

BUSINESS

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Imelda Argel

Lawyer continues success despite cultural challenges

By AMBER DAINES

If Imelda Argel had not consistently lived the mantra "nothing ventured, nothing gained", it's unlikely she would have persisted in either the legal profession nor started a consultancy business in Australia.

Argel is the first to admit that establishing, and re-establishing, herself professionally has been a bit of a rollercoaster; one that she hopes will start to ride on an even keel.

But to know the Imelda Argel story is to discover that she is not a quitter, nor perturbed by the prospect of hardship. In fact, she quite philosophically muses over the obstacles she has faced and overcome to get where she is today.

"When I left the Philippines I was a top corporate lawyer, one of the highest paid, and I was on the Legal Management Council, and my achievements got me admission to the bar (in New York and the Philippines) without sitting exams.

"But in Australia, I was faced with more difficulties than expected in getting to practice law here. I had to swallow my pride and work as a paralegal while I went through the admission process. It took much humility on my part," Argel said.

Yet like all of the stepping stones in her career, Argel can recount the positive aspects of rebuilding her position as a lawyer. She said working as a paralegal in one of Sydney's top law firms, Baker & McKenzie, positioned her well to learn the workings of the Australian legal system.

Argel said she found completing her NSW accreditation and working as a paralegal particularly difficult because of her age. She found it equally disconcerting to then be competing with 25 year olds for places within legal firms, once she had graduated.

"The big firms would recognise my education and experience then ask me where did I think I would fit in the hierarchy of their firm. They would overlook the fact that international commercial law is basically universal and I could carry my experience into Australia.

"They restrict themselves by not taking risks and it's this attitude that will see Australian firms miss out on international business, compared to the United States."

While working, Argel went on to complete a Master of Laws part-time over three years. Specialising in international business law, Argel said she did it not only to update her skills but also to remove any doubts about her competency that might arise while establishing herself in Australian legal system.

Since 1994, Argel has worked as a sole legal practitioner through Imelda Argel and Associates. The bulk of her business is in what she refers to as "cross-cultural orientation" for Australian industry involved in international trade and transactions.

In layman's terms, this translates to the negotiation of joint venture commercial contracts and conveyancing, legal protection of foreign investment, and advice on corporate incentives in Asia, particularly the Philippines.

Name

Imelda Argel

Position

Principal, Interlink Asia and solicitor with Imelda Argel and Associates
Solicitor in New South Wales, and Solicitor and Barrister in the Australian Capital Territory,
Attorney-at-law in the Philippines and New York State, United States of America

Education

Master of Laws, University of Sydney
Diploma in Practical Legal Training, NSW College of Law
Accreditation with the NSW Solicitors' Admission Board,
Bachelor of Laws, University of the Philippines,
Bachelor of Arts (Honours) at St Theresa's College, Philippines

Family

Son, Victor

Interests

Dancing, travelling, group singing

"I look at my legal practice as a way to pay the day-to-day bills, but I have got involved with a number of start-ups that I am proud of, and I have found clientele in the immigration services area which I got into because of the demand from ethnic communities.

"There's lots of work from companies from the Philippines coming to Australia, such as the group that bought into City Tattersalls, who were (incidentally) one of the top two companies in the Philippines" Argus said.

As demanding as running a legal practice might be, Argel has diverted a great amount of her ambition into Interlink Asia, a business consultancy she also began three years ago. However, Argel is expecting to be in for the long-haul in building up this business.

"I know the gestation time for any project will be at least three years, but Interlink Asia focuses on business development services that incorporate the cross-cultural orientation I am accustomed to in my work with Imelda Argel and Associates."

Keeping in regular contact with political and legal organisations in the Philippines has been paramount to establishing both business ventures, and it was through her strong ties with the Philippines Government that she received a Presidential Administration Order to develop an information technology joint venture.

"This IT project is ready to go, all I need is Australian companies wanting to put forward capital, and the successful implementation will



follow. This IT project is a favourite of mine, but I am also in the market for projects in mining, such as gold, marble, quarrying and processing," Argel said.

Last year, as part of a series of seminars held in conjunction with the Australian Chamber of Commerce, Argel addressed the cultural and practical issues of doing business with Filipinos. Attending Argel's session was David Peterson, manager of maritime marketing with Transfield Defence Systems.

"I attended with the agent I work with from the Philippines and he also passed Imelda's advice through his quality check and said she was spot on. It was a clear, interesting and useful presentation of the Philippines culture," Peterson said.

Argel is candid about her meteoric rise in the legal ranks of the Philippines. She said a combination of coming from a well-respected and well-to-do family (both her parents were also lawyers) and a sound education made way for her ascension within the commercial law arena.

When she left Manila, Philippines, in 1988, Argel was the Managing Partner of Argel, Guevara and Associates. From 1977 to 1987 she was the General Counsel for the Asia-Pacific headquarters of United Development Incorporated in Manila and Vice President,

Administration and Legal, of Eisenberg and Co.

"Eisenberg gave me exposure to the commercial acumen of the Jewish business community, and it was a forerunner to the BOT (build, operate, transfer) contracts negotiated throughout Asia today, and that was back in the 1970s."

She also spent three years working in a financial intermediary role with the Ayala group of companies, now the leading company in the Philippines. The time spent here gave her an invaluable insight into the decision-making processes of big business.

On the Asian currency crisis, Argel said the Philippines was relatively unscathed because the Philippines has not borrowed for the development of its infrastructure and commercial developments, and its this interest for venture capitalism that Interlink Asia is trying to arouse in Australia.

"Australians companies should be more aggressive venture capitalists, because unless they take risks they cannot be more successful.

"The crisis will affect Australian business prospects but we shouldn't discount the fact there are opportunities for more enterprising people to succeed if they go against the flow. Business opportunities come out of change," Argel said.

"A combination of coming from a well-respected and well-to-do family and a sound education made way for her ascension within the commercial law arena"