

# Big John

The  
Life Story of  
John Gokongwei Jr.

Written by  
**Yvette Fernandez**

Illustrated by  
**Abi Goy**





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# BIG JOHN

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My name is John Gokongwei Jr.

People call me Big John because I am 85 years old and weigh over 200 pounds. They also call me Big John because I own a big company that runs many businesses. I have been called a rich man because over the years I've made a lot of money.

That's true now but it wasn't true many years ago, when I was a little boy living in Cebu.

I wasn't always Big John with money.



Many years ago I was little John with no money at all.

We started out rich enough. Or so I thought. I lived in a big house surrounded by a pretty garden which even had a fountain. My father owned many movie theaters in Cebu and my friends and I got to watch all the movies we wanted for free. We could sit wherever we wanted. We never needed to buy tickets.

When I was 13 years old, my father died and my mother cried. We found out that my father owed people a lot of money. We didn't have the money to pay them back, so the people he owed money to took away our house and garden with the fountain. They also took away our movie theaters. One day, one of the old employees snuck my brother Henry and me into a theater so we could watch a movie for free, but we were caught by the new owner who kicked us out and told us we could never go back there again. We had no money to buy movie tickets. We had no money to buy anything else.

I was little John with no money at all.

I cried. I was so sad. I was so angry. Being sad and angry will not put food on the table, my mother said. It will not help us buy clothes to keep us warm.

Be grateful that we all have each other, she said. We will all work hard together as a family, and we will be all right.

My mother sold her jewelry, the pretty, sparkling pieces she had always loved, so that we could buy food. There are more important things in life than jewelry, she said. What is important is that my children get to eat nutritious food and sleep in warm beds.





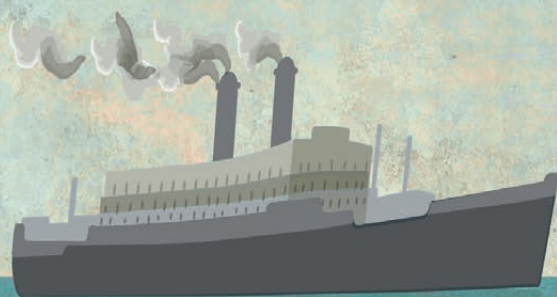


I was the eldest child in the family, so I became the man of the house. I felt that the little boy I once was had suddenly become an adult overnight. It was all up to me. I was dealing with hardship, but I knew that it was something I could overcome, if I worked hard at it. My life would be what I made of it. I had four younger brothers: Henry, Johnson, Eddie, and James, and one little sister, Lily. My mother and I realized it would be cheaper for the little ones to grow up in China where my parents' families were from, so she took them there on a boat. I was very sad to see the others leave and they were sad to leave me but we all knew it was best for all of us. Later, my mother and Henry came back to join me in Cebu.





It was not easy for my brothers and sister in China. Sometimes we didn't have enough money to send them, which meant they could only eat one meal a day. When it got too cold in the winter, they had to burn some of their furniture to stay warm.





To make more money to send to our family in China, we cooked peanuts and garlic that we packed in little bags and sold. Everyone loves fresh, hot peanuts, so we had a good product. Selling them was easy. That was my first experience as an entrepreneur. An entrepreneur is someone who makes money by going into his own business. He doesn't have a boss, but works for himself.





## What you need to do to become an entrepreneur:

Decide who your buyers are.

Figure out what they want.

Sell them what they want at a fair price.

Work hard.

Love what you do.

Don't give up.

The toughest challenge to being an entrepreneur is being better than the rest of your competitors by selling a product better than anyone else's.

If you don't have a better product, sell the same product, but at a cheaper price.

If you can't give it at a cheaper price, give them something else for free. Even if it's just a smile. Buyers always want a good deal. And they want good service. A happy smile is part of good service.



And so many years ago, while the world was in the middle of the Second World War, I decided to become an entrepreneur.

I woke up earlier than everyone else, even before the roosters crowed COCKADOODLEDOO! I jumped out of bed, dressed up quickly and got on my trusty bicycle. It never let me down. It took me everywhere I needed to go.

Every day, I would ride my bicycle to the public market many kilometers away.





I set up a little table at the market to sell my wares: spools of thread, bars of soap, candles that shone bright at night. I was 15 years old. The other vendors were much older than I was, but I wasn't worried. I knew I could work longer and harder than the rest of them.

I worked for many hours under the scorching hot sun and stayed on in the twilight and darkness long after the sun went away.

I earned about twenty pesos a day. Part of the money I used to buy food for my family. The rest of the money I used to buy more thread, soap and candles.





One day I heard that there were many more buyers with much more money in the big city of Manila, across the sea, many kilometers north.

And so I packed my wares, got on a boat called a *batel* and made the long trip to Manila. The boat was not very long, about the length of two cars put together. That was very small for a boat that would brave the rough sea.

When there was wind, it would take us five days on the boat to Lucena, and then six more hours by truck to Manila. When there was no wind, it sometimes took up to two weeks on the boat. We would eat *tuyo* – salted fish – and lots of rice. When we were lucky, we would catch fresh fish.

For some of my companions those trips were boring, but not for me. Riding on the *batel* gave me time to read. I read all kinds of books: little books and big books. Books about all sorts of people with all sorts of lives in all sorts of places all over the world. Some were real stories, some were pretend, but with each one, I learned something new. About myself. About life.

Reading books expanded my mind. Reading made me realize the many possibilities, the vast opportunities beyond my own experiences.





One day, I loaded a pile of car tires on the *batel* to sell in Manila. My grownup companions brought sacks of sugar and rice to sell so they could buy other food and clothes for their families. We all settled into the boat to make the long trip across the water. The wind was strong, the water was choppy. We hit a huge rock and CRACK!!! The next thing I knew, we were all in the water, gasping for air, fighting for our lives.

And then we saw the tires. They floated on the water, our life savers. We grabbed on to them, and held on tight till we were rescued.

The tires saved us from drowning, and my companions and I saved the tires from being lost at sea. Unfortunately, my friends lost the sacks of sugar and rice they had hoped to sell to help their families.

The tires and I eventually made it to Manila and I made money selling them. That's another thing I learned. Do not get too attached to anything you own. Always be ready to make a good deal.





Eventually, I put together enough money to start an even bigger business. By that time, my brothers and sister were back in the Philippines and old enough to help me with my work. They went to school during the day, but when classes were done in the afternoon and into the evening, they waited on customers and carried stuff in and out of the storeroom. The war had ended but people couldn't buy everything they needed. Not many people were selling things, and many more people were looking for things to buy. I saw that as an opportunity.





We turned our apartment into a warehouse, and slept next to sacks of onions and oranges. We brought in all sorts of products from the United States: old newspapers and magazines, bits of fabric and used clothing that smelled of mothballs. Our customers eagerly snapped up what we were selling because they couldn't find them elsewhere.

I liked the used clothing best because I got to try out the different outfits before I sold them again.









One day I met a pretty girl named Elizabeth. I fell in love with her and fortunately, she loved me back, even if I smelled of onions and mothballs. Elizabeth soon became Mrs. John and worked hard by my side. She joined my brothers and sister and me in the family business. Together, we worked hard and saved hard.

We bought and sold, bought and sold.







One day we decided, why buy when we can make? Why not make the things for us to sell? That's when we put up a factory that made cornstarch.

Why something boring like cornstarch? Because boring cornstarch is used in more exciting products like ice cream, medicine, and beer. There were other companies that made cornstarch too, but we were not afraid of them. We made good cornstarch and we sold it at a cheap price so we got many customers. The name of our cornstarch was Panda.

Big companies bought our cornstarch and used it to create products with brand names. A brand name is one that many other people recognize and buy because they respect it.



**QUESTIONS**  
you should be able  
to answer with  
“**YES!**”  
before you go  
into business:

**1**

Is there a  
market?

**2**

Can you be better  
than anyone else in  
the Philippines and  
maybe even the rest  
of the world?



Soon, we decided to create our own product with a brand name, a coffee named Blend 45. Blend 45 became a popular brand throughout the Philippines.

Through the years, our family started many other brands. You may recognize some of them: Chippy, Chiz Curls, Nips, Cloud 9, Maxx candy, C2 green tea, Great Taste coffee, Payless instant noodles, Robinsons department stores and malls, YES! magazine, Sun Cellular, Cebu Pacific.

Today our products are sold in many parts of Asia, Europe and the United States. We've helped put Filipino products in households around the globe. We've created jobs for many people. These employees have worked hard with us and helped us build the company. A company needs a team of good, honest, hardworking people to succeed.



3

Can you get the right people to work for you?

4

Do you have enough money to start the business?

5

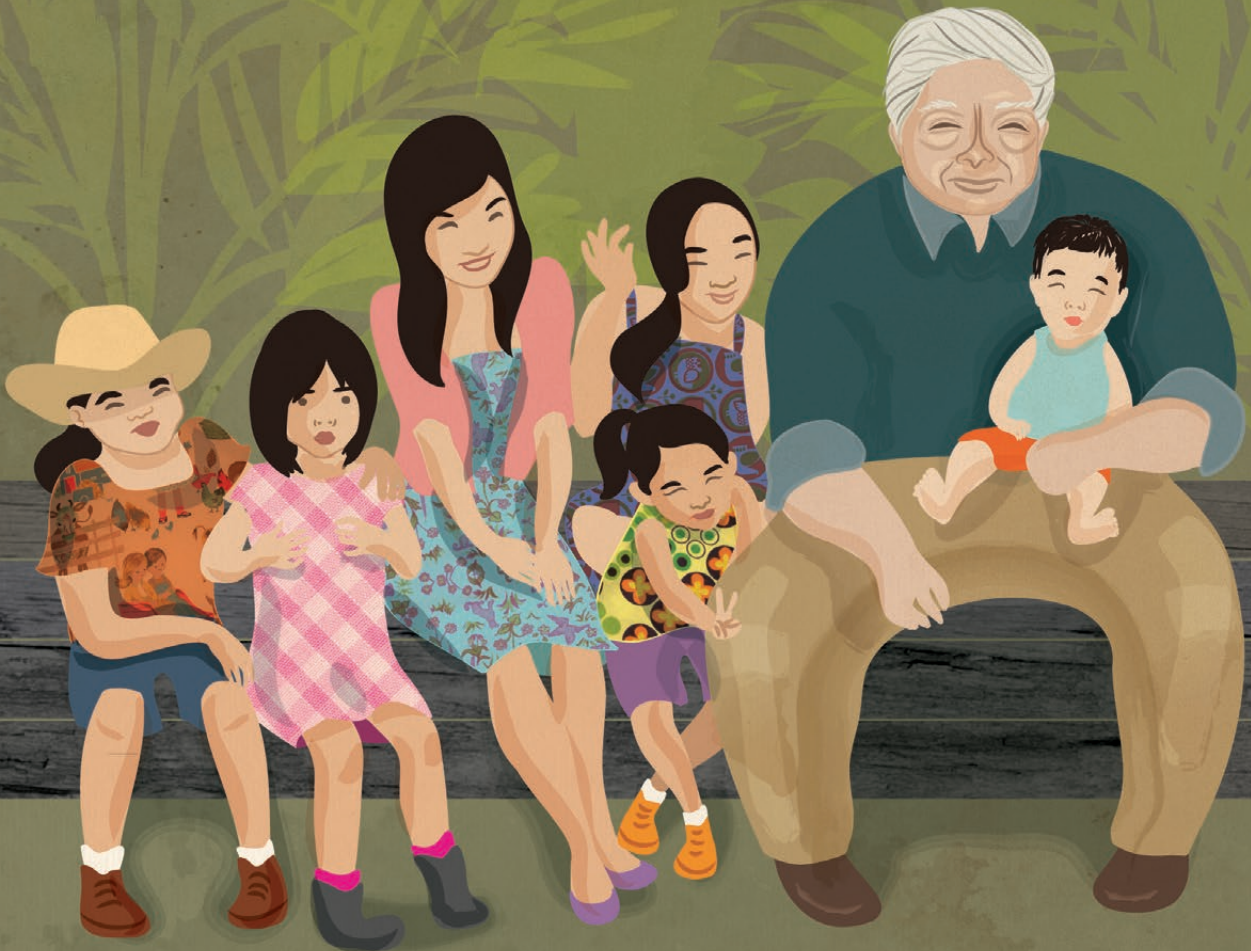
Are you willing to face the not-so-good things that come with it?

(for example: big eye bags from working late nights, bad gossip from nasty rivals)



My mother was very proud of her children. She lived a long and happy life, pleased with the successes of all of us.

Over the years, we made much more money than our family will ever need. That's why I decided to give some of it away. On my 80th birthday, I announced I would be giving away part of our company worth many billions of pesos to a foundation that will help young people go to school and learn to be successful like me. I thought that was a good idea. My wife and children thought that was a good idea too.





Elizabeth and I have six children: good children, smart children who studied hard. They have always listened to me, and fortunately, continue to learn from me. They've always worked very hard too.

I have twelve grandchildren who visit me every Sunday. We have lunch together and we talk to each other and we have a good time as a family.





Can I tell you a secret?

More than all my businesses, more than all the money I have, my family is my greatest happiness.

I am an old man.

I am now 85 years old.

I am no longer little John.

I am now Big John who weighs over 200 pounds.

I have a good wife and a good family.

I am happy.







## **Afterword**

### **by Lisa Gokongwei Cheng**

Dad died on November 9, 2019. He was 93 years old.

Dad continues to be larger than life. Big John, the big man behind the big conglomerate that spans big countries around the region.

But to us, Big John will always be Dad. Over the years, he taught us many lessons about entrepreneurship, business, and leadership. But more than that, he taught us to live good lives, to do the right thing even when no one is looking, the value of family.

We continue to use these lessons to navigate our lives, both at home and in our professions, and we will hand down these learnings to future generations.



## About this book

This children's book was a gift to our father on his 85th birthday.

While we were growing up, our father, John Gokongwei Jr., would tell us stories about his difficult childhood as a tool to teach us the values of hard work, resiliency, family, and vision. We were lucky to grow up in a stable and loving home, and when we became adults, fortunate to join him and our uncles and aunt as they built the company, JG Summit, into a Philippine powerhouse. This book is a way for us and our cousins to share our father's story with our own children, their children, and generations to come who may never get to meet him. We would like them to remember the young boy who lost his father at an early age, but who transcended that and other obstacles to live a life of great adventure and passion.

In doing so, we hope that they live by the same values he did.

*Robina, Lance, Lisa, Faith, Hope, and Marcia*



*A portion of the proceeds from this book will be donated to the Gokongwei Brothers Foundation (GBF), which was established in 1992 to support Philippine education. Its first project was the Technical Training Center for skilled graduates in various engineering fields. An endowment to the Ateneo de Manila University led to the John Gokongwei School of Management (JGSOM). GBF has also donated facilities and scholarships, and supported programs in schools such as Immaculate Concepcion Academy, Xavier School, and De La Salle University.*





### **The Author**

Yvette Fernandez is the editor in chief of Town&Country Philippines. She worked with Bloomberg News in New York for 16 years as a writer, producer, anchor, and editor. Her writing has appeared in various publications including New York Newsday, The Los Angeles Times, The Orange County Register, and The Chicago Tribune.

Her children's book "Haluhalo Espesyal", about Filipino merienda treats, was published by Adarna House.

Yvette met Big John and his family over 20 years ago and thinks of them as her second family.



### **The Illustrator**

Abi Goy is an illustrator and is 1/3 of design company Studio Dialogo ([studiodialogo.com](http://studiodialogo.com)).

Her most recent illustration work "Buwan, Buwang Bulawan," is a poetry book for children written by Rio Almario and published by Adarna House and "Twelve Merry Princesses" retold by Christine Bellen for Anvil's Lola Basyang series. She also designed the book and illustrated for "100 Questions Filipino Kids Ask," which won the 2006 National Book Award, Best Reference Book.

To see more of Abi's illustrations, visit her website at [abigoy.com](http://abigoy.com).



Dream Big Books is an imprint of Summit Books. It is a collection of inspiring stories written for children that we hope will kindle within them a desire to aim for the sky, do their best, and meet the challenge of helping change the world we live in for the better.



Big John Gokongwei and his family run many businesses. They include brands such as Chippy, C2, Maxx, Cloud 9, Payless instant noodles, Great Taste coffee, Cebu Pacific, Robinsons department stores and malls, and YES! magazine.

But Big John didn't always have money. Many years ago he was little John with no money at all.

This is the story of how a young boy learned the value of dreaming big, working hard, and never giving up.



₱125

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