

Chester Vergara Gamer for life

by JOSEPH PIMENTEL / AJPress

THERE was always something about video games. Growing up, Fil-Am Chester Vergara was a video game addict. He would sit in front of the TV and play for hours. As a 12-year-old, he would carry a Legend of Zelda battery pack containing a previous saved game everywhere he went so if he were at a friend's house, he'd pop it in the Nintendo and continue to play. "As a kid, I just had this love for gaming," said Vergara. "I just love how it could take you away from reality and bring you into this fantasy world." His parents hated it. His parents wanted him to become a lawyer or a doctor. But now they'll have to settle that their son's fervent childhood hobby has become a full time job.

The 32-year-old Vergara is an associate producer for Namco Bandai, one of the largest producers of video games and toys in the world.

As an associate producer, he's responsible for overseeing a games development from design to coordinating with publishers and ensuring that the game gets finished on time.

He's already produced several video game titles in all the major consoles including Warhammer for Sony's PSP, Fast and Furious for XBOX, Afro Samurai for the Sony's PS3 and both Active Life: Outdoor Challenge I and II for the Nintendo Wii system, among others.

In this year's Electronic Entertainment Expo (E3) in Los Angeles, the world's premiere trade show for computer and video games and related products, it's hard not to miss Vergara. Donning a red shirt with the Namco Bandai logo, the shaven head Filipino is wearing a grin from ear to ear. During the three-day convention, he's been demonstrating the latest title he helped produce - Active Life eXtreme challenge II for the Nintendo Wii system.

"This is really a great game for families," he said about the game. "It's a great way for kids and parents to spend quality time and enjoy the game that they are playing."

Vergara admits that he never thought he would be in the position that he's in. He said that he's living the dream.

"It's really a big sense of accomplishment to be where I am," said Vergara. "There's not a lot of Filipinos in my position."

Nothing is Impossible Fulfilling his dream wasn't always easy. Born in Ilocus Sur, Philippines,



Vergara immigrated to the US when he was nine years old. Similar to many Pinoy families, his father made the ultimate sacrifice. The elder Vergara, who was 56 when Chester was born, left to the US first, foregoing his successful dental practice and leaving his wife and four kids to try and secure a job in the US.

Chester Vergara was only two when his father left the Philippines. The youngest of four siblings, he didn't see him again until he was nine.

"I remember I came here expecting a good life because that's what everyone was saying to me in the Philippines," he said. "They would say, 'you're dad is in America and you're going to have

a great life.' I came here being ignorant and naive believing that and it was a big disappointment."

His father couldn't use his dental education in the Philippines to secure a job in the US so he had to settle for an assembly line position to support the family.

When the rest of the family arrived from the Philippines, they found themselves homeless. They would stay with friends and co-workers before finding a place of their own.

"I really came from a humbling beginning," he said. "We really struggled. But I think all the hardships we went through were a blessing in disguise because now it has created this fighter mentality in my family. If we want some-



Galing Pinoy showcases the triumph of the Filipino spirit - the Filipino's innate perseverance to rise above. A double entendre, Galing Pinoy literally translates to both coming from (or brought to you by) the Filipino and Filipino ingenuity.



thing, we're going to get it." Vergara said that his oldest brother is pursuing a Ph.D., sister received a full scholarship when she attended UC Santa Barbara, and his other older brother is an engineer.

"When you start at the bottom, you have no where else but go up," he said.

Vergara had always dreamed about working in the video game industry. After studying Computer Graphics at Silicon Valley College, he initially wanted to be a concept artist. However, when he applied at Namco Bandai there were no entry-level positions available at that time.

Itching to get his foot in the door, he took a temp position in the company. While working as a receptionist, he would bug Human Resources personnel for a more permanent job. His persistence paid off. After a few months, he began work as a Quality Assurance (QA) game tester.

He thought he had the dream job. He would play video games

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all day and report to producers and Lead game testers.

But a QA game tester is not what it's all cracked up to be, said Vergara

"Imagine playing your favorite video game but only playing one aspect of it," explained Vergara. "For example, Pacman. Imagine playing Pacman and making sure that all the dots are there. It might be fun for first one or two days but try doing it for a month or two."

While at QA, Vergara continued to keep his eye on the prize. He starved for more responsibilities. He networked with producers and volunteered to help them in any way.

After four years at QA, he was promoted as an assistant producer. He then continued to work his way up, earning an Associate Producer title.

He's not done yet, he said.

He plans to one day become an executive producer, a role that he doesn't see many Filipinos in currently.

Looking back, he said that no one expected gaming to be a \$10 billion a year industry. He said that there are a lot of Filipino artists but not a lot of executives in the industry.

With his work ethic, he knows he'll make it.

"I'm not done," said Vergara. "I've done QA, assistant producing, associate producing, I'm only a year away before I get become a full fledge producer. I'm not going to stop. I'm going to keep going. I have a lot of ideas and you know what, I really think that Filipinos are one of the most creative people out there...it just takes a little push or a nudge or someone to lead by example before we can make it to the top of this industry." ■