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Russellville native takes on Netflix's "The Mole" using family lessons

By SARAH MICHELS smichels@bgdailynews.com

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Kesi Neblett, a contestant in Netflix's reality competition show "The Mole," sits in her Russellville childhood home.

By SARAH MICHELS/smichels@bgdailynews.com

Kesi Neblett doesn't watch reality television. It wasn't allowed in her Russellville home growing up so that she could focus on her academics and athletics, and the habit stuck.

Which makes Neblett's titular role as "the mole" in Netflix's newest reality competition show all the more surprising.

Season one of The Mole takes 12 contestants – 11 players and one "mole" – on a series of missions throughout Australia to earn money for the pot, which the show's winner gets to take home after the finale. The mole sabotages the other players by keeping money out of – or stealing from – the pot.



At the end of each round, players take a 20-question quiz asking them about the characteristics of the mole.

Whoever gets the fewest correct answers is out.

The opportunity to be cast as the mole seemed to fall right into Neblett's lap. The day after quitting her job as a Goldman Sachs software developer, a former classmate from the selective Gatton Academy of Mathematics and Science sent her a message telling her she should apply for the show.

It was a “no-brainer,” Neblett said. After several rounds of interviews, it was clear that the casting company wanted her as the mole, not a player. At first, she was reluctant.

“If you know me, you know that’s not my natural demeanor.” Neblett said. “I don’t like drama in my normal life, so I didn’t think I would like it, maneuvering it, on television either.”

But Neblett decided that she had nothing to fear. She could do anything if she had the time to prepare for it. That was a lesson she learned from her parents, Charles and Marvinia Neblett.

Charles Neblett was a bass singer for the Freedom Singers quartet, created by the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee in 1962 in the height of the Jim Crow era. The original group toured for several years, raising funds and spirits for SNCC’s civil rights campaigns.

It was a dangerous life; Neblett was arrested 27 times, served prison time in Mississippi for registering Black people to vote and had multiple near-death experiences due to his activism.

Back in Russellville, Neblett became Logan County’s first Black elected magistrate and continues work to preserve the homes of Black Civil War veterans in the “Black Bottom” neighborhood to this day.

Through his many stories, Kesi Neblett said her father instilled in her a strong sense of identity and taught her the power of self-determination.

“It’s, ‘wow, what an experience being near death all the time,’ but realizing that when you really, really believe in something that you are going to stick with it because you have a bigger goal,” she said. “... That type of composure – the ability to use comedy, the ability to persevere even though you’re near death – come on, The Mole was nothing compared to that.”

Her mother, who was responsible for her late father’s business, her ailing mother and a young brother from a young age, showed her how to “make a way out of no way,” Neblett added.

“I think it truly helped me be persistent and be adaptable in the game,” she said. “Yes, things are going wrong, but it’s OK, you can always make a way.”

During the pre-game quarantine, Neblett became a student of the game.

She read espionage novels like Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy by John le Carré, who popularized “the mole” term. She watched the original Belgian show that The Mole is based upon, then the German version. She read about psychology, sociology and the art of acting. She even talked to another former Gatton Academy classmate about the mathematics of playing the game.

“It was just two weeks of me being a complete nerd,” Neblett said.

Her general strategy was to first build trust and lay low. Once she got to know everyone well and had a reputation as a non-threatening, sweet girl who just “accidentally” messed up a lot, she pivoted to become a bolder saboteur.

She was surprised how many people trusted her even after her sabotage.

“What I learned is, people believe what you say more than what they see,” she said.

The show also taught her that it was OK to be bold and take risks, even if that isn’t in her inherent nature. The Russellville community has been super supportive, she said.

“It’s been really exciting for me to be from here, go to Russellville High School, go to Gatton Academy and share this experience with everyone that has seen me grow,” Neblett said.

Season one of The Mole had a diverse cast, something that reality TV shows have only recently focused on. Neblett said that even though diverse casting should have always been the default, it was exciting to bring herself to the screen.

“I was very excited just to be myself while filming a reality television show because being Black and being a woman, just existing is really a message,” she said. “It’s already a message when you walk into the room. It’s a message when you have an accomplishment because you’re a Black woman. Your presence is always noticed.”

Going forward, Neblett plans to document her parent’s legacy in the form of an exciting but informative adventure novel about American history.

“I’m the youngest of six siblings, and we’ve all grown up hearing my parents stories in our home, and now I think it’s a perfect time to start writing it down,” she said. “And it’s not just something I’m going to do alone. It’s going to be a family endeavor.”

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Sarah Michels