Former grad gives Macdonald Campus $1-million boost

Kathryn Greenaway, Montreal Gazette
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J. William "Bill" Ritchie graduated from Macdonald College of McGill University in 1951 and has remained a devoted fan of the institution ever since. The 85-year-old stockbroker from Halifax is giving $1 million to build a new Macdonald College interpretation centre which will teach children where their food comes from.

It's been 64 years since he graduated, but J. William (Bill) Ritchie has never forgotten how much he loved his time at what was then Macdonald College of McGill University in Ste-Anne-de-Bellevue.

Ritchie BSc (Agr) '51 is showing his profound affection for what is now called the Macdonald Campus, home to McGill's Faculty of Agriculture and Environmental Sciences, by donating $1 million to help turn an old stone barn into the Macdonald Farm Community Engagement Centre.

The 85-year-old returned to Montreal last week to attend the announcement of his donation.

At the heart of the $2.5-million engagement centre will be the Lorna and William Ritchie Education Hall with a 140-seat lecture hall and a series of multimedia and interactive displays explaining where our food comes from and the various stages it goes through before landing on our plates.

The educational program will target children.

Ritchie's wife Lorna died Nov. 11, 2011, after 56 years of marriage. The couple had four children and there was a happy lilt to Ritchie's voice when he mentioned his four granddaughters during a telephone conversation from his office in Halifax.

Ritchie credits his parents and his time at Macdonald for setting him on his path to success.

"Those years at Macdonald were four of the best years of my life," he said. "I've kept up with the college and plan to attend the 65th reunion of my graduating class next year (in Montebello)," Ritchie said. "There were 115 in our graduating class, but we're all in our mid-80s now, so there will only be around 20 coming to Montebello."

Ritchie didn't come from a farming background and never ended up working in the field. He was born in Glace Bay, Nova Scotia, and his grandfather had a farm there, but Ritchie lived in Notre-Dame-de-Grace from age eight, graduated from West Hill High School and hadn't set foot on the Macdonald campus until the first week of the first semester when he packed his suitcase, caught the train out to Ste-Anned-de-Bellevue and moved into residence.

"Macdonald was easier to get into than McGill," Ritchie said. "I loved it from the start. There was a wonderful spirit on campus. I studied agriculture economics and was a very active undergrad."

Ritchie was quarterback on the football team, president of the Literary and Debating Society — the body responsible for organizing all the activities on campus — and in his final year he was president of the student council.

Being as engaged as he was in campus life meant Ritchie came in contact with people who had already forged their way in the business world. After graduation, one of those contacts put Ritchie in touch with the stock brokerage business A.E. Ames & Co. Ltd. in Montreal and he never looked back.

"It was like taking a four-year degree in economics," he said. "That was the bridge that led me to my career as a stockbroker."

Over the course of his successful career as a stockbroker, Ritchie gained the reputation of being an "angel investor." He would spend time with young entrepreneurs, listening to their pitches, doling out advice and sometimes offering financial backing — like he did for Salter Street Films, which produced hits like This Hour Has 22 Minutes and the Michael Moore documentary Bowling For Columbine.

"Of the 40 or so operations I helped, six or seven were successful," Ritchie said. "Investing in what are called 'startups' is the riskiest part of the investment business."

Source: Montreal Gazette http://montrealgazette.com/news/local-news/west-island-gazette/former-grad-gives-macdonald-campus-1-million-boost