

A new kind of chancellor for Carleton University

Charles Chi, a successful high-tech entrepreneur to take over volunteer post in late November

BY ZEV SINGER, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN AUGUST 29, 2011 11:32 AM



Charles Chi, 45, has been an active alumnus of Carleton University. A 1988 graduate of the school's engineering program, he has contacted the university in the past to see how he can help. That will hit a new level in late November, when Chi takes over as chancellor of Carleton.

Photograph by: David Kaw ai, David Kaw ai

OTTAWA — Carleton University will appoint a new chancellor this fall, one decades younger than the average holder of the post.

Charles Chi, a successful high-tech entrepreneur is 45.

Of course, in the years since he graduated from Carleton's engineering program in 1988 he has accomplished quite a bit, including the creation of an optical networking company that sold for \$452 million.

He also spent 10 years as a Silicon Valley venture capitalist before retiring from that field and re-entering the startup world.

He'll begin the volunteer job as Carleton's chancellor in late November.

The man he takes over from, former deputy prime minister Herb Gray, is a good example of the traditional appointee to the ceremonial position: a person with a very long and distinguished public

career.

Other Carleton chancellors have included former prime minister Lester Pearson and former governor general Ray Hnatyshyn.

To date, the youngest person appointed to the role was former astronaut Marc Garneau, at the age of 54.

Chi has been an active alumnus, even calling Carleton after he became very successful to ask how he could help his alma mater and its students.

In recent years Chi has given talks to Carleton students to help inspire them with a vision of what can be made with their education if it's applied the right way.

He said he will enthusiastically hood the graduates, as chancellors traditionally do, but looks forward to putting his own stamp on the role.

"We haven't spoken about anything specific in that vein, but (Carleton's president) Dr. (Roseann) Runte expressed that it's a blank sheet of paper as far as she's concerned if I want to be involved in more things.

"I'm very open-minded and looking to serve the best way I can, so if there are opportunities for me to do things abroad for Carleton or in Silicon Valley for Carleton I'm very eager to do so."

Chi now lives in San Carlos, California, about halfway between San Francisco and San Jose. Currently, he's spending most of his time as chairman of new tech firm, Lytro Inc. The company has produced a new type of camera technology, based on light rays rather than pixels, which it says will bring a change in photography no less significant than the transition from film to digital. Its first cameras will hit the market this fall, which would suggest Chi is a bit busy at this moment in his life.

Chi said he hopes it will be helpful for students to have a role model who has used his Carleton education successfully in the world.

"One can strive to live out one's full potential. Carleton University is a great starting point for that," he said. "To this day, I still apply the principles of what I learned in my engineering education to what I do today."

Chi was born in Vietnam, but left the war-torn country when he was two, settling in Ottawa at age five. He graduated from Merivale High School. His father, Nguyen Huu Chi, a former provincial governor in Vietnam, taught political science at Queen's University in Kingston and then at Carleton.

Chi's parents actually had to pressure him to enrol at Carleton — where, he says, he was only an average student — rather than trying to make it as a New Wave guitarist.

That, along with a car-racing hobby that he says he's been neglecting for the past five years, but plans to get back to, mark him as a new type of chancellor.

“Charles Chi is a brilliant entrepreneur and a graduate of Carleton University,” Runte said. “ He will inspire students to pursue their dreams through his example of hard work, dedication and strategic thinking. He epitomizes the global Canadian, at home around the world.”

Runte also expressed her gratitude to the current chancellor, Gray, who went beyond the traditional ceremonial role. Gray was on the Board of Governors and sat on all its committees, spending time on campus several days each week.

“I cannot think of a wiser, more gracious person than the Rt. Hon. Herb Gray. He has dedicated his precious time to Carleton University, presiding over many convocations, guiding us through meetings with complex issues, listening to students, caring about the university community and making us all feel part of his family. He is a fine Canadian and we are proud he is our chancellor.”

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