

YOU DON'T HAVE TO BE RICH TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

PHILANTHROPY SPECIAL

Charting Canada's culture of giving back

BY CATHY GULLI • When an old woman and her cat came looking for food recently from Shelley Wells, executive director of Quest Food Exchange in Vancouver, it didn't matter that the woman had only 17 cents to spend for a week's worth of goods. Wells had seen



SHELLEY WELLS gave up her business to focus on distributing food to the needy



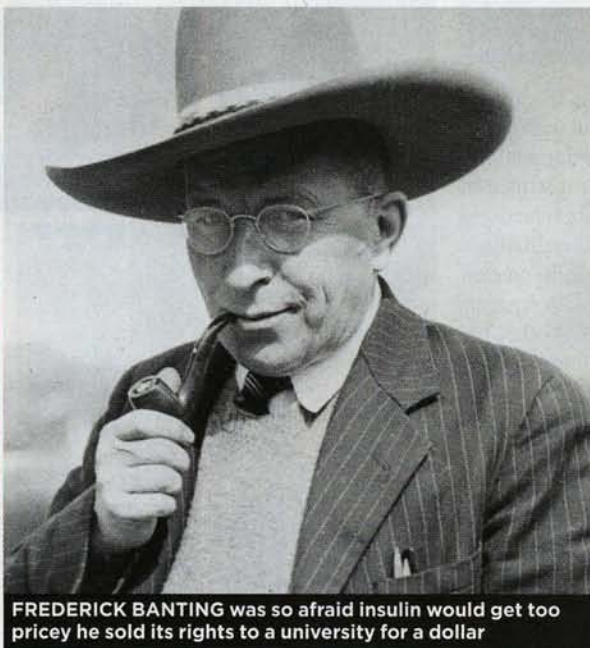
JIM BALSILLIE gave millions to the Centre for International Governance Innovation

tight budgets before—it was not rare for a family to drop by with \$20 to stretch for a whole month. By the time the lady went home that day, Wells and her team at Quest, which redistributes excess or damaged food from supermarkets and restaurants to the public,

were able to provide her with five meals. “We act as the link between the food and the people who need it,” says Wells of the operating model that fills the bellies of 220,000 people every month.

Quest is one of more than 120 examples of philanthropic achievement described in an upcoming report by Imagine Canada, a national charitable organization that researches and promotes the non-profit sector. “Conversations with Canadians: Philanthropic success stories,” to be released in November, details the history of philan-

‘THERE’S A LOT GOING ON. ALL IT TAKES IS ONE PERSON TO COME UP WITH AN IDEA AND TO PUT MONEY, THOUGHT, ENERGY AND TIME BEHIND IT’



FREDERICK BANTING was so afraid insulin would get too pricey he sold its rights to a university for a dollar

thropy across the country in hopes of motivating people to offer their talents and enthusiasm, if not always their money, for a cause. “We tend to focus on the big gifts,” says Georgina Steinsky-Schwartz, president and chief executive of Imagine Canada, “but

there’s a lot going on out there. All it takes is one person to come up with an idea and to put money, thought, energy and time behind it.”

The report fits all this philanthropic activity into one of eight categories, from fundraising, health care, education, social and economic development to the environment, sports, arts, and international issues. But a quick skim of the organizations and people named reveals that while large sums of money donated by wealthy people have had a tremendous impact—think of Ken Thomson’s donation of \$300 million worth of paintings to the Art Gallery of Ontario—many significant contributions start with ordinary, individual citizens who have been resourceful and inventive in addressing a problem. “I want people to dream and stretch their imagination on what they could do,” says Marvi Ricker, vice-president and managing director of philanthropic services at BMO Harris Private Banking, which sponsored the report.

When Shelley Wells first joined Quest several years ago, for instance, it was operating as a near-bankrupt soup kitchen barely able to feed a hundred people a day in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside. Until then, she had been

running her own business as a consultant on community development policies and race relations. The desperate need for produce, meat, poultry and grains—and Quest’s limited grocery budget—ignited an idea: redirect the good food that was going to the local landfill to Quest. Now, the organization is one of the fastest growing not-for-profits in Canada, having collected more than \$9 million worth of food last year—or 50 tonnes daily. And that’s still less than one per cent of the food they could be acquiring. Wells, who long ago abandoned her business to focus on Quest, says that specific goals are essential for philanthropy to work.

“You have to have a vision, and you have to believe in what you’re doing.”

The list of creative non-profit work is extensive: United We Can, also in Vancouver, sees 750 “binners” dive daily into dumpsters to rescue up to 20 million recyclable bottles

and cans from the landfill every year. In Montreal, a "circus city" called TOHU has been built using environmentally friendly methods, which has revitalized a destitute neighbourhood and employed marginalized residents. And in Kitchener-Waterloo, Ont., real estate agent Mary Bales established Heartwood Place, which offers affordable housing, after witnessing the widening disparity between the people who could buy nice homes in the community and those low-income earners who had few options. "I'm not a big-A advocate or a big-P political person," says Bales, but she insists that everyone has a role in philanthropy. "If I were to sit and look at what Mike Lazaridis and Jim Bal-

MARY BALES is putting roofs over the heads of low-income earners



IN PER CAPITA TERMS WE'RE STILL A LONG WAY BEHIND THE AMERICANS, BUT DONATIONS HAVE BEEN RISING WITH CANADIANS' EARNING POWER



RON DEMBO wants to cool things off with programs for low carbon footprints

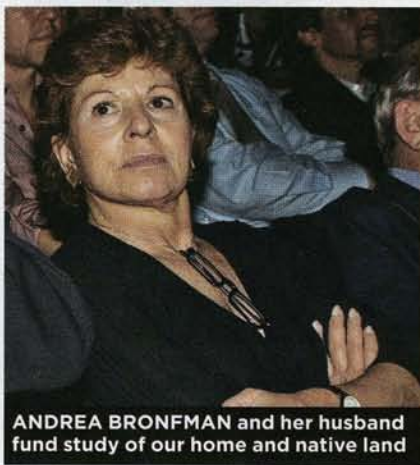
sillie do, I wouldn't do anything," she muses.

In fact, both of the co-CEOs of technology giant Research in Motion have donated millions to university education programs, and each have started non-profit organizations: Lazaridis founded the Perimeter Institute for Theoretical Physics, and Balsillie created the Centre for International Governance Innovation. The contributions of other big names are cited throughout Imagine Canada's report, including businessman Alan Broadbent, who established the Maytree Foundation and helped implement the National Child Benefit; Charles and Andrea Bronfman, who created the McGill Institute for the Study of Canada; and Ron Dembo, founder of risk management firm Algorithmics Inc., who now heads Zerofootprint, which promotes environmental programs such as carbon offsets.

Ricker, however, is quick to note that while David Suzuki, Stephen Lewis and June Callwood have become famed philanthropists, Canadians as a whole tend to be generous—no matter their income bracket or social status. "Everyone gives, it's just a question



MIKE LAZARIDIS plowed earnings from BlackBerry's back into university research into advanced physics



ANDREA BRONFMAN and her husband fund study of our home and native land

of how much," she notes, adding that "large amounts have great potential to have impact," but so can lesser amounts of money. In 2005, the year tsunami relief efforts dominated the news, Canadians gave \$11 billion, up from

\$9 billion a year earlier, when 85 per cent of the population over the age of 15 donated money to charity, says a report by Statistics Canada called "Caring Canadians, Involved Canadians." In per capita terms, we're still a long way behind the U.S., which gave US\$245.8 billion in 2005, but donations have been rising year after year since 1995, when Canadians gave \$4.5 billion. The increase, believes Ricker, correlates with the higher earning power of Canadians, and the growing awareness of local and global issues. "There's more money being made, and more pressure, rightly so, to give," she explains.

Too much pressure can be frustrating though, shows the StatsCan report, which reveals that some Canadians say they resist donating money or time when they feel rubbed the wrong way by relentless requests to help. Those feelings of being overwhelmed by need can paralyze individuals, suggests

Bales of Heartwood Place. "Too many people don't get involved because they don't know what they can do," she says. Bales often tells potential volunteers that philanthropy can involve "gifts of money [or] gifts of talent."

As evidence that a little cash and commitment can go a long way, both Ricker and Imagine CEO Steinsky-Schwartz point to Alice MacKay, a Vancouver secretary who, in 1944, put \$1,000 toward establishing the Vancouver Foundation, which gives endowments for various causes, and has become the largest organization of its kind in Canada.

Similarly inspiring is the story of Frederick Banting, who was so worried that insulin might become too expensive for the masses that he sold his car to finance his research, and then sold the rights to insulin for a dollar to the University of Toronto rather than other parties who would have manufactured it at a higher price.

"We don't know very much about the origins of social movements and organizations in Canada," says Ricker, who especially enjoys the story of Elizabeth McMaster, who founded the Toronto Hospital for Sick Children with a group of women who couldn't bear the high death rate of kids in 1875. By learning about the efforts of countless philanthropists throughout time, she believes that Canadians will "be more imaginative, more targeted, and they'll achieve more," Ricker continues. "People who give a lot, get a lot out of it." ■

With Suzanne Taylor