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**STARTING POINTS**

**Saluting the fire chief**

*When Bruce Firestone came back to town, few realized how important it would be for Ottawa*



**Elizabeth HOWELL**

**W**hen it comes to mucky business deals, Bruce Firestone has some tales to tell.

The Ottawa serial entrepreneur began his career cleaning up human waste practices with the Metropolitan Waste Disposal Authority in Sydney, Australia.

It was the mid-1970s, when environmental awareness was just hitting the western world. But he also found himself facing problems highlighted by a pop culture reference from the era: *The Godfather*.

"There was a big mob operation in terms of disposal of waste, so there was certainly a danger to bringing that industry under control," he recalls with a chuckle.

Mr. Firestone ended up coming back to his birth town of Ottawa when his dad, O.J., asked for help with his real estate business.

Since then, one can argue that Mr. Firestone has been the godfather – in a more benevolent sense – of Ottawa entrepreneurs.

He spent his career churning out real estate deals and helped bring the Ottawa Senators into town, to name a few efforts.

But now his energies are focused more on the next generation of businesspeople in his two-year-old role as the first entrepreneur in residence at the University of Ottawa's Telfer School of Management – following in the footsteps of O.J., a former professor at the institution.

"We have, in recent years, put a focus on entrepreneurship in terms of teaching and research," says Micheal Kelly, dean of the school and longtime friend of Mr. Firestone.

"(At the time) we had a fairly strong research group, but we wanted to focus on the entrepreneurship curriculum. And Bruce has a long history in this. He's taught a lot and he has some interesting ideas."

Among Mr. Firestone's ideas is a generation-long odyssey into downtown core renewal, which began in the mid-1980s when the National Capital Commission wanted to renew Sparks Street.

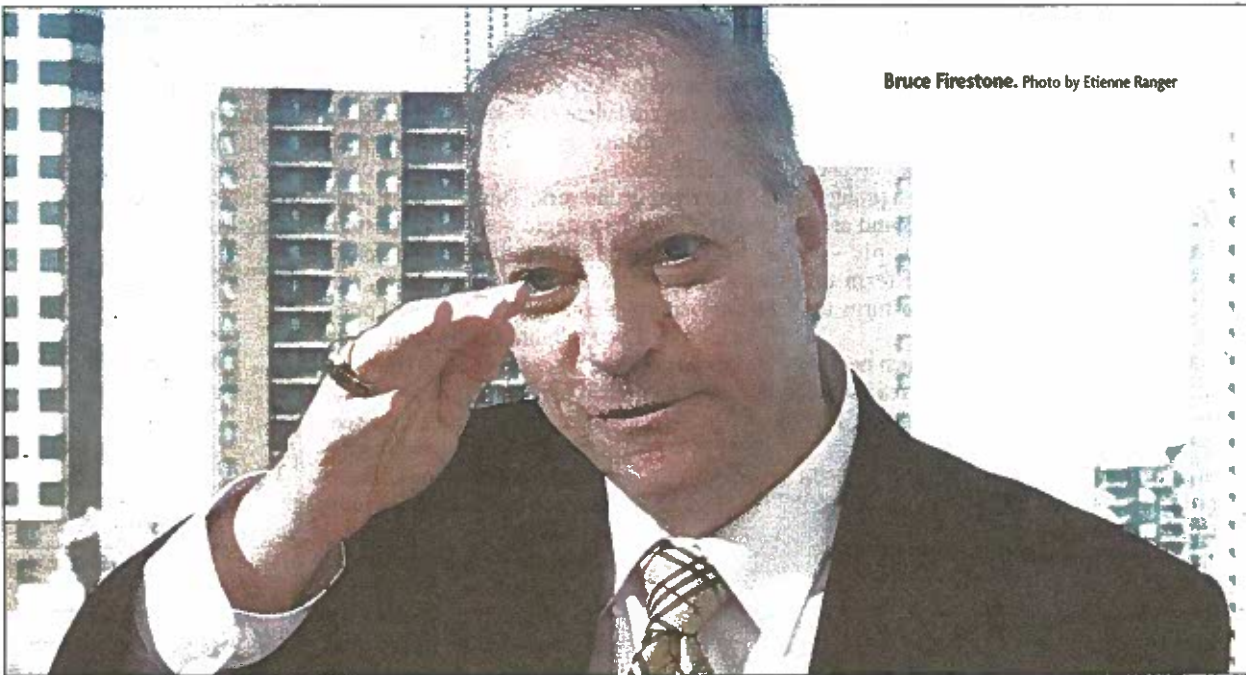
At the time, Mr. Firestone – already using Mac computers to print floor plans while most offices used typewriters – suggested turning the Bank of Canada building into a charity casino.

That idea was quickly turned down, but to this day he maintains it would have kept citizens in the area after dark.

"You can tinker with things, but you won't change the fundamentals of the street unless you do real things as opposed to things that are really lipstick," he says.

"You have to find uses for these buildings, and (the NCC's) motive – which was a good motive – was to bring people to the street after 5 p.m. on weekdays and on weekends.

"And you can't have that unless you have three and a half thousand people living within a few blocks of Sparks Street, and you can't do that unless you have some uses that do attract peo-



**Bruce Firestone.** Photo by Etienne Ranger

ple after hours."

So he worked on other forms of attraction instead. As it turns out, he ended up hiring a young chartered accountant named Cyril Leeder, who then hired an old friend, Randy Sexton.

Thus began the trio that brought the Ottawa Senators to town. That begat a company named Presidential Executive Travel Apartments, which begat several shopping malls and plazas in the Kanata area – as well as a little spot known as the Palladium, now Scotiabank Place.

"We thought there was some kind of method to what we were doing," Mr. Firestone says of the diverse business interests within his group.

"For example, when we got the hockey club, having the travel apartments was great. I mean, you could come to Ottawa – if you were a hockey player – with your family and you could get a two-bedroom unit finished up really well ... instead of going to a hotel you get a nice apartment.

"We also," he adds, "had some mini offices in the west end that fed our real estate business."

Mr. Firestone's chain of entrepreneurial thinking actually began with his father, who co-founded CJOH Television and also served on the commission that brought medicare into Canada.

And now his son, Matt, is doing real estate with another old friend of Mr. Firestone's – Steve Murray, a sales representative at Partners Advantage GMAC Real Estate.

"(Mr. Firestone) really has his finger on the pulse of the city, and the diversity of the people that he knows – whether through

the university or the partnerships he's built over the years – means he's dealt with a lot of different diverse people," says Mr. Murray. "That's why he's open to so many different ideas."

**BIO – BRUCE FIRESTONE**

**Born:** Ottawa, Ont.

**Education:** B. French, Laval University; B. Economics, University of Western Ontario; B. Finance, Harvard University; B. Civ. Eng., McGill University; M. Eng., University of New South Wales, Sydney; Ph.D. Urban Economics, Australian National University, Canberra.

**Prominent previous positions:** Executive vice-president of business development, Momentous Corp.; Co-founder, Ottawa Senators; Director, Terrace Corp.; Director, S.C. Stormont Corp.; Publisher, *Ottawa Business News*; Operations Research Engineer, Metropolitan Waste Disposal Authority, Sydney, Australia.

**Awards:** 2004 Exemplary Course Designation, Design Economics, Canada Architectural Accreditation Committee; 2002 Educator of the Year Award, OCRI EduGala.

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