

# Dani Canubas

## Something Out of Nothing

When Dani Canubas was growing up in a small village in the Philippines, coming to America was the furthest thing from his mind. In fact, he'd never even heard of it. His parents were high school educated, and his father spent years at a time travelling to Saudi Arabia and Singapore to work as a laborer. Meanwhile, his mother stayed home to raise Dani and his brother and tend to the family farm. At the local elementary school—a tiny, one-room building that taught about 10-15 kids—Dani learned alongside the other village children, but resources were limited. The students were taught languages and math through fourth grade; then they had to travel a bit further afield, to a bigger town.

In the bigger town, Dani began to struggle with his studies. The other students had had better training, and he was already behind. “It was a culture shock, because the other students knew more than I did,” he remembers. “These kids were more advanced, and that made it quite challenging for me. That is when I started hating school because I couldn't keep up.”

During high school, the divide between the richer and poorer students only worsened. He was again sent to a larger town, and for the first time, he began to encounter kids who were wealthy. “There is no middle class in the Philippines,” explains Dani. “You're either rich or poor. I could see from the get-go that there were places I wouldn't be invited. Classmates of mine got dropped off by their drivers, while I took public transportation. I started to notice the difference between the wealthy kids and the rest of us. That is when I started dreaming because I noticed that the parents of those wealthy kids were entrepreneurs.”

Today, Dani is the Founder and CEO of American Esports, a rapidly growing business in a

rapidly growing field. “Esports is competitive video gaming,” explains Dani. “It used to be for leisure, but now it's become a profession. It used to be part of the gaming industry, but in the last ten years it has become an industry in and of itself. Today it's considered the fastest growing technology industry in the world.”

Dani launched the company in May of 2018 after eight months of exhaustive research. He hadn't known anything about esports or video gaming previously. In fact, he'd never even played a video game before. But the more he read on the industry, the more he saw the opportunity. “A total of \$4.4 billion dollars was invested in esports in 2018,” he notes. “Before I started my research, I didn't know how much the total investment would be. I saw investments of \$10 million here and \$20 million there being made. And they were focused on three things—publishing, leagues, and professional teams. Publishing is video game makers putting out new games. Leagues are then built upon the publishers' games. And professional teams are the teams in the leagues. You have to have deep pockets to get involved in those three things.”

Dani was hesitant about plunging into any of these three major investment areas given that each was tied to a particular game, and particular games run their course in terms of public engagement and popularity. “I didn't see how you could sustain it in the long term,” Dani points out. “What if that ‘it’ game is no longer the ‘it’ game in five years. Then the league is gone, the game is gone, and there's a new one. So I knew we had to do something different and realized we could build the infrastructure around it. We don't participate in those three, but we support them.”

Instead, American Esports builds venues, large egaming centers which are often located on college campuses or military bases, as well as



hardware like gaming chairs, tables, monitors and more, all under one brand. They provide all the products and services of the esports industry, and with their venues, are providing spaces for large groups to gather and form teams and leagues around whatever game they may be interested in.

"We want to bring back the community, so our foundation is building these centers in big cities. We're building one or two in DC now that are 5,000 square feet," Dani describes. American esports is also interested in institutional development; they're the leading company providing esports development programs to colleges and even high schools. Colleges are interested in building their own esports centers and programs because those programs help to attract and retain students. "We provide a turnkey solution to help colleges build an esports program within 90 days," says Dani. "Now we're talking with major schools like Cornell and American University." Not only that, but American Esports is also working on its own college and putting together a curriculum to certify people who want to become trainers, coaches, and tutors.

Additionally, American Esports is creating an app that will launch within the next year, as well as a media platform including an ESPN-like television show for esports. They've even brought in a former ESPN executive to head up the project. And finally, they hope to construct their own leagues, but these will be public rather than built around a publisher's game. Another idea is building a collegiate league that is similar to the NCAA. "There are a lot of leagues in colleges right now, but they're regionalized," explains Dani. "We're creating an umbrella so all of them will be playing under us."

Currently, the team has raised about \$1 million and employs about 35 people. Dani was careful to hire a mix of experienced business leaders and energetic young gaming experts. "I built two teams—a team of seasoned people and a team of millennials," describes Dani. "We then mixed them up so they can leverage each other and feed off each other. All the members of my team are equity holders of the company."

Dani chose the name "American Esports" as both an homage to his chosen home and with an eye to its branding power. "If you go anywhere and ask them to give you 10 global brands, what do they say?" asked Dani. "Ninety-five percent of the time, they mention companies like Coca-Cola,

McDonald's, Nike, Adidas, and Starbucks. They say American companies. I came to the conclusion that the number one brand in the world is America. If it succeeds here, it succeeds globally. All we have to do is succeed in America, then we go international. So this is a global play."

If Dani's ambitions are grand, perhaps it's because he's already come so far. Casile in Cabuyao, Laguna was the name of the tiny village he grew up and is about an hour outside Manila. Laguna didn't have electricity or running water when Dani was a kid. "When I go back today, I don't recognize it," says Dani wistfully, "There are big houses and mansions today. It's actually tough to go back because I don't recognize where I came from."

His father was a carpenter, and, like many Filipinos, he travelled abroad to make money for the family. In fact, Dani notes that the Philippines is one of the leading countries that provides workers around the world, from construction workers, to nannies, and to nurses. Dani has seven nurses in his family and his wife's nursing career is ultimately what brought him to the U.S. So Dani's father was one of many who would leave home for long periods of time. Generally, he'd leave for two to three years before coming home for several months, after which he would go back to Saudi Arabia or Singapore. Dani was in high school before the family was doing well enough that his father could stop travelling.

His mother, meanwhile, cared for the children and ran the family farm where they raised pigs, cows, and chickens and grew bananas and coconuts. From the age of 10, Dani was selling bananas in the market to make extra money. He and his younger brother were expected to help care for all the farm animals as soon as they could carry a pail of water. In his free time, Dani loved to play basketball, which is wildly popular in the Philippines, and spend time with his grandfather who was a respected leader in the village.

"I enjoyed hanging out with him and enjoyed listening to the older people's conversations," reflects Dani. "All the leaders from different villages would come, and I would sit there and just listen and enjoy it. I continued that until I came here. The majority of my business partners and associates are older than me, and that's how I learn, by listening. I learned about things like philosophy, leadership, solving conflicts, and other things from my grandfather.

Eventually, I was tapped as a leader in my village, too. If I had stayed, I probably would have gone into politics.”

Although neither of Dani’s parents had a college degree, they stressed the importance of education and were adamant that Dani should get one. He never loved school, he worked his way through it to honor their wish. “As parents, they wanted us to have a better life than they had,” Dani explains. “They thought that if we finished college, we’d have a better opportunity. That was their goal for us at the time.”

Dani attended a religious university close to the village for two years where he decided to study psychology and marketing. While there, he began selling magazines door-to-door, and continued to cultivate his natural gift for sales. After two years, he left for the big city of Manila. It was there that he completed his education and got his first post-college job doing sales at a staffing company, acquiring clients, and sending workers for jobs in Taiwan and Hong Kong.

People began to notice Dani’s potential almost immediately. After a year at the staffing company, he was recruited by a toothbrush company after the owner promised to double his salary. Instead of selling door-to-door, Dani was selling to companies. “I was building relationships with purchasers and with the people who own the store,” says Dani. “One of the things I learned in sales and psychology is the first thing you have to sell is yourself. Once you’re able to do that, then you have a very good chance at selling whatever products or services you have. Because if you’re not able to sell yourself, no matter how great your products are or if people don’t like you, they aren’t going to make a deal with you.”

Dani’s career was going well, but around this time his girlfriend and future wife, Ruth, was recruited to come to America. “She was my college classmate, and I fell in love with her because she was kind, simple, pretty, and charming, and she was the smartest person in the class,” smiles Dani. “When she took the board exams, she was in the top ten in the entire country. She had always dreamed of coming to America and had relatives here. Those relatives would send her things from America when she was a kid. So when she got the opportunity to go, she knew she wanted to go.”

Dani followed Ruth to America where he knew no one except his wife and her family. He accepted a job for two weeks at a local Taco Bell

and would drive to work every day with his mother-in-law. He next tried out a job at a bookstore but found the work to be boring. “All I was doing was checking the inventory. Around 2:00 PM I would go in the bathroom and fall asleep,” laughs Dani. “I was so bored. I can’t be in one place doing the same thing for eight hours. So after about a month I left that, too.”

Then he decided to become a distributor for packaged nuts. Each morning he’d fill the trunk of his car with packaged nuts and drive from gas station to gas station selling them. Dani enjoyed this far more than being cooped up in one place. He began to learn how to communicate, to make connections, and to hone his selling skills. A few months later, he was introduced to Cutco Knives and decided to try his hand at selling knives for Cutco. “They doubted my capability and access being a new immigrant, but I asked them to give me a chance,” remembers Dani. “I asked them to give me 30 days to prove myself. I ended up becoming the No. 1 salesperson in that office, and ended up the No. 3 producer in the entire company that same year.”

While selling knives, he happened to meet and befriend a former VP for Equitable Insurance who offered Dani a place at the company. “I was uncertain why he asked me to join him, and he said that he knew I could do it,” says Dani. “I accepted it and asked him to show me the ropes. He taught me about residual income, and I became more interested.” Dani became a financial planner for several years.

Once Equitable was bought out in 1996, Dani decided to leave and became an Independent Distributor for Market America now SHOP.COM to build a substantial residual income. After building the global distribution business, Dani decided to retire in 2003. By this time, Ruth and Dani had four children—they now have five—and they decided to take the children back to the Philippines for several years so they could meet their family and better understand their heritage. While there Dani started another international staffing business that placed nurses and other workers in the U.S. After 9/11, though, this became increasingly difficult, and ultimately, Dani and the family returned to the U.S.

After several years living only on residual income, Dani took a consultancy job as VP of Sales and Training for Market Philippines and led Market America’s expansion there. “With Market

America/SHOP.COM, I learned many aspects of leadership there,” he recalls. “I spoke in public, ran conferences, and led trainings in front of as many as 25,000 people around the world. My horizon was expanding as I travelled globally and I was becoming more entrepreneurial.”

After a couple of years back in the U.S., Dani joined the Tower Club and became an advisory board member. He met and became friends with more entrepreneurs and leaders from various industries.

In 2017, Dani’s father died suddenly in a tragic accident, and Dani accompanied his mother to the Philippines to bury his father and mourn. “My dad was one of those people who never made an enemy,” smiles Dani. “No one was ever mad at him. He was a quiet man but was always helping others. In fact, even though we had very little, both of my parents were always helping others as I was growing up. They always found some way to give back to others.”

It was during this trip home that Dani had time to take a step back and begin to research new business opportunities. It was during this research that he discovered esports. “I stopped everything I was doing and disappeared for a while,” recalls Dani. “I fell in love with reading again which is how I learned about the industry. I feel like my father paved the way for me to achieve my goals. It was almost like he helped me find this platform that can empower young people.”

Ruth has been another major influence in Dani’s life. “She’s been very supportive, but she’s also my number one critic,” laughs Dani. “She’s smarter than I am and better than me in many ways. She’s disciplined and very organized. Her thoughts and ideas help me since I know she doesn’t always tell me what I thought I wanted to hear. She supports me and holds me accountable.”

As a leader, Dani sees the importance of teamwork and making sure your team gets the credit they deserve. “Leadership, to me, is doing what you want other people to do. I see the difference between leadership and management. Many people confuse the two,” observes Dani. “I let people know that I don’t want to walk in front of them and don’t want to walk behind them. I want to walk with them. I love teamwork. The essence of teamwork, for me, is about giving the

credit instead of taking the credit. What I’ve experienced in life is that the more you give, you more you receive.”

To young people getting ready to face the world, he advises them to focus on personal development, to never quit, and to make adjustments to get better. He also said it is important to have balance and to remember to give back. Dani also shared that he loves the philosophy of ants—they never quit, are always moving forward, and are working as a team.

“One of our missions in American Esports is funding the American Esports Kids Foundation,” says Dani. “It’s focused on social responsibility, education and wellness. I think that’s what’s missing right now. There are a lot of Gen Zers and millennials who are into wellness and education. But what’s missing is social responsibility. I would encourage them not to overlook that.”

He also looks to his own past as he encourages college graduates to dream big, because everyone can exceed their dreams. Dreams do come true. “Had I not believed that I would succeed because I was not rich, or because my parents were not rich, then I would have just given up on my dreams,” he reflects. “I shouldn’t have been dreaming the way I was, but I did. I wanted to create something out of nothing. To me, that’s the true definition of entrepreneurship.”

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– By Gordon J. Bernhardt, CFP®, AIF®

*About Gordon J. Bernhardt*

*President and founder of Bernhardt Wealth Management and author of Profiles in Success: Inspiration from Executive Leaders in the Washington D.C. Area, Gordon provides financial planning and wealth management services to affluent individuals, families and business-owners throughout the Washington, DC area. Since establishing his firm in 1994, he and his team have been focused on providing high-quality service and independent financial advice to help clients make informed decisions about their money. For more information, visit [www.BernhardtWealth.com](http://www.BernhardtWealth.com) and [Gordon’s Blog](#).*