

Humble start to mammoth success Award Wallace McCain honoured

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Like his roots, Wallace McCain is extremely humble when asked about being only the fifth Canadian to receive a prestigious American award for rags-to-riches business success.

"I'm just a farmer from New Brunswick," he says simply.

But the cofounder of McCain Foods and chairman of Maple Leaf Foods will join the ranks of Oprah Winfrey, Lou Dobbs and Maya Angelou next month as he is honoured with the International Horatio Alger Award.

McCain heads an empire that's grown powerfully over the past half century.

McCain Foods, which began making frozen French fries in 1957 from a small factory in Florenceville with only 30 employees, has since morphed into a worldwide enterprise that employs more than 20,000.

Pretty impressive for this New Brunswick farmer.

"I was surprised ... big time," McCain said Monday of his reaction to being selected for the award.

When he and his brothers first started out, they knew "absolutely, unequivocally, zero" about the business.

"We knew nothing about frozen food or frozen French fries. Zero," he said. "Which in hindsight, you'd say was stupid as hell."

But through their hard work, perseverance and "a lot of great employees," McCain Foods took off.

The company's holdings include large plants in Florenceville and Grand Falls, along with many others around the world.

The award, which recognizes individuals who have risen past adversity to lead successful businesses, is administered by an American non-profit group that recently expanded its mandate to recognize international talent.

Wayne Gretzky was the first Canadian to receive the honour from the Horatio Alger Association of Distinguished Americans in 2003.

According to Melody Morris, the organization's manager of membership services, McCain fit the profile for this year's award because he translated humble beginnings into a massively successful business.

"He and his family have contributed greatly to their community ... giving back into the community as well as being a great leader in [his] company," Morris said.

The association's main focus is providing assistance to students facing challenges in their own lives, with a national program doling out \$20,000 scholarships to over a hundred students this year.

The program is open only to American students.

"The students are basically where the members were many years ago," Morris said, noting members of the association act as mentors to the students.

McCain will be presented with his award and inducted as a lifetime member of the association during ceremonies set to take place in Washington April 3-5.

Donald Savoie, a public policy expert at Université de Moncton, said he was "delighted" by the news of the award, noting McCain has been "a giant in the business community in the province for a long, long time."

He lauded the association for recognizing McCain's significant economic contributions.

"What's remarkable about the McCains is that they decided to do what they're doing in New Brunswick, and so they stayed behind and built a world-class company starting in a very small village, Florenceville, and they made it work," Savoie said.

"The message to all should be, if he can do it, a lot of New Brunswickers could do the same."