

# David Harilela

The CEO of the David Harilela Group and the director of Harilela Hotels speaks to *Tatler* about his legacy, how he celebrated closing his first deal and the weight of the Harilela name

By Tara Sobti. Photography by Zed Leets

*It's been said that your father, the late George Harilela, gave you a US\$3 monthly allowance. How did that impact your determination and drive to succeed?*

I was in high school at the time and it wasn't even enough money for me to pick up a date. I've seen my father work from scratch and I idolised him. I didn't mind it. I had a driver, car, food and I was pampered. But it made me think about how to make my father's life easier. My whole life, I've been very independent. I went to study business at the University of Southern Carolina and was the first person to go to university in my family. I thank him for these lessons. I always taught my kids that they need to sustain themselves. I have always tried to prove to my father that I could be at least half the man he was, because he was totally self-made.

*You're considered an expert in the licensing world and have worked with companies like Disney and Warner. How did you first get into this line of work?*

I was in trading first and I always wanted to add creativity and value. I partnered with an Australian company and we owned many notable Disney licences. The

biggest licence we ever got was for the World Cup in 1994 in the US. We created a store with 250 items. You could buy a towel, a stuffed toy or a soccer ball. It was challenging and a lot of fun.

*Was the dream always to join the family business?*

I either wanted to be a successful businessman or a fantastic singer. I realised early in life that I wanted to contribute to my family and prove myself as a businessman. I was offered a recording contract before college in the late 1960s. Our band was called The Balladeers; we practised like mad and we played every night for two months in Tsim Sha Shui. But musically, I was mediocre. It would have been the wrong path.

*What are the core values that drive your business decisions?*

The key is service and integrity. I always deliver what I promise—never less. If anything is wrong, I will pay the penalty. I also learnt to not only sell to clients but to profit-share with clients. That makes you a team. It was very alien for a businessperson in the 1970s and 1980s to do this, but I did. Everything good, I learnt from my father: strategy, how to grab a big client and how to understand a client.

*What was the first big deal you closed?*

The first big one, which I thought was the easiest money I ever made, was when I was the licensing agent for the World Cup for Mexico in 1986. I made over US\$1 million net profit. That was beautiful. I went to a restaurant to sing and dance with friends afterwards to celebrate.

*How has your family supported you throughout your entrepreneurial journey?*

My father and my grandmother, Devibai—whom I am named after—gave me all the good values in life. When I really want something, I go full steam ahead. When I saw my wife, I knew I was going to marry her. When I started my charity [The One], everyone thought I was crazy, but I just did it. It's the same with business. I've been blessed. My dad never interfered and my wife never complained. You can't build your business sitting on your butt. I'm a workaholic. I always wanted to rise to the occasion and not run away from it.

*You have three daughters. Have you ever tried to lure them into the family business?*

Is the Pope Catholic? [laughs] They didn't enjoy it. We're an investment company now; over the last few years, I've had some health problems, and Divia [Harilela's eldest daughter] has been very good [working in the business]. Divia is very

creative and the investment world is very dry. One day, Divia will run this company and she will run it very capably. She's smart and a workaholic like me. She doesn't shy away from any task. I can go away knowing my children will float—and that is every parent's dream.

*Is the Harilela name a blessing or a burden?*

My father and my uncle Hari built a legacy and created so much goodwill. The challenge for the new generation is to create their own legacy. I've never misused the name, though. I have always wanted to be my own king and make my own success. The name has never been a burden. The name has good vibes. When God has given you success, you must use it to give back to society. My family name has opened a lot of doors. At the end of the day, I'm simply a nobody trying to be somebody.

*What can you tell us about The One Humanitarian Award you founded in 2012?*

*What inspired you to establish this initiative?*

I never did charity until I was 50. My father wanted me to join Rotary International, but I always said I would join when I made my own money and could make my own donations. I like to dream big and I came up with the concept of The One in 2012 [a project supported by the Rotary International, it recognises and empowers outstanding individuals



PHOTO ASSISTANT NICOLE MA

who have dedicated their lives to humanitarian causes. To date, The One has awarded 60 humanitarians and has donated more than US\$3 million to humanitarian projects across the globe, transforming more than 300,000 lives]. I just decided to do it and the doors opened.

Years ago, my sister Mira went to India to donate money to Mother Teresa, who said Mira was godsent. Mother Teresa had just taken in 35 street kids and

didn't have the money to care for them. That story is so inspiring to me. Mother Teresa was recognised very late in life. If she had been recognised earlier, the work she could have done would have been tremendously more. If we find these angels early, wow—think of the impact we could make.

*How do you select the recipients of The One awards?*

We look for the unknown heroes; the ones who really

need the money to make a difference to feed people or build hospitals. The role of The One is to find these heroes and shine a light on them. In Hong Kong in 2018, Jeff Rotmeyer [founder of ImpactHK, a charity that aims to provide shelter and care to homeless individuals] was nominated and won [HK\$200,000 to further his charity]. That's a great example of what The One can do. This is what gives me purpose. This will be my legacy. I always say:

try to maximise the good you can do. My dream is for every country in the world to have The One—to honour heroes everywhere. The key is finding donors that will commit to the cause for life.

*In 2017, you said that the biggest lesson you've learnt is to “bend sometimes”; and that a leader needs to command, but most importantly, inspire. Does this still hold true?*

Absolutely. You can pay a person anything they want, but you can't get them to stay unless they are happy. You have to bend to lift people up.

*Many successful entrepreneurs find it challenging to retire fully. Is retirement something you would ever consider?*

Not in this lifetime. I can't stay at home, even if I'm in pain. To decay and wither away? It isn't my style. I'll go with a bang, never a whimper. I love coming to work and interacting with people. I love the charity work I do. I love the idea that I can contribute—and for as long as I can, I won't stop.

*What makes you the happiest now?*

There is one thing that's come into my life like a prayer: my grandson Ishaan, who lives in [Caribbean island] Saint Martin. I love him. He loves me the most too, which is what I always wanted from my father [laughs].