

The Australian Property Hall of Fame 2024 Inductee - Charlotte Vidor AM Acceptance speech

When my son told me that I had been nominated and recommended for this great honour, he informed me that I would have to make a speech. I told him he should make it - he's the Boss now. But he's also my boss now and he commanded me to do it - so ... Good evening Ladies and Gentlemen!!

I feel a bit like Michael Corleone in The Godfather when he says "Just when I thought I was out, they pull me back in". I certainly never expected to be standing here today, but I am delighted, somewhat embarrassed and quite overwhelmed to be the recipient of this great honour.

In truth, this recognition belongs to my husband Ervin just as much as it does to me. Ervin was a driving force, a great entrepreneur and leader both in our business and in our family. We worked together as equals, with complementary skills and contributions, and any success we may have had has been jointly achieved.

I have had an exciting, at times challenging, life of adventure, and have much to be grateful for. Both Ervin and I lived through and survived the horrors of the Holocaust and were refugees after the Second World War. I recall the anxiety of my parents as we wandered from city to city, making our way from Poland to Berlin in the hope that some country would grant us visas.

And so, we arrived in Australia. This wonderful country of ours took us in, gave us a home and provided the setting for Ervin and me to meet. Together we built a good livelihood and a wonderful family, most of whom are here today with me. There are no prouder Australians than Ervin and I.

My parents strongly believed that a good education was paramount so, after finishing high school in 1952, I went to Sydney University to study Pharmacy, working as a pharmacist until I met my husband. Later I decided to do a Master of Planning at Macquarie University and found this most useful in dealing with councils.

In the 1960s we were introduced to an Italian builder, Tony Stillone, an immigrant just as we were, and in 1963 we decided to go into business together.

It was initially a small development and construction business, building residential apartment buildings and selling them to investors. In 1963 there was no such thing as strata title.

During the great credit squeeze of the 1970's our finance company called in the loans and we spent the next two years selling pretty much everything we had built up over the previous years. So, we started again, realising that our model needed to change to a build and hold strategy. The banks had enormous respect for Ervin and his integrity and were prepared to support us again as we re-grew.

I'm often asked about gender equality as a woman working in business and in particular, development and construction. Well, to be honest, I never really gave it a thought - I just got on with what needed to be done. I never accepted that I was not as capable as a 'bloke', but I have to admit that the men on site did not know how to deal with me. The Union reps at the time were not comfortable seeing me on site, and no doubt wondered who that tiny woman was in a hard hat, walking around and asking questions. I suspect many of them thought I was there to deliver morning tea!

I remember visiting a site with a Union rep who frequently stopped the job. His first words to me were "What are you doing here? Women are not allowed here." A few days later I turned up again and asked him for his opinion on some tiles I had selected. We went through a lot of samples and he was, surprisingly, very helpful. Being the only woman, in an all-male environment was not always a disadvantage!

I have seen huge changes in the development industry since my early beginnings. In the 1960s all one needed was to have plans drawn up by a draftsman, not architect, submitted to council and have it built by a handyman who also thought he was a builder. Hard to believe today! The ensuing changes to both building and planning requirements have added hugely to costs of construction. And I know that there is a huge gap between what is being built and what is needed.

My years of active involvement in the property industry has provided me with a lifetime of adventure and personal fulfilment. I've had the good fortune to work with talented people and to have mentored young people starting their careers. I tell them that there are no shortcuts to success - perseverance, boldness and humility are the key. Working in the property industry is a privilege. It is an industry that touches every Australian, creating spaces and places for every aspect of life.

On a personal level, it is gratifying to see our children having active roles, and to witness our business continue to grow whilst retaining our values and culture under their leadership.

And to receive this recognition from the Property Council of Australia, our country's leading advocate, is the ultimate accolade.

I wish you all continued success and fulfilment as you contribute to this wonderful industry.