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INTERVIEW: I want to be a big businessman



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Angelo Xuereb was only 13 years old when he declared solemnly to his father and his friends when asked what he wanted to be when he grew up: "I want to be a big businessman."



Today, at 60 years old, bar a few days, Mr Xuereb declares with pride: "I feel that I have done a lot in my life. I have given a big contribution to my country. Now I want to pass on my experience to those determined to succeed. I want to share the challenges I have overcome to succeed."

In the past two years, Angelo Xuereb worked on his autobiography. "Angelo - An Autobiography" will officially be launched at his 60th birthday party and later in the United Kingdom through Amazon. The book, which was edited by Charles Micallef St John, carries a foreword by Edward Debono and has reviews by former President Ugo Mifsud Bonnici, Prof. JJ Cremona,

Hollywood-based author and film producer Joseph Vassallo and a German mayor.

While others would be thinking of retiring at the age of 60, Angelo Xuereb has no such plans yet. Challenge has always been a good source of motivation for Mr Xuereb. "When you want to change things, you find a lot of resistance. I was never afraid of change and have managed to succeed in many things. It is thus that you create wealth."

One of the challenges Angelo Xuereb had to overcome was his shyness. At 31, he had already expanded his construction business and opened his first hotel, the Sunny Coast in Qawra. But when asked to be interviewed by TVM and later to address the staff party, he blanked out. He thus decided to take a public speaking course in the UK to gain the confidence he needed.

The spirit of entrepreneurship started early in Mr Xuereb's life. "When I was 10, I used to sell animal fodder for a few pence from an old pram to our neighbours in Naxxar. I also used to build small rooms in my father's fields. At 16, I started to import stuff and sell Maltese crafts. But my ultimate aim was to go in the construction business," he said.

But Angelo's father opposed such an idea. He wanted his eldest son to go into the banking sector. Angelo decided to go his own way, and to gain the confidence to tell his father his intentions, he decided to marry his wife Jessie, who he had met when he was 17.

The week before his marriage, he put up a classified advertisement in a local newspaper offering to do small construction work. He got a phone call asking him to go to a place at The Strand in Sliema on Sunday morning and he accepted. It was the morning after his wedding. Upon turning up, the family was surprised to see a young man of 22 and quizzed him about his experience. Then they noticed he was married. Asking him how long he had been married, Mr Xuereb told them that had got married the night before. "And where is your wife?" was the obvious next question. "In the car outside," he replied. He was quickly kicked out and sent to join his young bride.

That day, Angelo told his father that he was setting up his construction business. His first contract was a government tender for Lm200 to construct pavements on San Anton Street in Balzan. At the time, he employed two workers to help him. "My father was not happy," says Angelo Xuereb. He continued bidding for work discarded by others and the work started to grow.

Mr Xuereb soon met with cash flow problems. He needed a van for his work and had no choice but to trade in his beloved car to afford one. "After three years in the job, my father was still complaining and I decided to explain the situation," he said. He told his father that not only had he paid for the lorries and machinery he had bought for his business but also for the cars he and his wife owned besides having a good sum of money in the bank. "Eventually my father became proud of me," he adds.

The first big contract won by Angelo Xuereb was to build the boundary wall for the Spinning and Weaving factory in Ta' Qali back in 1977. "The contract was huge. It was for Lm30,000 and I was somehow reluctant to go for it. But I was encouraged to do so by an architect," he said.

The then Minister for Works Lorry Sant visited the site and enquired why the boundary wall was finished when the factory wasn't. He demanded to meet the responsible contractor. On meeting Angelo Xuereb, he ordered him to build one of the factory blocks. In the end, Mr Xuereb built two of the blocks and thus the contract of Lm30,000 was converted to one of Lm100,000, within the same short completion period of three months. "That gave me a big boost," he said.

The company Angelo Xuereb Ltd then got work to build the Ta' Qali Stadium and the reverse osmosis plant in Ghar Lapsi. Mr Xuereb was his own foreman.

Having a lot of cash in hand, Angelo Xuereb started considering what to do next. He pondered going into manufacturing but after making a few calculations, he ruled that out. Instead, he went into the tourism sector and built the Sunny Coast Hotel. "I finished it in one year and I used to market it myself," he said.

Soon after, Mr Xuereb was approached and offered a piece of land further up from the Sunny Coast hotel. A price was agreed and a promise of sale was signed. "A prominent hotelier called me and offered me Lm50,000 profit for it. I said no," Angelo Xuereb said.

So what does Angelo consider his biggest success in life? "My family and my children first," he promptly says. Business-wise, it was the Suncrest Hotel. "It was my biggest challenge. I built it single-handedly. In one year and one month it welcomed its first tourist," he said.

Mr Xuereb was faced by a lot of obstacles in doing the project. "The government, who was building the Holiday Inn that took seven years to finish, was against my investment which probably was the largest private investment at the time. I had asked the bank to lend me 40% of the cost to build the Suncrest. I was given a sanction letter but the bank refused to give me the money. It asked me to present receipts up front. The bank even withheld an Lm5 cheque I had issued," he said.

"I ended up with no cash flow. So I spoke to my contractors and told them about the situation. Anyone who wanted to leave the job could do so, with no penalties incurred. But the majority had faith in me and continued with their work. I am still grateful to them to this day," he said. Eventually, the bank issued the loan and the suppliers got paid.

Mr Xuereb's biggest disappointment was "when government did not realise my entrepreneurship and vision for a better Malta." He mentions the golf course that he had proposed to build under the Verdala Hotel. "I spent hundreds of thousands of pounds over 10 years. The authorities should not have procrastinated for so long to make a decision," he said.

Another disappointment was the failure of a project Mr Xuereb had planned to do in Albania. The project fizzled out due to civil riots that occurred in the country back in 1995/1996.

He also mentions the bid he did as part of a consortium to develop Manoel Island and Tigne Point. "The winning consortium has changed the project completely from the one submitted originally. Instead of four storeys, the buildings today are 14 storeys high. They did not keep to the original plan. Midi plc did not spend money on the infrastructure, as was required in the development brief. It is absurd," he said.

Angelo Xuereb is also proud for having served two terms as Mayor of Naxxar.

Looking back at his 60 years, di-ve asks Mr Xuereb what he would have changed.

"I wish I could understand politics better," he replies. "I am so genuine, so convinced that I am doing well for the country that I do not expect to find obstacles. I have always found obstacles by whoever was in government," he says. "I have never declared my political leniencies," he adds. "It is unfortunate that there are only two major political parties. Whenever one proposes a project they look at 'your colour'," Mr Xuereb says.

He refers to the time when he formed part of the Azzjoni Nazzjonali "as a mistake but I had good intentions," he says.

The future still holds challenges for Mr Xuereb. There are pending development cases in front of the Malta Environment and Planning Authority (MEPA). One is a 20-year-old proposal for the development of an elderly residential complex at Simblia in Naxxar. The other application, which was submitted 18 years ago, is for the development of the Verdala Hotel.

"Once I am semi-retired, I will develop a master plan for each town and village in Malta and Gozo from the infrastructure aspect. It will be entitled 'Vision for the Maltese islands 2050 and beyond'" he says. "I know the infrastructure very well," Mr Xuereb adds. "I have proposed numerous innovative concepts and ideas, many of which were addressed by the Government 10 and 20 years later".

The entrepreneur is disappointed that the government does not consult with the Maltese when it is proposing new developments "but prefers to consult with foreigners who may not understand the Maltese infrastructure," he says.

He concludes the interview by declaring: "I wish I could have done much more and still I hope to do a lot more."

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