

Mac van der Merwe

Last Updated Tuesday, 21 July 2009

Self-made South African multi-millionaire, Mac van der Merwe, is the antithesis of one's expectations of a man who has made it big in the hospitality, tourism, and wine industry. He's affable and easy to speak to, humble and looks no different from you and I.

The middle son of a poor white South African family, Van der Merwe grew up near Vereeniging just outside Johannesburg, ironically not far from the Riviera on Vaal, one of the five-star properties he now owns. The 61-year-old says the first time he ate out was at the age of 19 or 20, at the restaurant at the Riviera on Vaal. Little did he realise then that he would buy the hotel in December 2003 and turn it into a top class tourist destination.

As with most successful businessmen, Van der Merwe showed an entrepreneurial bent from a young age. His first "business" at age eight was charging friends one pence a time to view pictures on his View Master. Van der Merwe soon graduated to selling bicycles and says: "I was always busy with some sort of scheme, buying and selling, creating opportunities".

Van der Merwe graduated with a mechanical engineering degree, despite his claims of not being a good scholar, and debuted in business with a car dealership in 1982, which he expanded to seven branches. He says he was driven by the fact that he did not want to battle like his parents. He then opened an engineering firm providing support engineering for the steel industry, and grew this into a company with three branches, which he listed on the JSE as City Investment Holding in 1996.

Van der Merwe also invested in the IT industry, but his Midas touch came to the fore when he and two other partners purchased the President Steyn gold mine in Welkom from AngloGold. The mine was sold five years later "the deal in which the quietly spoken Van der Merwe literally made his millions." (Not wanting to retire, Van der Merwe then started a family-owned business, the Zorgvliet Group, in which his wife, two daughters, and son are involved. This started with the opportune purchase of a Stellenbosch wine farm, Zorgvliet, in 2002, followed by the Riviera on Vaal (bought for sentimental reasons) and then two adjacent private game reserves in the malaria-free Limpopo Waterberg - Ka-Ingo Private Reserve and Spa and Dinkweng Safari Camp.

Still happily married to his childhood sweetheart, Marietjie, Van der Merwe attributes a lot of his success to luck "making the right decision to buy the right asset at the right time" but is quick to admit that he has a considerable appetite for risk and that success is not achieved by default or even hard work, but by working your plan.

Van der Merwe's current plan is to build a hospitality network in South Africa with the best that South Africa has to offer and is clearly making his plan work. Van der Merwe hopes to encourage people to invest in full title fractional ownership of unique properties such as those available through the Zorgvliet Private Residence Club, while ensuring sustainable access and sound conservation management "part of the custodianship vision instilled into Van der Merwe by his hardworking father. But Van der Merwe's focus is on more than just making money. He believes that success is relative and is comprised of more than the proverbial accounting bottom line.

He ranks a happy close-knit family at the top of his achievements, and "time-out" for Van der Merwe means spending quality time with Marietjie or his daughters, playing golf with his son and son-in-law, or driving his five grandchildren around on a quad bike.

Van der Merwe, who also completed his MBA part-time through UNISA, believes it is his responsibility to add value, and as a result has also involved himself in several conservation projects including the release of cheetahs and relocation of leopard, as well as providing financial assistance to the Waterberg Academy.

Despite the fact that his staff has nothing but nice things to say about him, Van der Merwe, a self-confessed opportunist, says he is not a good manager. "I give people a lot of rope, and if they don't pull their weight I send them packing," he says. His secret ingredient of success is a willingness to share information and learn daily from others. "Not being territorial opens opportunities for exciting and productive partnerships and finding synergies," says Van der Merwe. This article was written for the Absa Platinum e-zine.