

Joe V. Travez

Building a New Tomorrow

Nine hours. That was the duration of the propeller plane flight that took five-year-old Joe Travez from his old life to his new life. The Andes Mountains of Quito, Ecuador, faded from view, and along with them the culture, environment, and comfort of his early life. He had to leave behind his soccer ball, his tricycle, his toy elephant on wheels, and his small stuffed monkey. His incredibly smart, talented, and driven sister, Rina, was three years old at the time. His brother, Italo, was only one. The family landed in Miami and then made the trek to Washington, DC, where Joe's father was working as a green-card machinist for a Maryland-based company. They settled on Connecticut Avenue in Washington, D.C., and in some ways, Joe couldn't help but feel that his childhood had been left behind.

"It was a huge paradigm shift in my life," he reflects today. "I became the only English speaker in my family, translating everything for them and leading in that process of integrating. There was an inherent trauma in immigrating, but soon enough, I was ready to build a new tomorrow. Who I am today is sown into those early experiences." Now the co-founder and CEO of Prototype Production, Inc. (PPI), a technology development, advanced manufacturing, and product commercialization company that partners with government, university labs, commercial clients, and entrepreneurs alike to build smart products that are changing the way the world operates, Joe's professional success is the product of his exceptional ability to build through integration, just as he has built his own life through integrating since that day he first arrived in America all those years ago.

PPI was originally conceived of by Joe's younger brother, Italo, after working as the lead for the University of Maryland team working to

develop the solar car. At age seventeen, Italo was creating the Tesla of 1991, advancing a prototype with electric motors in each wheel and a solar array. The design won third place in a US competition, and when Italo went on to serve as a consultant for George Washington University, the GW Vehicle landed seventh place in a world race across the Australian Desert.

At the time, Joe was working at Marriott International Headquarters in Bethesda, Maryland, which had fallen on hard times due to the real estate recession. Joe's division went from 1,300 people to 80, and his boss resigned, so he stepped up to run the then-small International Architecture & Construction Division for three years—a tremendous learning experience. In 1991, he received a call from Italo letting him know he had a chance to work at GM, but that he was concerned by his observation of a looming disconnect between engineering, design and manufacturing. There



was a decided lack of understanding and regard between the fields, and Italo believed much greater things could be accomplished if they were all housed under one roof. He envisioned an innovative design/build firm where engineers and machinists work together to develop products.

Italo needed to say no more. Joe mortgaged his town house and put \$50,000 toward building a new company with his brother. Their father donated two manual mills and laths, and in no time, PPI was up and running in a small shop in Rockville, providing free design engineering in return for the manufacturing contract. Joe was still at Marriott at the time, and would help out on weekends. Creative, innovative, insightful, and futuristic, he had the uncommon ability to lead and innovate with parallel right-and-left-brain strengths. At the intersection of science and humanities, he emerged as a design thinker,

bringing both IQ and emotional intelligence to his work at PPI.

Through its early development, the company expanded from 1,000 square feet, to 3,000, to 5,000, and upgraded its equipment to computer numerically controlled mills, laths, 3-D printers, and electronic component manufacturing gear all under one roof. “The big dream was, when we’re in our forties, we’re going to have a cool place where we can develop cool things quickly,” Joe laughs. “Basically we built ourselves a James Bond lab where we integrated scientist, engineers, and machinists, embracing the core of the company as its people and culture. We call it the ‘no collar’ workplace, where engineers and machinists respect each other. We also created a culture where you have scientists and artists collaborating to innovate. It’s not about the equipment and the clients and the things we do, it’s about the incredibly singular culture we’ve created by integrating innovation and commercialization under one roof.”

Over the years, PPI has evolved into a 50,000-square-foot workspace with an array of highly sophisticated tools and equipment and a team of around 150 people. The company has developed over 300 products for its clients across different vertical markets, and now has well over two decades of experience, infrastructure, and company culture. Joe and Italo invested to build an incredible platform, and now, the company is ideally poised to capitalize on the advent of the Internet of Things, web enabled devices, data, data analytics, and Industrial Internet technologies. In a sense, PPI has been developing for twenty years what companies like Flextronics are doing now on a larger scale, building contracting manufacturing and then teaming with top clients to innovate great IP.

Now, PPI is looking to be one of those partners, developing an intelligent, innovative workshop and continuing its creation of incredibly complex projects like international space station gear, advanced military products, and robotics training equipment for doctors. The company is redeveloping critical technology for the U.S. Army, while also creating a meditation timer for a Georgetown professor. “We explore around a hundred opportunities each year, and decide to pursue around twenty of those projects,” says Joe. “We work to develop the product, license it or team with others who can, and build. Ultimately,

one or two projects a year will result in true commercial viability.”

But PPI is also embarking on a monumental step forward—a move inspired by Joe’s analysis of market trends that show the big software and social media companies like Amazon, Google, Apple, and Facebook buying up hardware companies like those specializing in robotics, drones, and devices. “It’s now all about data analytics and information,” he explains. “When I saw this two years ago, I knew I needed to transform and evolve. As a hardware company sitting in the middle of the Internet of Everything hotspot—the DC, Maryland, and Virginia technology hub—I knew we had an advantage, so I began looking for a software partner.”

As luck would have it, Joe met Pat Scannell and assisted him with a charity event one evening. Joe was later introduced to Pat’s brother, Jay, the former COO of SkyMall who had worked on the team that took the company from a lifestyle business to an enterprise company, successfully divesting both publically and privately three times during his tenure. With an expertise in IT software and eCommerce, Jay was brought in to build an eCommerce platform around PPI’s products. He also brought onboard a colleague, Martin Fisher, who had sold one of his first companies to Steve Case before joining Case at AOL as part of the acquisition serving as President of American Online Technology Group. Martin also spearheaded technology for Case at RevolutionHealth, which later went public as EverydayHealth.

“With his incredible success, Marty never needed to work another day in his life, so I asked why he wanted to join PPI,” says Joe. “His response was that it feels like 1984. There’s a new convergence occurring—a convergence of hardware and software that will change everything. PPI was the best hardware company he’s seen, so with him doing the software piece, we’re really poised to excel in smart devices and execute this five-year plan for innovation leadership.”

Joe’s natural affinity for integrating hardware and software stems from the integration techniques he’s honed all his life, beginning with his early days as a new American. Joe was enrolled at a Catholic school quite young for first grade, and because he didn’t speak any English at first, he was bullied. Three months into the new

experience, however, his teacher called him to the front of the classroom. "Come here, little Jose," Sister Mary Allerita said. She turned to the class and announced, "Jose didn't speak a word of English when he joined us, and now his English is perfect. Everybody give him a clap!"

The room erupted in the applause of tiny hands, and Joe's chest swelled with pride. For the first time since arriving in America, he threw his shoulders back and knew in his heart that he could excel in this new land. "From that moment, I knew it was going to be a great ride," he says. "And to this day, I'm most inspired by the act of inspiring kids. My teacher's gesture instilled in me a passion for youth leadership that I carry on in my work with YouthQuest, the Hispanics Against Child Abuse and Neglect (HACAN), and an Ecuadorian school I sponsor with Father Travez, the Archbishop of Quito, Ecuador, and a relative of mine."

Thanks to inclusive mentors and peers, Joe never felt alienated or suppressed as an immigrant youth in America. The riots in the wake of Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination drove the family to move from DC to Rockville, Maryland, where there were few Hispanics in the 1960s. Still, he made friends quickly. Joe mastered the language, learned the constitution, embraced the culture, and reflected on what makes this country great. Through his passion for soccer, he also became a teammate, a leader, and then a captain. "That was critical for me as a young person," he says. "Through rejecting divisiveness and embracing integration, I was able to really accelerate my own development and success."

Joe's parents worked incredibly hard to sustain the family, with his stern, conservative father working two shifts as a machinist for 35 years. "He had an incredible work ethic and courage," says Joe. "I can't imagine how hard it must have been for him, being the first person to ever leave his Ecuadorian village to get an education. He was hard on us kids, but he has a sense of humor and is an incredible person."

Joe's mother, a radiant woman with a phenomenally positive spirit, stayed at home while the children were young and was very nurturing, teaching them that they could do anything they wanted in life. She came from a line of entrepreneurs in Ecuador, with her own father running a decorative block and sewage pipe manufacturing company. "As a very small child,

my playground was mountains of aggregate, stone, and sand," Joe says. "We grew up around builders." His mother became a professional seamstress and jewelry designer and went to work for W. Bell and Co. once the kids were in junior high school. She would bring home thousands of pearls during the holidays that needed to be manufactured into jewelry, and Joe's father invented a machine so they didn't have to drill the holes manually. The whole family would set up a production line to help make the task faster and more fun.

As a kid, Joe was always outside playing basketball and football. "I was always running, always up to something, and always getting hurt," he laughs. "Between my brother and I, we were at the suburban hospital every month for a decade. My mother was very patient with us."

Joe made his first buck babysitting, and then selling subscriptions to the *Washington Star*. He nailed all the lines and quickly became the top salesman in Maryland, driven by the promise of ice cream sundaes at Friendly's. He then got a *Washington Post* paper route through his apartment complex, waking up at 4:30 or 5:00 in the morning to assemble the papers and make the deliveries. He recruited Italo to help, incentivizing him with éclairs and hot chocolates from 7-11.

Every other summer, the family would travel back to Ecuador for extended periods of time, visiting his grandfather's house in the city and his aunt's home two hours south of Quito in a Spanish colonial village. In this way, Joe's typical American upbringing was integrated with the rich cultural flavors of his roots, infusing his coming of age with a strong sense of heritage and global perspective. "The Andean village had a town square where they'd set up wooden trellises and hold bullfights," Joe remembers. "As children, my cousins and I would walk along the walls of the bull pens and admire them. Once, my father had to rescue me from a bull that had escaped and was slashing people. I remember festivals, music, and the grain alcohol the elders would drink. It was so different from hanging out at the Jewish Community Center in Rockville, Maryland, near my high school, dating the prom queen. I really loved the diversity of those experiences."

From the time he was in seventh grade, Joe also began getting more serious about soccer, joining the inaugural league of Montgomery Soccer Incorporated. "It came naturally to me, and

when I picked it up, I fell in love with it," he remembers. "I began to really hone those skills, especially during those summers in Ecuador. I was incredibly driven, pushing myself to the max and then saying, I'm going to run 5 more miles or do 5 more pushups for my family. One for my dad, one for my mom, one for my sister, one for my brother, and one for God."

Joe's soccer coach in high school, Coach David Scaggs, became the mentor and advisor that would accelerate his upward trajectory. He espoused core principles that applied just as perfectly to life as they did to athletics, which Joe still lives by today. "You're only as good as your weakest link," Joe recites. "If you hoot with the owls at night you can't soar with the eagles at dawn. Are you a champ or a chump? The difference is the letter 'u.' God first, country second, then family, then team. He taught us philosophy as much as he taught us soccer, and it made the team great. My brother and I collectively won three state championships thanks to those mantras."

Coach Scaggs helped Joe land a full NCAA Division 1 soccer scholarship to Catholic University, a tremendous opportunity. When he packed up his 1979 Camaro, made the short drive to school, and set foot on campus for the first time, he was overcome by the same feeling he'd had when he stood at the front of the classroom as a five-year-old: that he was in for a great ride. "I wouldn't have been able to afford the tuition if I hadn't gotten that scholarship," he affirms. "I was so honored to join a class of superstars, who would go on to serve as Senators, banking executives, news anchors, and governors. It was a great education—a defining moment in my life where I realized how much more there was to experience and learn."

Joe had a phenomenal freshman year, bringing the soccer team to a new level of excellence and settling on architecture as his major. "I always loved buildings and stone material, so it was a natural fit," he says. In the summers, he worked for Williams Brick and Concrete along with his friend, Tracy Meyers, who now works as his partner at PPI Aerospace at NASA Goddard division. Together, they poured retaining walls and did brickwork, building all the second and third floor balconies of a Vienna apartment complex together. "It was laborious, grueling work, but we loved it," Joe remembers.

After graduating from college and playing Division II soccer in Argentina for a year and a half, Joe returned to the U.S. and began looking for work as a young architect. The best he could find was a job as a temporary assistant at an interior design firm, cutting carpet samples and assembling presentation boards. One day, however, he ran into Anna Mooney, the woman who used to lifeguard at the apartment complex he grew up in. She was working for Marriott and had just launched a new division called International Architecture and Construction. She was about to go on maternity leave, so she offered to consider Joe to fill her position while she was gone. He came in for an interview with her partner, Art Ferrante. Joe had only his college portfolio to show for himself, but Art recognized that Joe was more international than anyone in the entire building, so he was hired.

"The next thing I knew, I was in Castle Harbor, Bermuda, looking down the first hole of the mid-ocean golf club where Eisenhower used to play," Joe laughs. "I teamed up with the local architect, Michael Peengilly. Bill Marriott had been building these standard prototypical rectangular pink box hotels all over the USA, and we were ready to try something new." With that, Joe and his team set to work renovating a limestone castle, adding 120 rooms and designing the aesthetic to resemble the sail of a ship. The project turned out beautifully, and when Bill Marriott held the grand opening of the hotel, Joe was invited. He rented a tuxedo and lived it up during the celebration, staying up late into the night.

At 7:00 AM the next morning, he awoke to a phone call from the general manager letting him know he was requested in the office downstairs. The Marriott executive team was waiting, along with Art Ferrante, and Joe worried he had done something wrong. Instead, they mused that they had never seen anything like the Castle Harbor hotel, and they wanted Joe on the permanent payroll. He was to start immediately on their next project in Europe, working on the Homburg, Munich, and Frankfurt Marriotts. As a 21-year-old kid, the opportunity was unbelievable. "I went quickly from being a designer, to a project manager, to Director of Architecture and Construction," he recounts. "Being at Marriott as a young guy, I was exposed to the best of the best. I was part of the 1991 Marriott rework with Steve Bollenback, which was like getting an MBA on the

fly. I was doing budgeting, finance, marketing, strategy, process, and procedure. I learned technical service agreements and how to really run something. I was invited and attended hotel development and hotel finance committee meetings.”

Over his fifteen-year tenure at Marriott, Joe and his great team built the company’s first 80 hotels in five continents, including Moscow, Bombay, Buenos Aires, Quito, Cancun, Frankfurt, Homburg, London, Hong Kong, and the Caribbean. “Australia and Africa are the only continents I haven’t built,” he remarks. “The true value of that experience was not the technical attributes I picked up, but building political formats in different parts of the world with different cultures, languages, and ethnic types. Globalization is firmly entrenched now, but back in the 1980s, Marriott was at the tip of the spear going global. We had an entire U.S. corporation that didn’t understand or respect what we were doing overseas, so we had to communicate the value of that work to people who had never traveled outside of the country. We were trying to institute a 5-star product in third world nations, which builds true political awareness and emotional capital. It was hard, but I was young, full of spirit, didn’t know better, and didn’t care.”

Overall, Marriott was an exceptional learning experience and a wild ride, full of victories and only one plane crash—an incident in Cartagena where a wheel of the jet carrying Joe, former President of Marriott International Ed Fuller, and other key Marriott executives was shot during takeoff. Though the plane caught fire and came perilously close to skidding off the runway into the ocean, everyone onboard survived the ordeal, recounted in Ed Fuller’s book sold on Amazon.

Joe could have continued there, but in 1995, he married Monica Rodman, the gorgeous young woman he had met at an Ecuadorian Embassy event. Her father, among the first Peace Corps volunteers, met her mother while serving in Ecuador, and had gone on to travel the world in the CIA and the Foreign Service. As a result, Monica grew up with a global perspective much like Joe’s, coming of age in the Philippines, Korea, Costa Rica, and Africa. Joe knew he couldn’t be the family man he wanted to be if he continued his hectic travel schedule with Marriott, so he resigned in 1998.

Upon his resignation, his boss, Alastair McPhail, sent a headquarters-wide email saying that Elvis had left the building. When the news made it to Ed Fuller, the then-President of Marriott and a good friend of Joe’s, Ed made a tremendous offer that was hard to refuse. But Joe knew he needed to give PPI a go, and when he explained his reasoning to Ed, his friend and mentor understood. Joe promised he’d be back groveling if he failed. “Joe, you won’t fail,” Ed said firmly.

Joe ultimately agreed to help Marriott as a contractor over the next three years, finishing the 22 projects he had helped start in Latin America and also taking care of five first new hotels in India. He was offered positions from an array of other hotels, but he turned them all down, opting instead to be as present as possible for his family. It wasn’t until 2002 that he was able to truly dive into his work at PPI, taking the helm as CEO.

Things hummed along well in the business and in Joe’s personal life, until a miracle and tragedy struck in the same moment. Monica gave birth to beautiful twin girls, but one didn’t make it. “We were blessed to have Catherine enter our lives, but we lost Josephine, and that was incredibly tough,” Joe reflects. “I tried not to let it get to me because that’s just how I operate.”

Joe pushed forward, completing his Masters In Leadership at the McDonough Business School at Georgetown University. Business was booming at PPI, with manufacturing operations running 24/7 and raking in 27% gross margins as they developed high-value IP. With a beautiful wife and daughter, a successful company, and monumental growth prospects on the horizon, he took a trip one day in 2008 to visit Josephine’s gravesite. He found himself kneeling down, speaking to the angel daughter he knew was there. He promised to protect, guide, and nurture her sister, and he asked that Josephine protect and nurture him. Then, he prayed she would ask God to make him the man He wanted him to be.

Two days later, Joe’s world fell apart. It was like a timed sequence of destruction—the collapse of Lehman brothers, the banking crisis, the government shutdown, sequestration, the rising costs of healthcare and energy, the overall global uncertainty. In March of 2008, PPI lost 70 percent of its revenue. “I never felt hardship like I did during that period of time,” he affirms. “We had the families of 250 employees relying on us, and our clients kept delaying contracts. I came

close to jumping ship and pulling the parachute chord, facing debt for the rest of my life. Yet as a leader, you have to come in everyday with a smile, encouraging your people that things will be okay. Those years were horrific, the dark night of the soul, but I think God gave me what I asked for. It was a personal and professional resurrection—the kind I think everyone must go through in accepting the gift of humility. Through faith, prayer, perseverance, the entrepreneurial spirit, and the American way, we made it through, and I'm far better prepared now for the incredible blessings I see in front of us. My wife and my daughter have been my angels through everything, and now we're on the other side looking forward."

In advising young people entering the working world today, Joe underscores the importance of having a mentor or advisor to help you along the way. Ed Fuller, one of his own mentors, taught him that a leader can't lead from behind a desk—they have to be out there in the trenches. Father Don Bosco, a Catholic priest who worked as a hero to get children off the street and had a profound influence on Joe's father, professed leadership through love and not fear. Joe also believes in the Jesuit principle of contemplation and action, reflecting at the end of the day or at the beginning of a project to ensure optimal performance and continual improvement.

Sometimes, contemplation means reaching deep into the past. For this, Joe keeps the spurs and poncho that belonged to one grandfather, a distinguished Ecuadorian cowboy. He also keeps memories of the entrepreneurial, adventurous spirit of his other grandfather, who loved to go Inca gold hunting deep in the Andes and the jungle of Ecuador. He treasures the Bible with his

grandmother's notes written inside. And he reflects on the gratitude he feels for the childhood his own daughter has enjoyed—beautiful, stable, uninterrupted in the way his own was.

With the tools of culture, character, and compassion, Joe builds. He built incredible three-story forts and tree houses when he was a child, leading the other kids in the elaborate endeavors. Later, he built hotel after hotel for one of the premier companies in the global industry. And now, through PPI, he builds success across industries. "I've always been a builder at heart," he says. "Now, I've fallen into this lucky situation where my business is building better lives for people. We build things to help the war fighter. We build medical devices to help surgeons. Our company is very diverse, but at its essence, we're sophisticated builders ready to build a new tomorrow."

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