By Alec Bruce

THE BEAUTIFUL DREAMING OF WADIH FARES

HE WAS A BOY FROM WAR-TORN LEBANON WHO SPOKE BARELY A WORD OF ENGLISH WHEN HE ALIGHTED ON HALIFAX'S SHORE IN 1976. HE DREAMED OF A BETTER LIFE AND PREVAILED TO BECOME A COMMERCIAL AND COMMUNITY LEADER IN ONE OF CANADA'S BASTIONS OF ANGLOPHONE INFLUENCE. AS A BUSINESSMAN, HE'S PEERLESS. AS AN IMMIGRATION ADVOCATE, HE'S TIRELESS. AS AN INSPIRATION FOR A NEW GENERATION OF ENTREPRENEURS, HE'S PRICELESS. MEET WADIH M. FARES, ATLANTIC BUSINESS MAGAZINE'S CEO OF THE YEAR FOR 2011.


WMF

Wadih Fares reviewing financial figures with employee Darren Rodgers. Without revealing the exact numbers, Wadih says WM Fares Group ranks as one of Atlantic Canada's 20 highest revenue earners. (Right) Wadih Fares during his early engineering days at work in the field (age unknown).

IN HALIFAX'S NORTHWESTERN QUARTER,

the condominium and apartment complexes rise like monuments to serenity, branded for cloistering in vertical villages whose names never fail to incorporate the words "Arms" or "Estates." Somewhere in the heart of this gentrified jungle of concrete, glass, cookie-cut green spaces, concierges and underground parking, a balding, mustachioed man of average height, Mediterranean complexion and disarming humour sits at a table in his office. The office, in turn, sits in a mini-mall that's also home to a Domino's Pizza, a Ritual Tanning & Vibrations Studio and the Glenbourne Chiropractic Clinic. The mustachioed man ponders aloud, as if waking from a dream: "Honestly . . . how the heck did I get here?"

Well, not literally "here." Wadih M. Fares certainly understands that these modest premises, capped by a faux bell tower, comprise the Atlantic headquarters of the building design, project management and development group he owns and operates as its president and CEO. The question is more existential, as in: How did he, an 18-year-old immigrant from war-torn Lebanon, without a dollar in his pocket and unable to speak even restaurant English, become — 36 years later — one of the most successful and important entrepreneurs and community leaders in Atlantic Canada's preeminent bastion of Anglophone influence?

Even more specifically, how did he, the boy who was once alone like a stone in the New World, become the man who's now responsible for building thousands of square feet of commercial and residential space across the Maritimes, Ontario and Alberta (including a $250-million subdivision near his office, and a $40-million high-rise, the first in a quarter century approved for the normally sacrosanct downtown core, both of which are currently under construction)?

Beyond this, how did he become the recognized leader of Halifax's 10,000-strong Lebanese community, having served as his homeland's honourary consul for the Maritimes over the past 12 years; the past chair and current director of the Pier 21 Society, which represents and advocates for immigrants from all over the world; a governor of Dalhousie University; a member of Nova Scotia's Immigration Advisory Council; and the recipient of a trunk load of honours, including the Golden Jubilee Medal, conferred by the Queen herself, and the Order of St. Gregory, awarded to him by none other than Pope Benedict XVI?

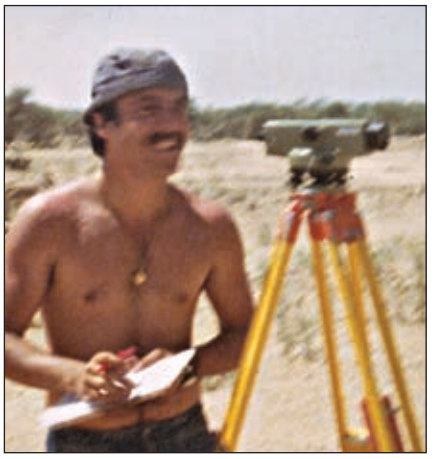
Indeed, says Robert Zed, a Halifax entrepreneur who knows Fares well: "Wadih's role in business may actually be outweighed by his stellar record in community and volunteer services. His commitment is unbelievable. He simply does not say no and he steps up every time. He lives in a world of 'pay it forward' and gives of his time, money and resources just because it feels right."

That may be, but the question still hangs in the air: How did a youngster with savagely curtailed prospects, with almost everything conspiring against his progress, and virtually nothing promising his eventual triumph, so convincingly beat the odds?

Fares flashes a good-natured smile, leans into his table, presses his raised index fingers to his lips, and blurts in heavily accented, but perfectly comprehensible, English: "Let me tell you one thing, my friend . . . it was not easy."

ON AN EARLY SPRING EVENING IN 1976, a teenaged boy, the eldest son of a road builder, hunkered down in a base camp on the front lines of a civil war just 30 minutes, as the crow flies, from his village of Diman in the northern mountains of Lebanon. Hostilities between the country's Islamic and Christian factions had erupted three months earlier, and Wadih, like so many other males of legal age in that nation, had been conscripted into military service.

It was a particularly hard night. Shelling from the other side was constant, accurate and loud. Townspeople from miles around trembled with every concussion echoing



against the walls of the foothills that framed the Kadisha Valley. And young Wadih mused about the past and better times.

"You know, I adored my father," he says today. "He was such a skilled man. He built highways and bridges. He operated a small asphalt plant. And from when I was just a little guy, I wanted to be an engineer. Now, he wasn't one, officially. I mean, we were a pretty poor family, after all, with two boys and two girls. But, with his experience, I tell you, he was probably better than an engineer. He wanted to create things. That's what made him happy."

What made the old man happiest, perhaps, was securing a top-notch secondary education for his son. He had borrowed heavily to ensure this, finally managing to send Wadih to a private high school that dispensed, upon graduation, an international baccalaureate (grade 13 in Canada). The young Fares did not disappoint: He earned top marks in math and science and, as a result, nailed a freshman spot for himself at the national university in Beirut.

Then came the war. Or, as Fares observes about this formative time: "We Christians and Muslims got along just fine in school. There were no issues between us. We didn't care who was this or who was that. It simply didn't matter. It was other men who decided we were enemies. Politicians who said they knew better than the rest of us. But in the end none of us had any choice at all."

Suddenly, the universities closed down as the bifurcated state demanded that one healthy man from each family fight for his sectarian faction. Wadih's father, a Christian, volunteered, but the elder son argued that his younger brother and two sisters still needed their dad to put food on the table and protect their mother from destitution (or worse). Reluctantly, the sire succumbed to the logic of the scion, and the once and future engineer was off to battle, just down the road from where he was born, raised and nurtured in peace.

"Sure I was scared," Fares says. "But I

Growing up in Lebanon. (Above) Wadih pictured with his parents and siblings (l-r): mother Georgette, father Maurice, Constance, Jana, John and Wadih. Jana is Wadih's twin. (Left) Wadih, age unknown.

also had some training. In high school, we had to spend two hours a week in military classes, learning safety and first aid. So, in my family, I was the right person to serve in the army."

Or so he thought. What he hadn't factored into his coarse calculus was his mother. "After that particular night of heavy bombardment, when I was only three months on the line, I made my way back home," he says. "My mother was standing at the door of our house. She hadn't got a wink of sleep worrying about me. She turned to me and said, 'I hate this, but you must go. I can't handle this, thinking I might lose you. You must get out of Lebanon. You must go to Canada.'"

The pronouncement was a dart to Fares's still-tender heart. Leave his parents, his brother and sisters, his friends, to become a stranger in a strange land? What was she thinking? But his mother was adamant. She had relatives in Halifax, particularly a brother of some means who was willing to sponsor, shepherd and house the boy as long as she could guarantee his safe passage out of the Middle East and into a European city, preferably Paris (home to an established and discreet Lebanese community).

After some tense, but ultimately fruitful, discussions with a sympathetic army general, Fares obtained permission to leave the country, and with two cousins in tow he headed for Paris with the equivalent of $200 to last nine days. "At one point, I had one-and-a-half French francs," he laughs. "That was just enough for a slice of pizza and a Coke. Obviously, though, I did make it to Halifax."

Out of the frying pan. Into a different kind of fire.

IT WAS NO ONE'S FAULT, EXACTLY.

After all, the cultural eccentricities of the Great White North did not figure prominently in the core curriculum of the Lebanese school system. So, when Fares learned that Canada was, according to its billing, an "officially bilingual" nation of French- and English-speaking countrymen, he was relieved. He spoke Arabic and French. He'd worry about English later, perhaps even at his leisure. The first order of business was to prepare for engineering studies at Dalhousie University, where he was enrolled as a foreign arrival for the fall of 1975.

"Imagine my shock," he says now. "Here I was a villager in a city, in a country, where everything is different. I don't have my parents. I don't have my friends. It's April. In September, I'm heading off to an English university, and I don't even speak the language . . . I remember an early chemistry test. I really knew my stuff. I was always a pretty good student. But, because I had no English, I had to write it French. When I got it back, it was covered in red x's and I think the mark was something like zero.

"I tell you, for the first three months of university, I just came home many nights and cried."

Still, he persevered – if for no other reason than he had no choice. And, not insignificantly, he did have help. "You don't know what you can do until you have to do it," he says. "I mean, I used dictionaries. If I had English essays to write, I would write them in Arabic and my friends in Halifax's Lebanese community would translate them into English. Then, I would study the translations. My friends at the university corrected my mistakes. They didn't laugh at me. Even the professors were helpful. Eventually, I picked up the language and I moved on."

Before Wadih arrived in Canada and enrolled at Dalhousie, he thought he'd have no problem settling into the "officially bilingual" country. He was fluent in Arabic and French, after all. He learned English with the help of friends, and good dictionaries.

Indeed, by the early 1980s, he was settling in nicely. He had earned not one, but two, degrees in engineering: a bachelor from Dalhousie and a diploma from the Technical University of Nova Scotia. He had snagged a job working for Irving Oil in Bedford. He had married a young woman, Cathy, from Halifax's Lebanese community. He had bought a house, and was thinking about raising a family. He was happy. Well, in a fashion.

"You know, after working two or three years for the Irvings, I started feeling that I was not made to work for anybody," he confesses. "I wanted more. I looked at the whole company structure. And I wondered where I was going to be in five or 10 years. Okay, I could be a plant manager. Hmmmm. Okay, maybe I could be the general manager. Then, a young man who was obviously related to the current general manager was hired out of Saint John to become a vice-president. So, I said to myself, that ain't gonna happen for me. So, basically, one day, I just left."

It was not, Fares admits, a propitious move. Pogey paid approximately $200 a week. His mortgage rate was 18.75 per cent. And his wife was pregnant with their first child. To make matters worse, he wasn't entirely sure what he wanted to do with himself. He knew he needed to run his own show. But what? What would be the next act of his unfolding, adventure-filled life?

"I knew what I didn't want to do," he says. "Back then, a lot of my people were operating grocery stores and restaurants. I honestly couldn't see myself behind a counter. My father sacrificed to put me in a private school in Lebanon, to give me the education I needed to become an engineer. That's to say nothing of what I had to go through myself. I just was not about to waste any of that.

"You know, an older gentleman in my community came up to me at about that time and said, 'Look, I know you're scared. I know you're upset. But one day, you are going to look back and realize that this was the best thing that ever happened to you.' Of course, that was a very easy thing for him to say. But, somehow, I believed him. I just had this confidence."

Perhaps his brio was infectious, or maybe members of his "community" simply recognized, in him, the qualities of a rising star. But before long he had his first commission, courtesy of a friend who wanted to build a house to sell. Fares promptly sat down at his kitchen table and drafted a set of plans. The happy client then returned with a project for a 12-unit apartment building. Wadih researched the local bylaws and zoning regulations and, again, produced the blueprints.

Word of mouth worked its predictable magic. "My friend started building and building and people in the community came to see what he was doing," Fares says. "So, he told them and he mentioned my name. And the reaction was 'Oh, he does this.' Suddenly, people were coming to me for the same services. Things took off from there."

In 1983, the freshly-minted honcho of WM Fares Group hired a secretary. A little later, he recruited a part-time accountant and, just to be safe, a draftsperson. He accepted work with dizzying regularity and always delivered on time and on budget. "Given my experiences, I wasn't inclined to be late or lazy," he says. "So punctuality became my motto. If I said I was going to get something done the next day, it got done."

The philosophy soon evolved into a brand which, not surprisingly, morphed into a unique value proposition. Fares explains: "People kept coming to me because they were comfortable dealing with me. Their English wasn't always that good. They wanted someone who understood them and someone they could understand. So, they would say, 'Wadih, now we have that settled, could you handle the bank for me?' Or maybe it was a question with the building suppliers. Or the city permitters. After a while, I began to think customers crave simplicity."

He continues: "My bottom line was that, at that time, there were too many consultants involved in the building and property business. You buy a piece of land. You need a surveyor. You need a soil engineer. You need a civil engineer. You need an architect. You gotta get a permit. You gotta get a deal with the city. Then you gotta do an inspection, and do financial packages with the bank. But what if one guy could do or arrange for all that stuff? It's pretty commonplace today, but in the mid-1980s, it wasn't."

The approach served him in ways other than those which validated his position in the increasingly prosperous Halifax Lebanese community; it made him a player in the broader marketplace. "Sure, I got more clients," Fares says. "But, more than this, I got more contacts. When you get in with the building supply people, you get the volume. And when you are the front man . . . well, the banks come to you and ask if you know of anybody who wants money. That's a nice situation to be in."

So nice, in fact, that Fares began to speculate about his own leverage. Here he was, sitting on top of the turn-key, fee-for-

Halifax entrepreneur Robert Zed says that Wadih Fares' stellar business record is outpaced only by his volunteer and community service. Photos (clockwise from top left): Wadih's 2008 induction into the Junior Achievement Nova Scotia Business Hall of Fame; speaking at Pier 21, the former immigration facility Wadih was instrumental in having named as a national historic museum; Prime Minister Stephen Harper signing the charter making Pier 21 the country's sixth national historic museum.

services, property development world of Metro Halifax. He knew everyone in the business. And he wondered: Why not live a little, and make some long-term bones for himself? "I'm doing all this stuff for these guys, and these guys are making a lot of money," he recalls. "Why can't I do some of this stuff for me? Why can't I own the products of my own effort?"

Why not, indeed? His first wholly-owned adventure was on a piece of land in Halifax for a townhouse development he capitalized with an investment from a relative. "Again, like before, it just went from there," he says. "I started putting options on other plots, continued making partnerships . . . It was all about taking advantage of situations. Really, it was about being present in my own life, working hard and never giving up."

Over the past 25 years, this attitude has enriched him handsomely, both figuratively and literally. Although WM Fares Group is only a mid-size company employing little more than 20 skilled professionals, its various projects have accounted for thousands of construction jobs and injected hundreds of millions of dollars into the Maritime economy. As the owner of a private company, Fares remains circumspect about his bottom line. Still, it's fair to say, his firm would likely figure in the upper fifth percentile of the 100 highest revenue earners in Atlantic Canada, or higher, in any year of the past 10.

"A lot of leaders lead from the head or from the heart," Robert Zed says. "Wadih does both. In business, not only has he beaten the odds for success, he has instilled lessons along the way. With a caring soul and a razor sharp business acumen he strategically changes the world."

Indeed, his Mount Royale subdivision (located just north of his office, off the Bicentennial Highway, and scheduled to open later this year) is a $250-million community that includes 100 single-family dwellings, 70 townhouses, 20 semi-detached dwellings, a church, a neighbourhood commercial plaza, 10 multi-unit residential buildings including 900 suites, a recreational field and two parks.

Located somewhere else, in downtown Halifax where developers' dreams generally go to die, is something even more astonishing: A $40-million, mixed-used condominium high-rise where a vacant lot once stood. If Fares claims a crowning achievement in his professional life, this would it.

"We call it the Trillium for symbolic reasons," he explains. "We designed it to represent the past, the present and the future. It's special. It's the first skyscraper

Life has come full circle for Wadih Fares: the former newly-arrived immigrant struggling to find his place in the world is now a successful businessman, proud father and husband, respected mentor and community leader. Here he is shown on vacation in Las Vegas with his wife Cathy, daughters Monique and Zana, son Maurice and son-in-law Mark.

in the heart of the city in 25 years, and that makes it a signature building. I feel it is the next step towards the future of design in Halifax. It's not just another concrete block. It's really comfortable to the eye. In fact, just a couple of days ago, we got word it won the Lieutenant-Governor's Award for engineering excellence."

Still, such trappings of success matter less to Fares, at 53, than they might have when he was younger. The war-torn boy has found in the architecture of his own works, purchased through diligence and faith, the serenity to give back to the city, province and country that embraced him so many years ago.

Wadih Fares checking the work in progress at the Trillium, the $40 million mixed-use condominium complex he's building in downtown Halifax.

THE HONOURARY CONSUL OF LEBANON

for the Maritimes is beaming now. On the wall of his office hangs a framed photograph of him sharing a quiet moment with the president of his homeland. It reminds him that while his official duties in this quasi-diplomatic capacity are not especially onerous, his responsibilities as a Lebanese-Canadian leader and outspoken advocate for immigration reform are not trifling. "We live in a region where the demographic changes are not to our advantage," he says. "Atlantic Canada's population is dwindling. People aren't having large families the way they used to. So, the question is: How do we deal with this?"

Framing the problem in the language of his vocation, he asks rhetorically, "Why am I building all these buildings and units and homes? Why am I opening up thousands and thousands of square feet of retail space? For what? For whom? One day we're gonna have these stores and nobody's going to walk into them. It's time for all governments to understand we have no other choice but to bring in good immigrants."

To this purpose, Fares has been instrumental in changing official policy at both the federal and provincial levels. As the chairman of the Pier 21 Society in Halifax, he and his board managed to obtain national museum status for the historic site along the waterfront — making it only the second to be located outside of Ottawa. "Government officials kept telling me it was next to impossible to accomplish this," he laughs.

And as a member of Nova Scotia's Immigration Advisory Council, he led a successful charge to introduce the family business category to the province. "I came here with no visa," he says. "What did Nova

Scotia lose by getting me here? Show me the loss. I say a family of five from Lebanon may come here and live in a one-bedroom apartment. They can live on $300 a week because they are used to living on less. That same family will save enough money in two or three years to buy their own business."

Fares leans back in his chair and ponders a while. His mother and father are now gone. They lived out their days in Lebanon, only occasionally making the crossing for visits to Halifax. Still, as two of his three children work for the family concern, time's spinning wheel has, in a way, come full circle. Now he's the one who does for others as others once did for him.

"I tell you something, my friend," he says, flashing a sidelong glance. "Nobody would leave his country, his family, his parents, his friends, his life to come to a strange land because he is lazy. A lazy person doesn't do that. He comes for a better life. And people who dream of a better life, and strive for one for themselves and those around them are, by definition, good people."

How the heck did Wadih M. Fares get here?

"That's how . . . In a beautiful, impossible dream." | ABM

Mayann Francis, Lieutenant Governor of Nova Scotia, was so impressed with Wadih Fares' contribution to the province's business and volunteer communities, she hosted a special dinner in his honour. (L-R): Wadih Fares, Lieutenant Governor Mayann Francis and Cathy Fares.