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From maid to made: Multinational CEO Rebecca Bustamante shares her story

By ELIZABETH MARCELO, GMA News May 3, 2014 11:05am

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At the formal opening of the nomination process for the 2014 Asia CEO Awards, an annual event that recognizes top-performing Filipino business leaders across Asia, founder Rebecca Bustamante-Mills brimmed with excitement.



Hard work and a love for studying took Rebecca Bustamante from helper to business leader. Photo from Chalre.com

"This is a very exciting time for the Philippines. Our country is the emerging business hub in Asia," she said to GMA News Online in an interview.

As the founder and president of Chalré Associates, a multinational recruitment firm for senior management executive positions, a typical day for Bustamante involves dealing with foreign companies and coordinating with local and foreign business leaders and economists for lectures and seminars.

For the last five years, Bustamante has also been at the forefront of organizing monthly forums for the non-profit organization Asia CEO Forum, which operates as Chalré's Corporate Social Responsibility project.

But life was not always like this for the 48-year-old.

Young blue-collar worker

The seventh of 11 siblings, Bustamante grew up in poverty. She was 18 when her mother died, forcing her to leave her hometown of Dasol, Pangasinan and work in a factory in Bataan to put her younger brothers and sisters through school. Their father had no steady job.

Even when she was in high school, Bustamante worked to earn money for her schooling.

"I used to work as a helper with different families in my hometown. I also worked for a mayor as a saleslady in their store," she said.

"As a kid, I sold pandesal, ice buko, ice candy. I also helped my mother sell fish in the market...I enjoyed doing it," she said. "I think I loved sales even as a kid."

In 1986, when she was 19, Bustamante began working as a domestic helper in Singapore. During her three years in the job, she also studied Accounting at the Open University of Singapore Institute of Management. She was even able to finish the undergraduate program without her employers knowing it.

"I did my studying during the evenings when everyone was asleep. From 11 in the evening to 1 a.m. [I would] start my job at 5 a.m. I was only given a day off. That one day off I would go to school to talk to my professors and get my whole month's worth of homework," she said.

"It was very hard, but I was determined to pursue my education to help my brothers and sisters back home."

To earn more money for her family, Bustamante then decided to work as a nanny in Canada for almost four years while pursuing her graduate studies in Accounting and Marketing at Ryerson University in Ontario.

"Learning is very important to me," she said. "If you want to be successful, it's important to continue learning, continue developing your skills. That's the reason why I never stopped studying."

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The man who qualified

Bustamante was 27, and almost done with fulfilling her promise to her mother to send her younger siblings to school, when the idea of entering into a serious relationship hit her.

"When I went to Canada, I was so focused on helping my brothers and sisters. I didn't really like to go on dates; I tried once and it did not work out," she recalled.

"But when I reached 27, I thought I was getting too old and I wanted to get married and have my own family. That's when I got serious about finding a right man."

And find the right man she did—after she read books about dating and wrote down the qualifications she was looking for in a man.

"I said to myself, 'In case I'm ready to settle down, I don't like to just date anybody. I should have qualifications,'" Bustamante said.

When a friend pressed her to go on a date with a businessman named Richard Mills, Bustamante checked his profile first on the internet. She admitted she was not playing fair, as she lied to him about her family background and financial status.

However, after a few weeks of dating, Mills wanted to introduce her to his parents.

"I said, 'Oh my gosh, I have to tell him the truth!'...That's when I said who am I, my background and why I did not give him my real story. And he said, 'I'm still really interested to meet you'...so that's when the relationship blossomed," Bustamante said.

She brought Mills to the Philippines and introduced him to her family. When she was 31, she and Mills got married. They now have two sons, ages 15 and 16.

"I guess the relationship developed because we both believed that love can be developed, instead of being so in love right away...Now we are like, best friends, husband and wife, and best partners," Bustamante said.

Best partners

Bustamante, Mills and their children Alex and Chris. **Photo courtesy of Richard Mills**

After finishing her master's degree, Bustamante began making a name for herself in Canada. She worked as a marketing executive and also founded her own recruitment firm, High-Q Personnel.

In December 2000, after spending Christmas in the Philippines, the Mills couple decided to stay in the country for good.

"[Richard] fell in love with the Filipino people and with our culture and values. And we also wanted our children to grow up here," Bustamante said.

In the Philippines, Bustamante worked for Mary Kay Cosmetics and then the Canadian Embassy. In 2005, she and her husband decided to put up their own company.

Chalré now has operations in the Philippines, Vietnam, Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Canada, doing the screening for senior managerial and directorial positions for multinational companies.

Marketing the Philippines

But despite her success, Bustamante felt she needed to do more.

"I always wanted to contribute to the Philippines...You know, I came from nothing and was able to develop my future. I wanted to give back to where I came from," she said. Her plan is to attract more foreign investments to the Philippines.

"More foreign investments mean more jobs, especially in the countryside," Bustamante said.

So, in 2009, the Mills couple inaugurated the Asia CEO Forum, in which Filipino or foreign business leaders share their experience of doing business in the country. The Asia CEO Awards, an offshoot of the forum, will be held on November 12 with the theme "Emerging Asia" in synch with the ASEAN economic integration in 2015.

"Filipinos are achievers but they are very humble, very quiet. So this is about making noise—that Filipino businessmen excel not only in the Philippines but also abroad, especially in Asia," Bustamante said.

More women to lead

Bustamante hopes her story can inspire other women, especially Filipinas, to aim higher.

"If you check many websites, you can see that a lot of multinational companies are impressed with their Filipino employees, especially Filipina CEOs...but a lot of women, especially the mothers usually don't aspire for the highest positions," she said.

Bustamante said some women still think that men are better in heading a company, or that being a head of the company will rob them time for their families. She said setting priorities, time management and open communication with one's partner are keys to achieving a rewarding career and having a happy family.

"You worked so hard for that long, why don't you go for it? What's stopping you?" she said. "As long as you have a healthy relationship with your husband you can do anything. Believe in him, support him and share with him what you want, what's your goal in life, and let him also share with you his goals. With that, you meet in the middle."

"And also, share your dreams with your children. That way they can understand that you are doing it for them." — **BM/VC, GMA News**

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