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Rebecca Bustamante's singular story of hard work

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However different rags to riches stories may be from one another, there is a common denominator that cuts through all, if not most, of them. Hard work.

For 48-year-old Rebecca Bustamante, this is what turned her life around from selling fish in the public market of Dasol, Pangasinan to heading a successful Asia Pacific-wide management recruitment corporation today.

She is an inspiring Filipina, and here now is her very singular story.

No shame

Bustamante's current state of life as founder and president of Chalré Associates—a management recruitment partner to multinational corporations throughout the region—is truly a far cry from her impoverished youth.

Nevertheless, one of the most admired and successful CEOs in the country today has never been ashamed to share her difficult journey to the top.

"I want to inspire our countrymen and give them hope through my story," she told The Sunday Times Magazine during a visit to The Manila Times offices in Intramuros, Manila this month.

Bustamante related that a compelling desire to give her family a better life fueled her dreams. She did not mince her words—she wanted to be rich so she could help her parents and 10 siblings.

"We were so poor that I had to sell pan de sal, iced candy and iced buko during my elementary years to help my mother earn money for my younger brothers and sisters. I also helped her sell fish in the public market.

"I was never ashamed to accept any job available to me because I had a goal to be rich, for myself and more importantly for my family," she simply explained.

Bustamante recalled her endless hours selling merienda items in Dasol as enjoyable as they were difficult. More importantly, she credited her vending experience as her ticket to landing a saleslady's job in high school, albeit in a sari-sari store.

"I also worked as a helper for different families in our hometown. Like I said, I took on any job available," she reiterated.

Even as she realized she could help her family with odd jobs, what set Bustamante apart from other less fortunate girls in her youth was that she knew education was very important.



Her message for emerging corporate leaders today: Work hard, think smart, and be positive



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She insisted on going to college even if her mother had said the family could not afford it by moving to Mariveles, Bataan where she found a job as a sewer.

"I realized that the only way to succeed is to have a good education so I became a working student through and through, and enrolled at the Polytechnic University of the Philippines to pursue Accountancy," Bustamante continued.

A sewer by day and student by night, the determined college lass soon found out that life can still be unkind to the hardest of workers.

Tougher times

What Bustamante thought would be a surefire formula of work and study to get ahead crumbled down when her mother died unexpectedly.

Bustamante was only 18 years old then, and besides the unfathomable grief of her mother's loss, she was faced with yet another tougher challenge of taking care of her younger siblings since their father was without a stable job.



With Richard Mills, her best friend, husband, father of her children, and business partner



From selling fish in the public market of Dasol, Pangasinan, Rebecca Bustamante now heads a successful Asia Pacific-wide management recruitment corporation today

"I promised my mother I would take care and help my younger siblings whatever it took, so I worked as a janitor at the Dasul Rural Bank for a year," she recalled, adding she was forced to put her college studies on hold.

Looking back, the repercussions of her mother's death were the most difficult times in her life, but she tried her best not to give up.

Neither ashamed to ask for help, Bustamante one day asked her bank manager to help her in her new plan. That is, to work as a domestic helper in Singapore.

Best nanny

It was in 1968 that Bustamante first arrived in Singapore as an overseas Filipino worker. She was hired as a *yaya*, or nanny, by a Singaporean family.

And despite the many challenges that came with her new job and new surroundings she strived to be nanny she could be.

"I always do my best because I believe that if my employer will like how I work, I would be assured of keeping my job," she wisely said.

By the quality of her service for her Singaporean employers, as well as her fellow OFWs, Bustamante more importantly came to the realization that Filipinos are world-class workers.

"With that, I dreamt even bigger," she smiled.

Given just one day of rest every month, Bustamante spent her time studying in one of Singapore's open universities. Unable to attend regular classes, she ask her professor her entire month's homework whenever she showed up.

"I studied at night when my employers were asleep from 11 o'clock until 1 a.m. Then I would start my job as early as five in the morning," revealed the superwoman.

Greener pastures

Soon enough, because of her highly efficient ways, Bustamante moved on to “greener pastures” as a domestic helper in Canada.

“My Singaporean employers tried to make me stay because they like me so much that at first, they refused to give me the job certificate I needed for Canada. But since I was good to them, they eventually recommended me and let me go.”

Bustamante found Canada to be brimming with opportunities. There, she was able to manage her time better in pursuit of her new goals.

While working as a nanny again, again enrolled in a nearby school and attended classes every Monday and Wednesday evening. Besides her job and schoolwork, however, she also sold pots and pans whenever she found the time.

“I needed to sell \$5,000 worth of pots and pans every week so I could send the commission I earned straight to my family in the Philippines,” she exclaimed. “As for my salary as a nanny, I saved them all until I had enough money to apply for a Canadian citizenship.”

Clear vision

With a clear vision of where she wanted to be, Bustamante fulfilled all her responsibilities without fail until she completed her course in Accounting and Marketing at Ryerson University in Ontario.

“Education is very important to me,” she declared. “If you want to be successful, it’s important to continue learning and to continue developing your skills. So that’s exactly what I did—I never stopped studying.”

She also loved to read books especially motivational ones to help her achieve her life plans.

“I wrote all my goals on a piece of cartolina and placed it beside my bed so that every morning, I am reminded of the work I had to do in order to achieve them,” she added.

Besides finishing an undergraduate degree, Bustamante also secured her Canadian citizenship, which allowed her to work in various companies, including cosmetic corporation Mary Kay where she became senior sales director.

Learning from whatever environment she found herself, she soon gathered the knowledge to put up her recruitment company in Canada called High-Q Personnel. She never forgot about the world class Filipino talent.

The right partner

Just as all her dreams came true and her promises to her mother fulfilled, Bustamante realized there was something missing in her life. A partner.

“When I reached 27, I began to think about marriage and family so I decided to find Mr. Right,” Bustamante giggled.

Ever the planner, she listed a set of qualifications she wanted in a husband and asked her friends to help her look for the right applicants.

“Before I dated Richard [Mills], I checked his profile first on the Internet. I also lied to him about my family background and financial status because I wanted to know him better.

But just after weeks of dating, he already wanted to introduce me to his parents.”

Taken aback, she realized that Mills, a businessman, was serious about her. Because of his genuine intentions she decided it was time to him the truth about her life and where she had come from, and why she had to lie to him about them.

Instead of leaving her as she expected, Mills stayed on and she knew he was the one.

“When I took him to my hometown, he fell in love not only with me but with the Philippines and its people. I was so happy that I found the man of my dreams,” the romantic in Bustamante beamed.

Bustamante was 31 years old when she married Mills, and their happy family now includes two sons aged 16 and 17.

“Richard is my best friend, my husband, the father of my children and my best partner in business,” Bustamante added.

Giving back

Despite the tremendous success she achieved in Canada, Bustamante’s dream of helping

her “kababayans” never wavered in her heart. So when she was offered by Mary Kay Cosmetics to put up a local counterpart of the company in the country, she readily accepted with her husband’s guidance.

More doors opened for her, including becoming vice president of the Canadian Club of the Philippines for a time.

With so much to do in the Philippines—not to mention the fun to be had—Mills soon joined in Manila, and in 2005, the couple established Chalré Associates. As she sees to the recruitment company’s operations, Mills serves as chairman.

“When I was working in Singapore, I used to hear a lot of negative things about Filipinos so I dreamt that someday I would do something to tell the world about the positive side of the Philippines and the Filipinos. This is where the inspiration of putting up Chalré Associates came from,” Bustamante related.

In 2009, the couple also launched the Asia CEO Forum, the largest annual business event in the country, which is also highly regarded in the Asia Pacific region.

“Our events are organized by an alliance of Filipino and international business people with a mission to promote the Philippines as a premier business destination to global decision makers,” she said of the endeavor.

An offshoot of Asia CEO Forum, Asia CEO Awards, the largest business awards event, was also launched in the Philippines within a year.

She said, “Filipinos are achievers but they are very humble. So the Asia CEO Awards is about making noise that Filipino businessmen excel not only in the Philippines but also abroad, especially in Asia.”

This year, the Asia CEO Awards carries the theme “Emerging Asia,” and its awards night will be held at the Solaire Resort and Casino on November 12.

Think smart and be positive

As she constantly shares her inspiring story, Bustamante’s message today is not just to work hard but to think smart and be positive. She believes that if every Filipino takes on these attitudes then the Philippine economy will indeed become the largest in South East Asia by 2050 as HSBC predicted.

“Everyone can be a CEO,” Bustamante guaranteed. “Go ahead and dream but work for it. Because it doesn’t matter where you came from; the important thing is where you want to go.”

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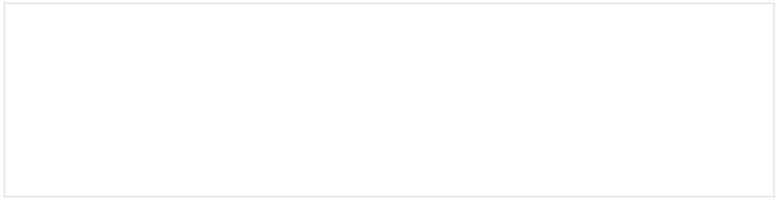
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