

# MAN IN THE ARENA – NEVER SAY QUIT

## INTRODUCTION

By David Michael Semas

For fifty years, even with all its ups and downs, I've enjoyed nearly every day of my adventurous life. Unlike those less fortunate, I've been blessed with good health and surrounded by family and close friends. Although at times stressful, my lifetime journey has been about never giving up. Rarely have I wavered from that mantra. If I failed, I chalked it up to another learning experience, dusted myself off, and waited for sunrise, mindful that life is about the journey and not the destination. That wasn't because I was fearless, but like many before me, *I didn't know what I didn't know*.

Today I am back at the helm as a real estate developer ([www.sierradorado.com](http://www.sierradorado.com)). My longtime friends and I are in the process of developing a 155-acre industrial park project in Reno, Nevada, and a luxury hotel, golf resort, and residential community in Nayarit, Mexico. The 1,200-acre Las Islitas Resort project is eighty-five miles north of Puerto Vallarta in the historic fishing village of San Blas ([www.lasislitasresort.com](http://www.lasislitasresort.com)).

However, it wasn't that long ago that I fell into a litigious abyss, mired in judicial chaos. These writings are of a mere mortal—an American-born man of proud Azorean Portuguese descent, a baby boomer who had the privilege of growing up in a typical 1950s American household before toiling for years to build several business careers. This book is not about great achievements but rather about perseverance and lessons learned. While at times I've had success and made millions along the way, I've also lost millions many times over. I've come to realize that failures are nothing more than learning experiences—sometimes merely blips in the road and other times life-altering. Remember: don't let life pass you by. Stop and look around once in a while.

This autobiography provides a detailed road map of trials, challenges, and pitfalls that might await you, the reader, in your personal life and business career. These writings and observations, together with various quotes from famous people and occasionally myself, are meant to give advice and counsel. The anecdotes and stories contained herein might one day provide you with the knowledge needed to face a formidable problem, challenge, or awkward situation—and even to anticipate one before it occurs in the first place.

They say that early childhood shapes our social skills and behavior in adulthood. This book is an honest account of my personal and business life. The chapters are sprinkled with many interesting characters, places, and events, including those from my hilarious, rambunctious teenage years in the Valley of Heart's Delight.

Shortly after the launching of my business career my story unfolds with an incident that took place a lifetime ago halfway around the world. It involved international intrigue and corruption at the highest levels of government. Looking to finance a \$50 million real estate project (\$268 million in 2021 dollars), I became involved with some rather unsavory characters and the political and military hierarchy of the Philippine government during the mid-1970s.

From the beginning of my early childhood in 1951 in the agricultural town of Santa Clara, California, located in the heart of Silicon Valley, I had no inkling of where my life journey would lead. Throughout my career, I've experienced the thrill of victory and the agony of defeat. During thirty years in construction, real estate development, and finance, I've endured incredible hardships, but founding and nurturing a non-real estate business dwarfed every other difficulty I faced before or after.

Almost from the beginning of that adventure, I was subjected to vindictive retaliation by a few disgruntled employees. On top of this, we were working to change an old-fashioned, multi-billion-dollar industry that had been around for hundreds of years. In our bid to bring more efficient processes and "green" specialty chemicals to the metal-finishing and corrosion-control industry, we went up against many deeply entrenched competitors.

After raising more than \$100 million in investment and after two decades of R&D and extensive marketing, the company I founded was hurt by a devastating global financial collapse. Vengeful employees subjected us to three retaliatory lawsuits and caused two unwarranted criminal investigations. One was by the IRS and the other, a decade later, by the powerful Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC). Considering that whistleblower investigations typically result in hefty fines, criminal prosecution, or both, I was relieved when the baseless and intrusive investigations were concluded without fines or penalties of any kind. However, the damage to our trademark brand and my professional reputation was considerable and the financial loss to our shareholders and my family quite devastating.

To exacerbate matters further, a person I believed to be a friend and an investor in our green metal-finishing chemical company betrayed my trust and acted in bad faith when he spearheaded a deceptive hostile takeover of the business. Based on carefully crafted self-serving lies and gross misrepresentations, I was removed as president of the company I had founded twenty years earlier and built from the ground up. Prior to my removal and in an effort to save the business and protect the investment of our shareholders, my wife and I had invested \$10 million in the business. We lost another \$6 million in real estate equity, not including my 25 percent ownership of the company itself. Thankfully, good fortune comes when you least expect it—and usually from the sheer will to persevere.

Ultimately, determination and a commitment to integrity prevailed. With the grace of God, a great deal of hard work, and creative financing, we managed to right the ship. Thanks to help from a few other loyal friends, some good old-fashioned luck, and what must have been divine intervention, I was able to stay the course and follow the guiding principles outlined by President Teddy Roosevelt in the “The Man in the Arena.” Somehow, I managed to pull through and redirect my career to the real estate development industry, where it all began a half century earlier.

Many years ago, I promised my father, Leonard “the Colonel” Semas, and my mentor, Benjamin “Ben” Harrison Swig, the founder of the world-famous Fairmont Hotel chain, that I would one day share their words of wisdom. This book passes along their business savvy and good old-fashioned horse sense, along with my own personal observations, to family, friends, and future generations.

With these writings, I am fulfilling commitments made to my supportive teachers, motivational mentors, influential friends, and loved ones that guided me along my exciting journey. The spirit of our forefathers live inside each of us. Our ancestors traveled far and wide and dared to dream and conquer the endless obstacles and challenges of everyday life in what has been called the Great American Experiment. To all those who have chosen the risky but rewarding entrepreneurial path, without gender distinction, you, too, represent the heart and soul of “The Man in the Arena.

**Life Lesson #4:** *The two most important days in your life are the day you are born and the day you discover why.*

—Mark Twain (American writer, 1835-1910)