

Lisette Villavicencio - President, Villavicencio & Associates Construction, Puerto Rico



We believe Puerto Rico needs to stand on its own feet to be able to grow again

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Founded in 2004, Villavicencio & Associates Construction is a dynamic Puerto Rican construction firm which has been involved in many different projects in the pharmaceutical industry. President Lisette Villavicencio explains how the company has managed to grow steadily throughout Puerto Rico's economic downturn by focusing on safety, quality and integrity. She details the projects delivered for pharma companies around the island and shares her desire to help rebuild Puerto Rico, post-Hurricane Maria.

Could you start by introducing to international readers to the activities of Villavicencio & Associates (V&A)?

Villavicencio & Associates was established in 2004 with the conviction that the path to success is based on three pillars: safety, quality, and integrity. Safety is first because we are a team. We consider every single person who works here a part of a big family, and we need to be able to take care of our people. Quality is the second pillar, and a part of our trademark. Puerto Rico is a small island which means that if we were to perform poorly, people would hear about it and would not invite us to bid or negotiate projects anymore. Many of our clients do repeat business with us because of the quality of our work and recommend us to their peers. After we finish a project, the best compliment we could receive is for someone to ask who did it. Finally, we make a point of

always acting with integrity. We work as a team, and if one of our employees makes a deal or promises something to a client, the entire company will back him up and make it happen. Our actions follow our words. We keep our promises. Integrity is the foundation on which strong relationships are built.

While Puerto Rico has suffered from a prolonged recession with the island's economy declining every year since 2006 after the repeal of Section 936, a situation exacerbated by Hurricane Maria, Villavicencio & Associates has continued a strong track record of steady growth. What are the success factors behind this remarkable performance during a tough time?

We love what we do, and we work hard at it. Customers invite us to bid on projects, no matter how big or how small, because they know we consistently deliver safety, quality and integrity. By not willing to sacrifice quality to survive, we have managed to grow through one of the worst recessions Puerto Rico has seen.

Puerto Rico is having a very hard time. The declining economic situation has been tough for everybody, and the construction industry is no exception. Ten years ago, we used to have million-dollar projects, while today we have smaller projects. We managed to evolve and adapt to this market trend. We were able to apply what we learned from large projects while adapting to the speed required of smaller projects. I believe that is part of our success.

What is the contribution of the life sciences industry to your business?

When the government was still in good shape, about 35 to 40 percent of our business came from governmental and institutional projects. Since the government went bankrupt, we have pivoted to the life sciences industry. As we speak, we are working with Lilly, AbbVie and J&J constantly so our entire business is driven by life sciences.

Our first major project in the sector was part of the construction of the PSGA Janssen facility in Gurabo. The \$7.9 million project's scope of work included the construction of three free-standing concrete towers up to 80 feet tall. The architectural aspect of the project included special flooring, concrete, block and gypsum walls, as well as acoustical, gypsum and metal ceilings. We were supposed to only do one part of the job and we ended up finishing the whole building, including the central utility building for new parental processes. We factored various green building concerns

including site development that considered and protected the surrounding habitat and utilizing low-emitting adhesives, sealants, painting and coatings.

At AbbVie's Barceloneta facility, we rehabilitated an existing building in order to provide adequate facilities for three new boilers. Moreover, in the last few years, we have constructed a lot of offices at AbbVie's Jayuya and Barceloneta plants. In addition, at Lilly del Caribe's Carolina facility, we worked on the expansion of the existing water treatment plant with the construction of new concrete tanks for equalization process and membrane bioreactor basins. Finally, we have just finished a project with Torcon at IPR Pharmaceuticals, a subsidiary of AstraZeneca, rebuilding the roofing which suffered a lot of damage during Hurricane Maria.

Nowadays, many pharmaceutical manufacturers are investing in energy projects to improve resiliency by decreasing their dependence on the grid while saving on their electrical bill. We will be working on Lilly's LNG project. For these kinds of projects, we subcontract electrical, HVAC, mechanical, built-up roofing and structural steelworks, while we handle concrete works as our people have expertise in pouring concrete following stringent standards and requirements.

We have become a partner of choice for the life sciences industry because we know the market, the sub-contractors and the suppliers.

The expertise you have built in Puerto Rico, especially within the plants of life sciences companies, could be valuable in other markets in Latin America and the US mainland.

Do you have international ambitions?

Before 2017, we had talked about expanding our footprint abroad, but Hurricane Maria changed our plans. After the disaster, we redirected resources to helping the community and got involved in emergency relief efforts. For instance, in the aftermaths of the hurricane, we participated in the Blue Roof program managed by the US Army Corps of Engineers and installed 1,000 temporary roofs. Then, in 2018, under the STEP program instituted by the Puerto Rico Department of Housing in conjunction with FEMA, we restored about 500 homes to allow residents to return to their homes until permanent repairs could be made. We are now looking forward delivering permanent repairs to the houses as part of the Community Development Block Grant for Disaster Recovery Program (CDBG -DR). Contributing to rebuilding the island is extremely important to us. We are helping our people. For my team and I, helping the island recover is going to be the most important work the company will ever do. After emergency funds for reconstruction run out, we will consider going abroad.

With many young professionals leaving the island, how do you attract, develop and retain talent?

As time goes by, it is getting more and more complicated. Many young people are going to work in the US mainland. But there are people who want to stay and help out, and who believe in what we are doing. What makes us attractive as a company is the fact we are like a family. My door is always open, my phone is always available for everybody, our engineers and construction labourers. While staying respectful of each other, communication is informal. This informal way of management I believe is one of the aspects that helps us integrate and retain our people. In addition, we keep a close relationship with the orientators at UPR Mayaguez, Polytechnic University and all the other Universities in Puerto Rico with Engineering Departments to communicate our opportunities.

What milestones would you like to achieve in the next few years?

We look forward to solidifying our position in the industry by strengthening our relationship with existing clients and forming new ones in the life sciences industry, which the Puerto Rico Manufacturers Association (PRMA) is helping us do.

In addition, we want to be part of rebuilding Puerto Rico. We are working hand-in-hand with the primary contractor on this project because we believe Puerto Rico needs to stand on its own feet to be able to grow again. After the island is rebuilt, we will look outside of Puerto Rico for opportunities in markets like Florida, Panama or Costa Rica.

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