

Different men, different wealth

Since I have trouble balancing a simple thing like my checkbook, it's very difficult to comprehend even an iota of the complicated Ponzi scheme that Bernie Madoff orchestrated into a \$65-billion investor fraud. However, in today's world, when one hears the words "billion-dollar fraud," the sting isn't quite the same as it used to be when a million-dollar anything would set tongues wag-

ging and make the hairs on one's arm stand up at attention.

Dollar amounts linked to scandals keeps rising as we struggle



DeMarco

through this decade and they include CEO bonuses paid to those on Wall Street who contributed to the collapse of the economy. Fraud and highway robberies seem to be more devious and elaborate than heists of any past years. Jesse James of the Old West would be shocked, no doubt, at how far we've come.

I scratch my head and wonder how one guy could have pulled this off with all the whiz kids on Wall Street who had to be watching, if only from a distance. A couple of times the SEC even looked into his dealings, but he managed to squeak by.

Evidently, Madoff was good at many things, including a head for numbers and a decades-long plan of deception. If you read the Jan. 5 article, "What Drove Bernie Madoff," posted on www.money.cnn.com and written by Alan Chernoff, you'll get a pretty good idea of what made this man tick. I have a feeling there are several best-selling books already in the works trying to figure him out.

DEMARCO: Madoff's wealth

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His escapades made me wonder why someone who could have lived comfortably, making an honest living, would resort to devising a sinister scheme; stealing from friends, family and colleagues; and then working for so many years while trying to cover it up. Think about all the effort and how exhausting it must have been for him to cover his tracks, even if it was on his yacht or a house in the Hamptons.

It couldn't have been easy being Bernie Madoff, but Bernie Madoff himself was a contradiction. Chernoff interviewed him both in 1999 and 2000 and noted that Madoff's business card didn't even have a title on it — no chairman, CEO or president — even though he was, in effect, all of the above in a highly successful company and very much in command. While some friends described him as shy, he had the drive of an intensely competitive person who seemed to be fighting a battle within his own psyche.

Madoff, born 70 years ago, grew up in Queens, N.Y. He attended University of Alabama for one year and then transferred to and graduated from Hofstra in 1960 with a degree in political science. He attended Brooklyn Law School in 1961, but didn't continue. Perhaps he should have, considering the jam he's in today.

Early on, he was out to prove his stature in the business world. He started his first venture in 1960 as a penny-stock trader with \$5,000 (about \$35,000 in today's money) earned from working as a lifeguard and sprinkler

installer. He had come a long way from saving lives in the pounding surf off Long Island when he started Bernard L. Madoff Investment Securities LLC. He remained its chairman until Dec. 11, 2008, the day of his arrest.

In social circles, he had an aura about him and marketed himself as a cut above everyone else. He made people feel "privileged" to be part of his circle, both in business and in social circles. Even when it came to fundraisers, his donations had to be the biggest not because of the causes, but, according to what a Wall Street executive told Chernoff, "His weakness was that he was incredibly egocentric. He had to feed that ego."

Two of his sons turned in Madoff. I guess that surprised me the most except that they probably knew any investigation eventually would lead back to them, because they were a part of his business and no one's clean when the boss isn't.

While out on bail, Madoff was confined to his luxurious Upper East Side penthouse apartment. It's been reported that he, his family and his lawyers received death threats.

On Thursday, saying he was "deeply sorry and ashamed," he pleaded guilty and was immediately led off to jail in handcuffs — to the delight of his seething victims. Madoff, 70, could get up to 150 years in prison when he is sentenced in June.

I wonder if he ever thinks about the man who took his life when he lost everything because of a Madoff investment or about the many people who lost their nest eggs.

PLEASE SEE DEMARO, C4

But this column isn't just about Bernie Madoff. It's also about a man that I met over 30 years ago and one whose memory is crystal clear even today.

The year was 1971, and I was in Kaduna in northern Nigeria.

It was just after my stint in the Peace Corps. I was coming home after a day of work and about to turn the key in the lock of my front door. It was around 5 o'clock in the afternoon and the temperature was, thankfully, cooling at 110 degrees. I was about to

cross my threshold and get out of the heat when I heard what sounded like singing coming from a distance. When everything is still, sounds seem to magnify when you are near the Sahara.

I was curious, so I followed the singing around the back of the house to a large, open window in an abandoned concrete building with a tin roof. An Indian man was laying a carpet in one corner of the room and he smiled when he saw me peering in.

"Oh, I'm sorry," I said quickly. "I didn't mean to pry. I thought I heard singing."

He stood up quickly, walked across the room, and extended his hand.

"Yes. It was me," he said.

I shook his hand. "Are you moving in?" I asked, noting that the room contained only the small carpet in the corner.

"Yes," he said proudly. "I am in."

"Welcome," I said.

We stood in awkward silence for a few moments.

"No family?" I asked.

"No, just me," he said quickly. "My family is back in Calcutta. I am the lucky one to have found my way here."

I looked in the room again, wondering where the rest of his belongings were, but much too polite to ask.

"I hope you will be happy here."

"I will be," he said, folding his arms across his chest.

I was about to leave, but temptation overtook sense. "Do you need anything while you wait for your belongings? I could lend you a pot or some dishes."

"No, everything I own is here now with me. In India, I would not have this," he said proudly as he pointed to the carpet in the corner.

I realized as I walked home that what he treasured most was his space.

When he spoke to me, there was fire, gratitude and genuine happiness in his eyes that I can still vividly recall today. I felt a pang of envy that evening.

Perhaps that, then, is the true secret to one's wealth. Not amassing any amount of fame or fortune, but finding one's space in a lifetime.

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