



The Sky's the Limit

From enduring homelessness to graduating Summa Cum Laude with a degree in Business Administration from Fresno Pacific University, **Chad Villanueva** is no stranger to adversity.



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As a Save Mart Supermarkets store manager who's also working towards obtaining his master's degree, Chad Villanueva never could have imagined he would graduate from college with the highest honors possible. Though he dreamed of attending college, as a youth it didn't seem in his cards.

Growing up with an absent father, he relied on his mom and grandmother throughout childhood. Tragedy struck when his grandmother was murdered, leaving him and his mom in an unstable situation.

"We ended up being homeless," Villanueva recalls. "You never know what hungry really is until you're putting together 50 cents to eat a can of green beans for dinner."

Though he worked whatever jobs he could as a teenager, it wasn't until Villanueva was hired by Save Mart in 2008 at age 21 that things turned around.

"The stability the job gave me as far as the medical insurance, the pay structure, everything... that's when my life really started to change," he says.

While Villanueva began as a courtesy clerk bagging groceries, he eventually transferred to the meat department and began working his way up the company. His mentor in the meat department, who himself had a degree, ultimately inspired Villanueva to pursue a higher education, reviving his childhood dreams.

"It was just one of the things I never thought would happen," he shares.

Villanueva is this year's CGA Educational Foundation "Legends of the Industry Scholarship" recipient. This \$10,000 scholarship was created last year in honor of past and future CGAEF Hall of Achievement inductees.

"[Receiving] this scholarship means that I can pursue my dream of higher education with less of the burden of tuition," he says. "I have four kids and ultimately every

decision I make, they're affected by. The effects of this are amazing, I'm still blown away by it."

Save Mart was supportive of his educational pursuits and allowed him flexibility within his work schedule. During his undergrad, Villanueva strove for the same excellence in school that he did in the workplace.

Coupled with his natural drive, Villanueva's kids fueled him to excel in his education, "I want to set the bar high for them," he adds.

"What impresses me the most about Chad is his ability to balance his role as a husband and father, stay on task with his educational goals, and still perform at high

and help teach, train, and develop other individuals such as myself that really want it." Gestures of human kindness have inspired Villanueva throughout his journey, like when the store manager from another Save Mart in town routinely offered him rides, relieving Villanueva of his hour-long walk to work.



(L to R) CGAEF Chair Jacquie Slobom with 2019 Legends of the Industry Scholarship Recipient Chad and Zandra Villanueva.

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level as a Store Manager," says Lloyd Scott, Director of Store Operations for Save Mart. "He's an inspiration to our team, and a true asset for our company."

Villanueva's deep passion for the industry is undeniable.

"It's my home. I'm not going anywhere," he says, calling the grocery industry unique because, in his words, it gives anyone a chance. "This industry is one of empowerment. It really taught me to take ownership in everything I do and that rolled over into my schooling."

Once he completes his master's degree in Organizational and Leadership Studies he hopes to secure a senior management position within the industry where he can help keep it thriving. He wants to "give back

Simple acts of kindness like these have made Villanueva adamant about giving back.

"I've seen what they've done for me [acts of kindness]," he says. "I mean, I never thought I'd go back to school. I never thought I'd be a store manager, a great father, or husband. I'd like to take other people who have gone through things in their life – good or bad – and try to give back to them and show what they can be with their potential."

Between work and school Villanueva is a busy man, but in his free time he is an avid sports fan and enjoys taking trips with his family.

To anyone starting out in the grocery industry Villanueva advises, "Ask questions, work hard, and keep a can-do attitude. If you do those three things the sky is the limit." ■