

# Eric Po: Taking the risk and never looking back

By JERNI CAMPOSANO-GOMEZ

His friends were enrolled in summer camps enjoying swimming lessons, the young Eric Po was busy helping out at their family's job in packing plastics and checking inventories that he first learned the ropes of business management.

Eric admits to complaining incessantly that time of his life, he also admits how his parents taught him hard work, discipline and responsibility at his tender age through this family business. "My family has always been in the plastic and carbon manufacturing industry. I was in sales at Rockwell Plastics, which was where my interest in business and interiors sparked," he says.

Eric is the managing partner at Bernhardt Furniture Co., the company that he founded in 1989 in Lenoir, North Carolina. Bernhardt Furniture Company is one of the largest family-owned furniture companies in the US. More than 100 years later, Bernhardt remains as one of the industry's most dynamic and innovative companies.

Eric introduced to Bernhardt four years ago and I honestly felt that it was too good to be true. I was quite scared to bring it to the Philippines. However, after visiting the showroom for the second time a year later, I realized how much value this brand has over the past 130 years. Not only is it known for its quality, design, and price, it has also endeared itself for its value. The Bernhardt family values the Bernhardt family with us," he explains. With this, he took the risk of bringing it to the Philippines – and never looked back since. Bernhardt has been one of the international brands appreciated and revered by top

interior designers and tasteful home makers in our country," he says.

Eric took to heart everything his parents taught him about managing a business. "I'm the kind of manager who aims for growth – not only growth for the organization, but growth for each team member in the organization. I've always believed that if we will not give that opportunity for our team members to hone their God-given gifts to the fullest, then the company will remain stagnant. I always see to it that the group has a holistic goal supported by a good adaptive system."

In his business deals, he ensures that partners and stakeholders share the same values he learned from his parents. "For Bernhardt to become America's largest family-owned furniture company, and for them to have passed the business to four generations, they must have shared the same values as what my parents have shared with and inculcated in me. And this is the main reason I said yes to the business and a big yes to this partnership because I know that these tenets will be the same standards that we will pass on to our clients and design partners," he says.

According to Eric, Bernhardt products are made globally – from North America, South America all the way to Asia and some parts of Europe. Each product is crafted by diversified minds and hands with different culture and take on art. Bernhardt's story is a tale of vision, perseverance, and uncompromising commitment to high standards of doing business. And this story



Po continues 125 years later with a focus to anticipate and satisfy the ever-changing needs of customers who expect the very best furniture for their residential or commercial spaces.

To serve more customers and showcase more of their stylish and functional products, Bernhardt Furniture Co. in the Philippines recently opened its flagship showroom in San Juan City. This haven is a space of almost 1,000 square meters and the whole building is almost dedicated to Bernhardt.

With its opening, Filipino designers and clients can feel how American designers and homemakers feel when they are in the Bernhardt showroom in the US. The flagship showroom was designed by interior designer Carlo Mecate to replicate the original space Bernhardt created in North Carolina.

## AboitizLand: A family's legacy of excellence

Philippine migrant Paulo moved to Leyte in the 1980s to run a hemp business there, eventually taking a chance on prospects and vistas. He explored spirit and energy anew when he transferred its headquarters to Cebu and operated businesses across the regions. Now the Aboitiz Equity Ventures through its subsidiary AboitizLand, is again driven by possibilities in land and, this time, expansion in Luzon.

Beginning, the AboitizLand was a passive asset, something that generate impressive compared to its other assets until the company take the first step in Central Luzon.

they do it? Perhaps strength of AboitizLand comes from a background with deep portfolio, skills, and assets that significantly risks traditionally with land develop-

### Nation-builders

The Aboitiz conglomerate, which is now considered a household name, started as a small family business in Ormoc, Leyte. The patriarch traded abaca fibers and general merchandise, and ventured into shipping goods across the seas of Visayas, eventually establishing a fully incorporated company called Aboitiz y Compania in 1920.

The ensuing decades saw the company's extraordinary growth in size and reputation across Central and Southern Philippines through the group's subsidiaries in the sectors of oxygen/industrial gas production, coffee and container products, navigation, light and power, and banking and financial services under the renamed private holding corporation, Aboitiz & Company (ACO).

### Beating the odds

In the '60s, the Aboitiz Group was a newcomer in the real estate industry when Cebu was starting to take shape as a metropolis. The firm developed simple subdivisions of six to seven hectares. The success of these initial ventures proved that indeed there was money to be made in land.

Despite initial misgivings, the company decided to formally

venture into real estate and construction in 1978 by acquiring an engineering firm that became known as Metaphil, forerunner of Aboitiz Construction (which at present is engaged mainly in civil works, industrial piping works, electro-mechanical works, and steel fabrication). By the '80s and '90s, the team was developing land holdings under it. As the Aboitiz people handled multiple projects and assets, they realized that they were, in fact, succeeding in real estate and decided to take the task seriously by organizing into a special company called ACOland, the precursor to AboitizLand.

Unlike other real estate developers, AboitizLand went beyond residential and commercial ventures, undertaking industrial development as well. ACOland worked on large-scale projects such as a partnership with the Japanese Group of Japan for the 202-hectare West Cebu Industrial Park, and the development and operation of the Mactan Export Processing Zone 2, also in Cebu.

Before the turn of the 21st century, ACOland officially became AboitizLand amid much market interest in its prestigious brand, exponentially expanding its residential portfolio all across Cebu with premier developments like North Town Homes, Pristina North, Priveya Hills, as well as mid-market communities like Kishanta, Ajoya, Almiya and Amosa.

### Expansion

A great part of why the company continues to evolve is because it established Aboitiz Equity Ventures (AEV), now a public holding company that secures its major investments in power, banking and financial services, food, infrastructure, and land for the benefit of businesses and communities. It fully divested its shipping and transportation ventures to focus capital expenditures on priority assets that will create long-term value for stakeholders. Today, AEV is recognized as one of the best-managed companies in the Philippines and in the ASEAN region.

From 2014 to 2019, Aboitiz-

Land began its national expansion through a series of acquisitions and project launches in Luzon, beginning with LIMA Technology Center, the leading industrial park in Calabarzon, where some of the world's largest manufacturing firms operate from. Its first-ever residential project in Luzon is Seafrost Residences, a premier beachside community in San Juan Batangas. Investing in this rapidly-growing province, the team infused another P7 billion into developing LIMA into a new industry city – a fully-integrated township project that includes The Outlets at Lipa which is the country's biggest outlet store, The Villages at Lipa, a 49-hectare residential village, and LIMA Exchange, the township's hub which will house a supermarket, fast food outlets, a sports complex and a transport terminal.

AboitizLand is making headway in Central Luzon through Ajoya, its mid-market horizontal residential brand in Tarlac, Nueva Ecija, and Pampanga. It will soon dive into the underserved economic housing segment with Asiera Homes, debuting in Mexico, Pampanga.

A trailblazing project in the National Capital Region is stirring up the millennial market segment AboitizLand, with its partner Point Blue, creates and operates innovative microstudio rental apartments for young professionals who desire to live within walking distance to the Central Business Districts in Metro Manila.

Not one to forget their roots, AboitizLand continues to strengthen its dominance of the Cebu market by entering into joint ventures, and soon by launching a landmark project, a sizeable township in the north of the city.

Today, AboitizLand hit the quarter-century mark pursuing projects that are responsive, sustainable, and vibrant, spanning across key regions of the archipelago. There is a saying that business helps build a nation, and in the Philippines, the story of the Aboitiz Group is filled with milestones intertwined with a country ever in progress.

## Solving the US health care fiasco

By MANNY GONZALEZ

Our country is the Philippines. The reason this seemingly domestic US matter should be of interest to Filipinos is not only that many of us are in the US, but also that it might teach us that the solution to seemingly impossible problems can sometimes be found by – as clichéd as it may sound – thinking outside the box, changing the paradigm, asking the right question.

The US health care structure was created and has evolved with all supply-side participants cooperating to raise costs for the consumer.

First the American Medical Association (AMA) limited the supply of doctors by making it hard to enter medical school in the US, and by requiring doctors' participation for minor tasks or judgments that a nurse could easily make. This made doctors more scarce and thus helped them command higher salaries. That's why a five-minute visit to get a prescription for ear drops can cost \$200.

Then the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) made it a labyrinth to get new drugs and devices approved, which meant that simple and cheap medicines or treatments were ignored, and only potentially expensive and high-return medications and devices are ever put on track for clinical trials. By being hypocritically strict and getting cause-and-effect wrong, FDA can ban a drug with bad consequences for 500 persons in a million, even if it helps 999,500 of that million (the actual case of phenylpropanolamine, a highly-effective cold-relief OTC drug which was misused as a diet aid and led to some strokes, almost entirely among the young women using it to lose weight – though their obesity and crash-dieting might have contributed, right?) Meanwhile, tobacco and alcohol, which are bad for 1 million out of 1 million, are allowed.

Another factor has been the misguided national campaign against "fats and oils", which was successful in its aim, at the cost of many people doubling and tripling their consumption of sugar and starches. Result? A nation of obese and unhealthy people.

Next came American lawyers and courts, and legislators in the pocket of lawyers' associations, with unthinkable awards for litigants in medical-related suits, and refusal to cap such awards. Also a refusal to allow people to suffer for their own stupidity or imprudence. In no other country can you get several million dollars for spilling hot coffee on your lap because you put the paper cup between your legs while driving. These awards are eventually paid for by consumers of medical services, which means everyone.

Then of course there is big pharma, whose sole interest is self-interest. Big pharma influences all three branches of government and many sectors of the health-care industry to maximize drug prices, increase the number of patients (for example by continuously expanding the definition of what fasting blood sugar level constitutes diabetes – which is in the first place the wrong indicator for a complex disease), and bad-mouth cheap or free treatments (for example, Intermittent Fasting, garlic, plenty of water).

Let's not forget the average patient, who instead of eating right and exercising, tries to cure everything with medication and herbs.

The problem of the US health care system has been wrongly postulated by every recent US President and almost every American authority or official who has ever weighed in on the subject in living memory. It is not a matter of how to fund high medical costs. This is a pass-the-buck game in which the insured, the insurers, hospitals, doctors, company health plans, state governments, and the Federal Government try to pass the cost to someone else among them (but still one of the above).

The correct question: How to lower the costs themselves? The answer to this is simple in the extreme.

Make it easier to become a doctor; do you really need a 130 IQ to prescribe Crestor? Do you really need 11 years of college and medical school, etc., to be an ER doctor or for that matter an anesthesiologist? Another measure to increase doctor supply: accept more doctors and nurses as immigrants on a fast-track.

Make FDA certification more sensible. Instead of vetoing drugs on grounds of unlikely side effects, just tell people the score and let them decide. They make such a choice every time they choose to eat a hamburger, which has a far greater chance of killing you than most banned drugs.

Cap jury awards for injuries; immunize hospitals and doctors against suit except in the most clearcut cases of negligence. But do publish tripadvisor-like reviews of doctors and hospitals, so truly bad actors can be weeded out.

Disseminate more information about how to take responsibility for your own health. No one has all the answers, but the government could make it easier to find responsible information about the pros and cons of fats and oils, supplements, lifestyle choices.

Ban vaping and increase yet again the sin tax on tobacco and alcohol.

With intelligence and determination, all the above could be done in one Presidential administration. And presto! – their health-care mess would be solved.

When asking the usual questions makes a problem seem incapable of resolution, sometimes it helps to change the question. In all our country's major contemporary issues, we need to change the question.

For example, the problem is not how to fix Metro Manila traffic. The problem, rather, is how to fix Metro Manila overpopulation. Metro Manila is a flood plain; it is sinking 4 inches a year; it is in a tsunami-prone, volcano-active zone which is both right on a major fault and 100 kilometers from another major fault just west of Luzon. The city of Manila is the most congested city in the world, and it is just five meters above sea level. Metro Manila traffic is inherently unsolvable; LA has spent 100 times more money on its traffic problem than we could ever hope to spend, and has gotten Nowhere. By re-defining the problem, we can make our problem more amenable to solution.

The problem is not how to lessen government corruption. The problem is how to allow more productive, less-disruptive corruption.

The problem is not how to build more schools and hire more teachers, earning high school or college degrees that are (sorry to say) hardly worth the paper they're written on. The problem is how to allow more Filipinos to educate themselves, free, through the Internet, or, cheaply, in vocational schools.

The problem is not that we are so poor, many of us have to seek work abroad as OFWs. Rather, the problem is how to best prepare our OFWs for working abroad, and how to get the best deal for them and our country.

The solutions are there, and the solutions are obvious, if only we would postulate the correct problem.

Gonzalez is the author of *Crazy Wild Ideas – Out-of-the-Box Solutions for Fixing the Philippines* (available on Amazon Kindle as an e-book)



The New Industry City, LIMA is a fully integrated township provides a work-live-play experience away from the metropolis.

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