

Mike Lazaridis



It was 1986, during his last year at the University of Waterloo, that a young Mike Lazaridis said he had high hopes for his new company, Research in Motion Ltd. (RIM):

“We’re pretty solidly established and the future looks good. It’s just a matter of letting people know what we can do for them. We feel our market is just starting to open up,” he said at the time.

Remarkably, in just over twenty years Lazaridis is known around the world for his wildly popular BlackBerry, a portable e-mail device, and Waterloo-based RIM is a global leader in wireless communications.

It’s a significant achievement for a man who immigrated to Canada from Turkey with his Greek parents and just three suitcases. Lazaridis was 5-years-old when he watched his bird-shaped kite soar above the stern of the boat that would take his family to their new home across the Atlantic Ocean. He was fascinated by how the motion of the boat and the wind kept the kite in the air.

His curiosity about motion and how things worked only blossomed as he grew up in Windsor, Ontario. He spent hours in the basement of his home building rockets and radios with his closest friend Doug Fregin. Fregin would later help found RIM in 1984 along with Michael Barnstijn.

When he was 12-years-old, Lazaridis won an award for reading every science book in the Windsor Public Library. In high school he took science courses to get into university but also enrolled in the shop courses that would allow him to tinker. He left the University of Waterloo’s electrical engineering programme in his final year because of a \$600,000 contract with General Motors.

Lazaridis’ business success has allowed him to donate huge sums of money to promote research locally. In 2000, the Perimeter Institute for Theoretical Physics was established thanks to a \$100 million grant from Lazaridis and his wife Ophelia Tong. The Waterloo-based institute recruits researchers from around the world to focus on uncovering the fundamental laws of nature.

At a groundbreaking ceremony then Prime Minister Jean Chretien said Lazaridis has “raised the bar for other private initiatives to support research and development.”

In 2004, Lazaridis and his wife donated \$33.3 million to the Institute for Quantum Computing at the University of Waterloo. Researchers there advance fundamental knowledge in the areas of engineering, math and science. At the time Lazaridis said, “We hope to see Waterloo become the epicenter of Quantum research and experimentation.”

Along with his entrepreneurial success, Lazaridis has received an honorary Ph.D. in Engineering from the University of Waterloo and in 2002 he was named Canada’s Nation

Builder of the Year by readers of the *Globe and Mail* newspaper. In 2006 he was made an Officer of the Order of Canada and he is the Chancellor of the University of Waterloo.

“He’s given the country a standard, a poster boy,” Howard Burton, executive director of the Perimeter Institute has said of Lazaridis. “He affects people’s beliefs in what they can accomplish. He’s an inspiration.”

Lazaridis’ scientific curiosity was obvious at a young age and it was a \$15,000 loan from his parents, his father a factory line-worker and his mother a seamstress that launched his business.

At the groundbreaking ceremony for the Perimeter Institute it was said: “This marks the odyssey started half a lifetime ago in a youngster’s dreams. It is our privilege to see that dream take form.”

Photo courtesy of the Kitchener-Waterloo Record Negatives Collection, University of Waterloo Library.