

MANNY VILLAR: A SELF-MADE MAN

A Boy from Tondo

A “self-made man” describes individuals who achieved success not because of their social position by birth or other favorable circumstances rather because of their own hard work, persistence, and vision. Manny Villar, the boy from Tondo who achieved success in business and politics, perfectly fits this description.

Born to poverty in Moriones, Tondo, Manila on December 13, 1949, he owns a distinction very few have accomplished: conquering the two worlds of business and politics.

Manny is the second child of Manuel Montalban, Sr., a government employee who hailed from Cabatuan, Iloilo and Curita Bamba, a seafood dealer who came from Pampanga and Bataan. Dreaming of a better life for his family, he would wake up early to help his mother sell shrimp and fish in Divisoria which allowed him to send himself to school.

“My *Nanay Curing* would wake me up just past midnight and we would have *nilagang kape* together,” he recalled. They would walk to the market where he would observe her mother in the auction of seafoods and help her set up their small space in the market.

“I learned from my mother the value of hard work and perseverance,” he proudly refers to this “my first lesson in entrepreneurship.” Hard work, persistence, and perseverance became his guiding principles in life. This earned him the title “*Mr. Sipag at Tiyaga.*” He recounted that whenever he would face an obstacle in his personal or business life, he would simply call to mind the hardships her mother faced and the lessons she imparted to him. These are the same lessons he wanted to impart to Filipinos in order to help them improve their quality of life and fulfill their dreams for their family and country.

Dreaming Big

At the University of the Philippines, where he obtained his undergraduate and master’s degree in Business Administration, Manny Villar learned how to “dream big”. There he met other young Filipinos who dreamed of changing the country and the world.

“Here I was dreaming of just changing the lot of my family,” he revealed, “and there they were talking about changing the country and the world!” It was in UP where Manny developed his vision to improve his family’s living conditions but the country’s as well.

During the last year of his UP college life, Villar would join demonstrations and rallies, just like most students in UP in those days. The First Quarter Storm was raging and he, together with other students, would board buses from Diliman to Agrifina Circle where they would start their march to Malacañang.

Villar recalled that he was not the radical 'aktibista' but he was amazed at the power of social consciousness in uniting a bunch of young people with diverse backgrounds into a common

cause. He explained that it was an experience that changed his life as much as those events changed the country.

After graduation, he tried his hand as an accountant at the country's biggest accounting firm, Sycip, Gorres, Velayo & Co. (SGV & Co). But the call of entrepreneurship was just too strong, he decided to resign to start a seafood delivery business.

He demonstrated what perseverance was all about when a restaurant he was delivering to failed to pay him. Instead of giving up, he persuaded the restaurant owner to honor "meal tickets" he printed which he then sold at discounted price to office workers. It took him one year to liquidate his receivables. But it was a lifelong lesson for the nascent entrepreneur.

He worked briefly as a financial analyst at the Private Development Corporation of the Philippines. His job was to sell World Bank loans, despite the attractive rates of which there were no takers. Convinced that he could make it on his own again, he quit his job and promptly availed of one of the loans.

So with an initial capital of P10,000 in 1975, he purchased two reconditioned trucks and started his sand-and-gravel business in Las Piñas. One of the original trucks have been restored and is currently on display in Starmall Alabang. In a sense, it symbolizes Villar's humble beginning, hard work and tremendous successes in life.

Building Houses, Building Dreams

It is here while delivering construction materials to big developers that Manny Villar came up with the idea of selling house and lot packages when the convention then was for homeowners to buy lots and build on them. "I also noticed that houses were being sold at prices that were out of reach for many Filipinos so I decided to build houses and lots at an affordable rate and a reasonable downpayment scheme".

Since then Manny Villar has become the housing industry leader, and the biggest homebuilder in Southeast Asia, having built more than 400,000 houses for middle class Filipino families and for overseas Filipino workers (OFWs).

He would initiate mass housing projects to achieve economies of scale. His various innovations practically created the country's mass housing industry. The Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism calls him "the dean of the (Philippine) real estate industry."

Building the Nation

In a stunning political debut in 1992, Manny Villar won a seat in the House of Representatives with the most overwhelming mandate among Representatives in Metro Manila. He would serve 3 terms in the lower chamber while becoming its 18th Speaker. He would later run and win two terms in the Philippine Senate and serve as Senate President in 2006 making him the first post-World War II public official to head both Houses of Congress.

As a Representative, he dedicated himself towards the eradication of poverty, protecting the poor, championing the welfare of Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs), fighting graft & corruption, promoting equitable economic development, and advocating entrepreneurship.

He also oversaw various infrastructure projects in his districts like the construction of concrete roads and the Alabang-Zapote Flyover. He introduced the “Friendship Route” to ease the traffic problems in Southern Manila by persuading subdivision homeowners to open up their roads to the general public. He succeeded in passing Republic Act 8003 “Declaring Certain Areas in Las Piñas as Tourist Spots.” The law formalized his program of rehabilitating historical and cultural landmarks in Las Piñas starting with the world-famous Bamboo Organ Church.

A staunch environmentalist, he initiated a privately funded tree planting drive in his district. He developed a P10-million tree nursery beside his home. He also quietly led a dedicated tree-planting drive complete with maintenance and watering of tree seedlings planted in the open spaces of the community.

When he realized that many poor students could not go to school because they did not even have fare money, he organized the “Manpower on Wheels” Program, a livelihood training school housed in a van that make rounds in depressed areas. The program has since produced more than 5,000 graduates and has been awarded by various government and civic organizations for its innovative scheme.

During his first term, he steered Las Piñas and Muntinlupa to cityhood. He pointed out: “As a developer, I have always envisioned these two communities as the ‘Twin Cities of the South’ of Manila. Today, Las Piñas and Muntinlupa are the two fastest growing communities in the country.”

For his constituency work and personal vow, he extended grants of home sites to some 10,000 poor families in Barangay CAA, Las Piñas City. Two major roads were also opened in his district: the Sucat-Pulanglupa Link Road to Parañaque and the Zapote-Molino (Daang Hari) Link Road to Cavite, thus alleviating the traffic congestion in the area.

During his second term, he was able to upgrade the Las Piñas District Hospital with a new building and better facilities. He also launched the “Sagip-Bukas” Drug Prevention Program on all the private and public schools of Las Piñas to educate the youth about the dangers of drug abuse. He also nationalized the Las Piñas High School to upgrade its facilities.

By the end of his second term in office, Villar had already proven beyond doubt his capacity for excellence as a true Filipino entrepreneur and a brilliant public servant who could get things done.

Champion of Entrepreneurs

In 1995, Manny Villar ran for re-election and won an unprecedented 142,000 votes, the highest number of votes for a congressman in the entire country. Winning media acclaim as an outstanding congressman as well as the respect and recognition of his peers, he was elected to chair the Committee on Entrepreneurship.

As one of the leading entrepreneurs in the country, he championed the cause of small and medium-sized enterprises. He authored and passed into law the landmark New Magna Carta for Small and Medium Enterprises (RA 8289). He initiated creative legislation such as the

establishment of the Small and Medium Enterprises Stock Exchange and Business One-Stop-Shop centers, the latter he immediately implemented in Las Piñas City with the help of local officials.

“Mister Speaker!”

It therefore came as no surprise when he was elected to be the Speaker of the House of Representatives gaining the support of 171 of 220 of his peers. As the leader of the lower house, Villar ushered in a new style of public administration called “leadership by consensus” - one which is based on management skills and consultation and not on oratory and rhetoric.

By his first year in office, Villar undertook three path-breaking reforms. He succeeded in marshaling consensus in the House to reform the ‘pork barrel’ system by limiting congressional discretion projects to the set parameters of the Executive’s development policies. Secondly, he launched a revamp of leadership by appointing at least seven neophyte congressmen to head powerful committees like Ecology and Banks and Financial Institutions. Lastly, he set a strong and principled stance on environment protection with the passage of the “Clean Air Act,” a measure that for more than ten years and three previous congresses were not able to pass.

On his second year in office, Manny Villar steered the 11th Congress into a record-breaking achievement in legislation and economic reforms. Among the pioneering measures he shepherded into law were the Retail Trade Liberalization Act, the New Central Bank Act, the New Securities Code, and the New Banking Act.

In 2001, he would lead the House in fulfilling its Constitutional mandate of checking the powers of the executive department by impeaching a sitting President. It was an act of courage, independence and patriotism.

Senator of the Republic

The Filipino people rewarded Villar’s hard work and perseverance with a mandate to serve as Senator of the Republic during the national elections of 2001. As Senator, he led some of the most powerful working committees – Finance; Agriculture and Food; Public Order and Illegal Drugs; Banks, Currencies and Financial Institutions; Trade and Commerce, and Economic Affairs.

He would become Senate President Pro Tempore and in 2006, during the third regular session of the 13th Congress, he assumed the highest post in the Senate of the Philippines as its President.

As Senate President, he is known as a hard worker and multitasker and the institution’s staunchest defender. As a multitasker, he was at the helm of the institution formulating laws of social relevance and initiating public advocacies like OFW Hotline, Repatriation Program for Distressed Migrant Workers, scholarships and health voucher assistance to indigent patients. In his two terms as Senator of the Republic, he authored 126 statutes of national significance including the laws on Barangay Micro Business Enterprises, Overseas Absentee Voting, Anti-Trafficking of Persons, The Act Granting Additional Benefits and Privileges to Senior Citizens, the law on Anti-Violence Against Women and their Children, the New UP Charter, the

new Copyright Law of the Philippines, the Magna Carta of Women, Food Safety and Toy Labeling, the new law on Statistics Administration, among others.

As Senate President, Villar understood the importance of defending the autonomy of the institution he was serving. Senate President Villar knew he needed to defend the Senate as the bulwark of democracy thereby protecting the Constitutional principle of separation of powers. He resisted encroachments on the Senate's prerogatives like EO 464 and other oppressive measures aimed at silencing legislative inquiries. He went on to defend the Upper Chamber in the Supreme Court.

In his legislation, Villar's concern for the common people is magnified - he filed bills and resolutions for the people and improving the Filipinos' quality of life through basic health care, decent shelters, responsive social services, and high quality education.

The fact that both the House of Representatives and the Senate received the highest performance and trust ratings from the people is a testament to Villar's exceptional leadership skills developed early on in his life and nurtured by his university education and experience as an entrepreneur.

Chairman of Villar Foundation

Whether in politics or business, Villar's philosophy is straightforward: uplift the lives of Filipinos; win the war against poverty. Thus, together with his family, he founded and chaired the Villar Foundation which also serves as the corporate social responsibility (CSR) arm of the publicly listed Vista Land & Lifescapes Inc.

Since its inception in 1992, Villar Foundation has initiated, implemented, and supported various projects aimed at improving the quality of life of the people in various communities. Villar Foundation's earliest programs: 'Pagtanim Para Sa Kinabukasan' (a greening and tree-planting program), Villards (fundraising billiards tournament for the youth and other beneficiaries) and "Sipag at Tiyaga Caravan Kaalaman" (a livelihood training program that provides skills and inspiration to people that will allow them to venture into their own businesses).

Villar Foundation has evolved to be more proactive in meeting the varying needs of underprivileged and poor Filipinos. It now counts as its major advocacy the following: livelihood generation through its green social enterprises; environment protection (such as its Sagip Ilog or river rehabilitation program) and helping distressed overseas Filipino workers through its Sagip-OFW program. The Villar Foundation took the cudgels for distressed OFWs who were abused or stranded in their host countries by facilitating their repatriation.

Villar Foundation's programs and projects have not only helped and empowered Filipinos, they have also garnered local and international recognition. In 2011, Manny Villar and his wife personally received the United Nations (UN) award for Villar Foundation's successful Las Pinas River Rehabilitation program, which bested 38 other programs of other countries and won the '2011 Water Management Best Practices Award' during the International Decade for Action-Water for Life ceremonies in Zaragoza, Spain.

Villar has also spearheaded the building of schools, sending out medical missions and setting up relief operations whenever or wherever needed. He led the inauguration of the Las Piñas-Muntinlupa-Laguna-Cavite (LPMLC) as part of his road improvement program aimed at easing

traffic in the south of Metro Manila. According to him, an efficient and rationalized road network is one of the fundamental requirements in improving commerce and spurring economic progress.

Awards and Distinctions

For his business achievements – from his humble beginning to becoming the country’s premier developer, he was made cover story in the Far Eastern Economic Review. His life story was also featured in Asiaweek, Forbes, AsiaMoney and Asian Business Review.

He has garnered various awards such as the Ten Outstanding Young Men Award (1986) by the Philippine Jaycees, Agora Award for Outstanding Achievement in Marketing Management (1989), Most Outstanding CPA by the Philippine Institute of Certified Public Accountants (1990), Most Outstanding UP Alumnus (1991) and Most Distinguished UP Alumnus (2004). He was also recognized as the Real Estate Personality of the Year by the editors of Property Report, Asia’s leading luxury real estate, architecture and design publication in 2016.

In 2020, Villar was hailed as one of Forbes Asia’s “Heroes of Philanthropy” together with 15 altruists in the Asia-Pacific region. Forbes Asia cited Villar’s substantial contribution to education in the Philippines which included his donation of an innovation campus to his alma mater, the University of the Philippines and Saint Jude Catholic School. His philanthropic focus on education is no accident. He explained: “Education is a potent weapon in our fight against poverty.”

Through the years, universities and colleges all over the country have conferred upon Villar honorary degrees in various fields in recognition of his exemplary performance in public service, his pioneering initiatives and innovations that revolutionized the country’s mass housing and real estate industry, and his distinct role in the enactment of economic and social reform laws that are vital in sustaining the country’s economic momentum and improvement of the lives of Filipinos, particularly the cause of small and medium enterprises.

Among these universities and colleges that have bestowed *Honoris Causa* to Villar are: Adamson University, Doctor of Science; Bulacan State University, Doctor of Humanities; Romblon State College, Doctor of Humanities; Central Luzon State University, Doctor of Humanities; Wesleyan University-Philippines, Doctor of Humanities; Foundation University (Dumaguete), Doctor of Humanities; Pablo Borbon Memorial Institute of Technology, Doctor of Humanities; Cagayan State University, Doctor of Humanities; Ramon Magsaysay Technological University, Doctor of Entrepreneurial Management; Western Visayas College of Science and Technology, Doctor of Technology in Entrepreneurial Management; Tarlac State University, Doctor of Public Administration; Laguna State Polytechnic College, Doctor of Humanities and Entrepreneurship; Bataan Polytechnic State College, Doctor of Humanities; Pangasinan State University, Doctor of Development Management; Nueva Ecija University of Science and Technology, Doctor of Business Administration; Polytechnic University of the Philippines, Doctor in Public Administration; Sultan Kudarat Polytechnic State College, Doctor of Philosophy in Institutional Development and Management; Bulacan Agricultural State College, Doctor of Philosophy in Agribusiness Management; University of Rizal System, Doctor of Technology; Mariano Marcos State University Doctor of Humanities; Tarlac College of Agriculture, Doctor of Humanities; Northwestern University-Laoag, Doctor of Humanities; and Philippine Women’s University, Doctor of Laws.

Manny Villar is currently the Chairman of Vista Land, a publicly listed company and one of the leading integrated property developers and the largest homebuilder in the country today. Vista Land operates through six distinct business units. Camella Homes, Communities Philippines, Crown Asia, Brittany and Vista Residences are focused on the residential property development while Vistamalls, which is also listed in the Philippine Stock Exchange (“PSE”) is involved in the commercial property development.

He also chairs Golden MV Holdings Inc., another publicly listed company with subsidiaries: Golden Haven, the largest Philippine death care property developer in terms of number of projects, and Bria Homes, one of the fastest growing mass housing developers in the country.

When he finished his term in the Senate, Villar returned to his first love: entrepreneurship. Feeling rejuvenated, he started game-changing initiative and world-class retail concepts at the helm of All Value, which includes All Home, a pioneering one-stop home store in the Philippines that made a debut in the PSE last October 2019, All Day Supermarket and Convenience Store, Coffee Project, Bake My Day, Finds and All Toys, AllBike, AllDigital, Green Centrale, AllGreen, Dear Joe and Ruined Project?.

More recently, he developed an innovative concept as a response to the increased need for outdoor markets in the time of COVID-19. Villar opened SOMO Market, a weekend outdoor market which is also the first and ultimate outdoor shopping destination in the south.

He currently heads the Villar Foundation, and Villar SIPAG (Social Institute for Poverty Alleviation and Governance). He also chairs the Nacionalista Party, the grandest political party in the Philippines and Southeast Asia.

A true family man, Manny Villar is a devoted husband to Senator Cynthia Villar, a loving father to sons Paolo and Mark and daughter Camille, and a doting *lolo* to Tristan and Emma Therese.

Today, the “self-made man” continues to dedicate his life towards the vision that the life path he took from poverty to success may be experienced by all Filipinos.