





Taking Note

By Ben Schooley

Dr. Geoff Nicholson may not be a name you recognize. You might have had lunch next to him at the clubhouse and had no idea who he is, or played tennis in the adjacent court. However, odds are, you've used one of the fruits of an innovation he helped create during his career at 3M. In fact, you probably used one just this morning.

Nicholson, widely recognized as the "Father of the Post-it Note", has taken his love of science and his passion for innovation and forged a career that earned him a wing of 3M's Innovation Center to bear his namesake. With a career spanning decades, Nicholson took his inquisitive mind, his ideas, and his hard work to 3M, and he is now an Ambassador for the company, speaking around the world about the need for science and innovation.

Born at the onset of World War II, Nicholson recalls vividly, "One of the first things I remember were the incendiary bombs falling within 50 yards of our house, because the German bombers were coming right over England. We were in total blackout, and they got lost, and would drop the bombs to light the way. They were looking for the shipyards where they would then drop their major bombs. I remember my mother pushing me under the staircase for protection, and it's a tremendous contrast

between that and living at Cordillera, with the peace and quiet." Once out of school, Nicholson enrolled at Imperial College, and followed with his PhD in Chemistry from the University of London.

Newly married to his wife Isobel, Nicholson was faced with a difficult job search. "In the UK, there were no jobs for scientists, but in the US it was the beginning of the Space Race, and companies like 3M were looking for people with science and physics backgrounds. Everybody was going to the coasts to join the firms there, and 3M was trying to get people to Minnesota, which was a hard sell. But 3M came to the colleges in the UK and they interviewed me, offered me a job to go to Minnesota, and we came across on the Queen Elizabeth. The first sight we had as we entered the U.S. was the Statue of Liberty."

As they began their new lives in the United States, 3M assisted the Nicholsons with their new surroundings. "We got off that boat with a couple of suitcases, and 200 bucks in our pockets. We left everything to move to the U.S. 3M gave me a job and an opportunity to use my scientific training, and I worked in the Central Research Laboratories for 5 years. I was one of the first foreign employees to come work directly for the company and they knew I had very little means. So they called me one day

and said 'We need to come get you in the morning and get you a car'. I laughed and told them I only had 200 dollars. But sure enough, they picked me up, took me to the bank, got me a loan, and helped me pick a car."

After 5 years in the Research Laboratories, Nicholson moved into the business units of 3M and excelled. "I made overhead projectors and the film for them. My job was to develop new films. I also put together the first LCD display, and we have a patent on that. We were so far ahead of the time. We just tried things. We would be in the lab and say 'I wonder what will happen if...'. This is one of the great things about 3M. There's a culture where you can try things, and they encourage you to experiment. You are encouraged to use 15 percent of your time to do anything you want. If you have a good idea, don't ask. Do it. Nobody asked us to make Post-it Notes. We just did it. And that 15 percent is so important to science. If you don't try new things, there will be no innovation. And it takes real leadership to encourage employees and team members to take time to do anything they want."

After his years in the Research Laboratories, Nicholson was moved to another business unit, and shortly after this transfer, the Post-it Note was born. "My job was to go



around the company and find people that would move to this new unit with me. I managed to attract a group, and had about 15 to 20 people. The incredible part of the story is that not 48 hours after we made that unit, there was a knock at the door. These 2 guys came in and said 'Geoff, we've got this adhesive'. Those people were Spence Silver and Bob Olivera. He explained that he accidentally made this adhesive. For 5 years he had been going around the labs, with all 5000 people in the labs, and saying 'I've got this adhesive. You think we can do anything with it?' Nobody had taken him up on it. 3M filed a patent in 1968 for it and never filed that outside the U.S. I told him that I know nothing about adhesives, but I told him that it sure sounds interesting. So he made this bulletin board coated with the adhesive and he showed me how you could take a paper and stick it on the board and pull it off. So we started playing around with the adhesive. We saw that once you put the paper on the board, and then pulled it off, the glue came off with the paper."

As Nicholson and his team continued to tinker with the adhesive, Art Fry, who is widely credited with inventing the Post-it Note, came up with a great idea. "He said, 'why are you putting the paper on the board with adhesive? Put the adhesive on the paper!' Well, it worked! The first name we gave it was Press n Peel. If you want to trademark a product, it can't be descriptive, so the marketing department came up with Post-it Notes." With a new name and a virgin product, Nicholson and his team went looking for supplies to continue experimentation. What they found was lots of yellow paper. "When they first came out, most of them were yellow. You know why? Our labs were in one building, and we went looking for some paper. Any paper. The lab across the way had some scrap paper, and it just so happened to be yellow. It was a pure accident."

From there, Nicholson took the idea and began to push the product forward. However, that didn't happen as easily as he might have liked. "I became the champion of the Post-it Notes.

Nobody came along and told me to lead this program. I just did it. The best people to do that are not the ones appointed, but the ones with the passion. So I took it around and gave it to people. I would hand them out everywhere. We couldn't keep up. The marketing group had done some research and told us there was no market for this. They told us that people will use scrap paper and save money. I had been to the leaders of the different units, and I was listening to their discussions. The marketing guy said 'Geoff, if you guys would develop a decent new product, we could get out and sell it.' I was sitting there, pulled out a Post It Note and said 'if you'd make a real effort to sell this, we could do tremendous!!' I went back from that meeting really upset."

Frustrated, Nicholson was to receive some inspiration from an unlikely source. "I was walking in my office and my secretary looks at me and said 'Geoff, you've got to make your mind up. I'm either going to be your secretary or your distributor. I get phone calls all day with people wanting more Post-it Notes. I looked at her and told her to stop taking the orders. No matter who calls, don't take the order. Tell them to call the marketing department and ask them why they can't get more Post it Notes! Suddenly all these calls are sent to the marketing guy. He calls me up and tells me he wants to do more market research. But he still says the only reason people want it is because it's free! I argued with him, they did more research, and came back and told me it wouldn't work."

Undaunted, Nicholson decided to give the project one final push. "We decided to go where they were doing their research. One of them was Richmond, VA. The program was dying again, so I asked the head of the division if he would like to go with me to Richmond. I told him we'd play salesman. We'll walk around and call on the offices and see if we can sell. He said he really didn't want to go, but I was so persuasive, he went. We walked up and down the streets and we sold Post-it Notes to virtually every business we called on.

People loved it. From there, the rest is history."

However, Nicholson's adventures were far from over with 3M. Within 3 months of the formal launch of the Post it Note, the Nicholson family was unpacking their bags in Japan, where Nicholson was transferred to launch a research laboratory. Widely recognized as one of 3M's most innovative scientists, Nicholson went on to spearhead the opening of several research laboratories around the world. "I racked up something like 8 million airline miles!" he laughs. Ending his career in 2001 as the leader of 3M's technical operations around the world, Nicholson and Isobel began to look at how to be

"We just love it here and it sure beats Minnesota in the winter!"

closer to family that lived in the Hill Country.

"My son Iaian moved down here (to the Hill Country) from Minnesota. He had some friends down here, and he met his wife, got married, and was living in Bulverde. As we were approaching retirement, he mentioned that we should get a place down here too. He then told me about a gorgeous place called Cordillera Ranch. I did not choose this lot, he did. I just trusted him. In 1998 we built the two houses here on the property. We live in the guest house, and then the main house is for Iaian's family. They have 4 children, and when we retired, the grandkids didn't really know us. The first year we were down here we really got to know each other. We just love it here and it sure beats Minnesota in the winter!"

Spending time equally between their home in Minnesota as well as the

home at Cordillera Ranch, Nicholson has only moderately slowed down. Traveling the globe speaking about innovation and how important it is to the scientific fields, Nicholson is using his passion and leadership to inspire the next generation of scientists. "3M says I'm an ambassador now. I'm an ambassador for research. Research is the transformation of money into knowledge, and innovation is the transformation of knowledge into money. We take your knowledge and produce money. Exponential innovation is changing the basis of competition. This country NEEDS the innovation. My biggest worry is we are not generating sufficiently competent scientists and mathematicians in the US. We're losing to Singapore, India, and China. We're falling behind in our ability to compete. Why are we losing jobs overseas? It's because we're having a terrible time in education. A few years ago we had a 15 billion dollar surplus in exports. Now it's a 15 billion dollar deficit. Those are high tech jobs leaving, and when you look at the education, we're losing."

Reflecting on his career, it's obvious that Nicholson will always have his finger on the pulse of science, and that his experiences have had a profoundly positive effect on him. "It has all been such a fantastic experience. They rewarded me at 3M with fantastic promotions, and I worked alongside the best scientists. The most successful people at 3M tell stories about their screw-ups. We all made so much crap, but eventually, we would hit something big. The CEO when the Post it Note came about was told to kill 3M's medical division, which as you know is a huge success today. All of the successful people were told that their best ideas were useless. We learned to think outside the box, and to break the rules. It all comes back to that 15% and about how, above all else, you must find the time to be innovative." 🍷