

McGill benefactor intrigued by how the world works

Engineer donates \$12M to alma mater



Lorne Trottier: Philanthropic support crucial if Canadian institutions are to keep up with U.S. rivals.

Photograph by : JOHN MAHONEY, THE GAZETTE

PEGGY CURRAN, The Gazette

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Lorne Trottier was 11, a poor kid from an inner-city neighbourhood, when he met his destiny.

"My friend's older brother had a ham radio, and from then on I was hooked," he recounted. "I was totally unaware of electronics and science before that.

"But when I saw these things, it kind of triggered something in me. I found it really cool, really interesting, and I wanted to build some of those things myself."

What Trottier eventually built, with business partner Branko Matic, was Matrox Electronics Systems, a multimillion-dollar firm in Dorval with 800 employees worldwide that's at the leading edge of graphics, video editing and image processing. But he never lost his youthful passion for scientific discovery - or the desire to pass on the wonder he still finds in the Earth and the sky.

"I was fascinated by the idea you could actually understand how things work. How does radio work? How does television work? And then from there, reading about science, I discovered you could understand how the world works, how nature works.

"That bug to understand what's going on, from the point of view of what science teaches us about nature, has stayed with me all my life."

At Baron Byng High School in the 1960s, Trottier was into everything - electronics, astronomy and space exploration, biology, geology and evolution.

"Somebody asked me, 'What do you want to be when you grow up?' and I said, 'Well, a scientist.' They asked, 'What kind?' That's when I said, 'You mean you have to choose?' It was all interesting."

This morning, the 58-year-old engineer and inventor will donate \$12 million to McGill University. The gift will allow his alma mater to fund research chairs in two fields dear to his heart: astrophysics and cosmology in the science faculty, and aerospace engineering in the engineering faculty.

Six years ago, Trottier donated \$10 million toward construction of the Lorne M. Trottier Building, which houses the electrical and computer engineering and computer science departments.

Count Trottier among a new generation of cyber barons, self-made entrepreneurs and baby-boomer microchip magnates who are pumping their newfound wealth into the non-profit sector with a ferocity reminiscent of the untaxed largesse of the early 20th-century era of the Carnegies, Vanderbilts and Rockefellers.

Indeed, today has been designated National Philanthropy Day, when more than 50,000 people are expected to take part in 125 events across North America aimed at shaking the pockets of the rich and generous.

"I believe in supporting science, education and McGill in particular," said the soft-spoken Trottier, who received an honorary doctorate last spring and whose two daughters studied science at McGill.

He said philanthropic support is crucial if Canadian institutions are to keep pace with rivals south of the border. "The U.S. schools with the prestigious reputations, and which are able to attract the brains, have the largest endowments from private benefactors. Those endowments mean they are able to attract the best talent in science and do the best research."

Adding to university coffers might be especially important here in Quebec, Trottier said, where low tuition fees mean students aren't paying enough toward their education.

"It was started years ago by the Parti Quebecois and it has become a trap. Nobody wants to break it because they are afraid of losing votes in the next election," he said.

McGill has already awarded the new chair in astrophysics to Victoria Kaspi, an acclaimed expert on pulsars who also holds a Canada Research Chair in observational astrophysics. The search is on for a candidate for the aerospace chair.

"I think they had an inkling these were areas I was interested in," Trottier said during an interview in his West Island office.

A plastic model of the Saturn V rocket used in the Apollo missions sits on a shelf; the walls are decorated with glorious photos of supernovas and the Cat's Eye Nebula captured by the Hubble space telescope.

Trottier said he has no wish to go to the moon - he'd just as soon go for a hike with his wife, Louise, or catch a Broadway show.

Yet for all its flaws and internal politics, he remains a life-long fan of the space program, absorbed by what manned and unmanned missions can tell us about our galaxy and others.

He's especially intrigued by proposals for the Terrestrial Planet Finder, a specialized space telescope equipped to detect Earth-like planets with the capacity to sustain life.

"I am convinced there is life out there elsewhere. How close intelligent life is to us, and whether we will ever be able to make contact, is much less likely."

Although Trottier understands the outcry over the decision to bump Pluto from the list of planets - "After all, Pluto is a Disney character" - he said sentiment can't stand in the way of scientific discovery.

"Nature is what nature is. It doesn't limit itself to artificial definitions that we try to put on things."