1st, 2016.

I told the doctor, "I am going to Fiji to complete my mission." He doesn’t believe what we are doing here today. I was super weak. Even skinny and pale serious cancer patient can do something big.

I am really enjoying my life. Doing something all my friends say "[That's] Impossible" is really thrilling.

But I still want to mention, this is not what I have done alone. I fully appreciate your support. Staff and Board members who really trust me, super friendly teachers, matron, security guards, South Pacific Free Bird’s marketing team in Tokyo and Osaka who work until midnight every day, super warm heart host families, our account and administration team and KPMG, Price Waterhouse Coopers, and Ernest Young, who help us, Aliz Pacific who help us [at] our early stage set up, South Pacific Stock Exchange and Reserve Bank of Fiji who approved us. And my X-girlfriend who really took care about me when I was fighting against stage IV cancer and the side effect from Chemo-therapy in a hospital. Ms. Baleilevuka who treated me as own son from the beginning in Fiji.

Vinaka Vaka Levu!

I was able to speak normally for the 30 seconds. But then tears started flowing and soon my nose started running. Girls from the stock exchange kindly brought me a towel. I was sobbing so hard throughout the speech, it was embarrassing to look at the video afterwards.

When I finished my speech, everyone had broken down into tears. Even Ali, who was fighting with me until yesterday, came over to me with welled up eyes.

　My speech was followed by a speech by President Whiteside from Reserve Bank of Fiji and Director Ali from the South Pacific Stock Exchange. She then gifted me with a large board that indicated approval of our stock listing.

Plus, I received a bell that only those who listed their company can ring!

While the 60 guests were watching, the MC declared our listing, and everyone started chanting as they do when a company is listed in the UK London market, "Oy! Oy! 　Oy!" In the commotion of what seems to sound like the howling of wolves, I rang the bell.

"Ding, ding, diiiiing"

This bell was really small, but I remember feeling awesome ringing it.

On February 13th, 2017, I was introduced in a program by TV Tokyo called, "Sekai naze sokoni? Nihonjin -Shirarezaru haran banjyouden-" (Why in the world are you there? Japanese -unknown dramas of extraordinary lives-). It is a TV documentary program on successful Japanese living/working overseas. They were supposed to shoot the documentary around in the beginning of 2016 to broadcast it in May. The person in charge was Mr. Saso of the production company, Television Field.

Mr. Saso gave me a phone call towards the end of 2015 to tell me that his proposal will be discussed at an in-house meeting in January for its approval. I was diagnosed with Stage IV terminal cancer and sadly but hastily declined their offer.

Mr. Saso encouraged me saying, "Please let me interview you when you are all better!" but in that hospital room, I didn't think such a day would come. But it did!

Just like Bruce Willis in "Die Hard".

The shooting started.

When I first received a request offer, they were thinking along the lines of "a runaway succeeds in Fiji!" for the program concept. Slightly getting ahead of the game, the production company had visited my parents’ house in Fukui and had already recorded about two hours of interview with them. But this time, the offer came after my recovery from terminal cancer. Thus, the main concept changed to "a terminal cancer working hard even though he is almost dying."

In fact, much of the footage was me, a Stage IV terminal cancer patient, going this way and that, to solve issues concerning education of the Japanese students and employment of Fijians. I wanted them to mention about the stock listing ceremony held just before the broadcast, but honestly speaking, I thought people watching TV would be more interested in an 'unhappy' person than a happy one. That is what crossed my mind when I was being interviewed about how much I had left to live.

I don't know whether that essence helped or not, but the program recorded a high viewing rate. I started receiving tons of encouraging messages via Facebook the day after the broadcasting. It took me a month to reply to every single encouragement. Among these messages was a note from the director of Narita International Airport Co., Ltd. who happened to watch my documentary by chance.

In the program, I talked about how grave the employment problem is in Fiji. Though Fijians have a high educational background, there are no jobs to take in Fiji after graduating from college. Mr. Kariya, this director of Narita International Airport Co., mentioned if there was something he could do to help Fijians. He said that Narita Airport is having a hard time recruiting staff, so they would be happy to offer Fijians with such great smiles, fluency in English, and a college degree.

This must be what people call a "godsend."

I immediately called Mr. Kariya, and by the following week, I was drawing up a proposal.

If our proposal becomes accepted and Fijians with working visa are hired as regular employees, Fijians may possibly be able to settle in Narita in the future.

Oh my! I gotta start planting cassava in Chiba!

We met an eel restaurant in Narita City. Seeing Mr. Kariya came with five board members/employees of Narita Airport, I was convinced that they were taking this matter seriously. Despite that it was our first encounter, Mr. Kariya and I discussed about our project over eel cuisine and I felt the excitement of many possibilities opening up.

Narita International Airport Co., Ltd. is a reputable company, funded 100% by the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, and Transport. It seems there are many jobs, mainly customer services, that Fijians, rich with hospitality, could contribute to.

Mr. Kariya told me, in quite a self-tormenting tone, that it was difficult to have young Japanese keep doing the same tasks for many years at Narita Airport, which was an hour and a half away from Tokyo with no fancy shops. Young people came but soon returned to Tokyo. (As a person coming from Fukui prefecture, even Narita city was urban enough and had fashionable shops....)

The greatest difficulty for foreigners to work with working visas in Japan is the language barrier. The sweet advantage of this project was that Japanese was not going to be a major issue. At an international airport, there were many sites that required more English than Japanese. If the employee could provide services to the customers with a natural smile on their face, then neither the color of their skin nor eye mattered.

It was still absolutely necessary for them to learn enough Japanese for daily conversations. Our language school in Fiji could set up a new Japanese language department to teach them.

The Fijians were delighted to hear this. Among the teachers at my school, there were many who said THEY wanted to work at Narita Airport.

In December 2017, when we went to petition to the Fiji government, Mr. Kariya explained to Fiji's Minister of Labor that we will be starting small, with only a few members, at first, but our ultimate goal is to eventually employ Fijians for 5% of the total staff (approximately 2,000 Fijians) at Narita Airport. This was reported in the news on TV that evening and posted as a big article in the newspaper the next day.

The impact that our idea had on Fiji was much greater than what Mr. Kariya or I had thought. We posted a small advertisement in a Fiji newspaper about the interview and received a great deal of inquiries. Ultimately, we received resumes for 220 young people who wanted to work at Narita Airport by the deadline. Narita Airport expressed it as 'extremely luxurious' personnel selection. Among them, there were some who had experience studying abroad in China and Sweden, and another who had graduated from an Australian university. 40 people passed the document screening. We decided to offer jobs to four to five Fijian women as our first team and start Japanese language training.

After Golden Week in 2018, the first team will arrive at Narita Airport and finally start working in Japan!

I really got to start planting those cassava potatoes!