



# close personal

with the new chair of UCC's Board of Governors, Michael MacMillan

Michael MacMillan '74 is executive chairman of Alliance Atlantis Communications Inc., a specialty broadcaster. Born in Scarborough, Ont., MacMillan came to UCC's Preparatory School in 1967. He graduated from Queen's University in Kingston, Ont. (BA, Honours Film Studies). In 1978, he co-founded Atlantis Films Limited (which later became Atlantis Communications Inc.). In 1984 Atlantis Films won an Oscar for Best Short Drama for *Boys and Girls*, based on an Alice Munro story.

In 1998, Atlantis Communications Inc. merged with Alliance Communications Corp. to become Alliance Atlantis Communications Inc. At the time this article was going to press, the company was in the process of being sold.

The company operates 13 Canadian specialty television networks, including Showcase, Slice, HGTV Canada, History Television, Food Network Canada, National Geographic Channel and BBC Canada. Alliance Atlantis also co-owns and co-produces the hit *CSI* franchise. Headquartered in Toronto, Alliance Atlantis operates offices in Montreal, Halifax, Los Angeles, Madrid, Dublin, London (U.K.) and Sydney.

MacMillan lives in Toronto with his wife, lawyer Cathy Spoel, and their three children.

**Q: What can you tell the readers of *Old Times* about your plans for UCC?**

**A:** I'd like to carry on the work that Principal Jim Power has put in place and the direction that he's chosen. It would be good to get the message across that the College should be more accessible to boys who may not normally have a chance to attend an educational establishment of this type.

**Q: UCC is an institution with great traditions and history. How should it raise its profile and stay relevant to modern education?**

**A:** When Sir John Colborne founded UCC in 1829, he intended that the school be a meritocracy. A superb idea. The school's motto is *Palmam Qui Meruit Ferat*, which means "Give the palm (prize) to him who merits it." In an attempt to make UCC as open and accessible as possible at that time, the tuition fees were set as low as reasonably possible — about \$8 per year I believe — and UCC was purposely never a religious-affiliated institution. Today, UCC builds on the strength of that time through its strong curriculum, programs and faculty. It can also build on that strength by embracing the idea of meritocracy in a modern way by making more financial aid available to students

who have the ability and personality to thrive here, but who cannot otherwise financially afford to attend.

**Q: Alliance Atlantis operates 13 Canadian television networks, all with their own specialties and nuances. Do you see a parallel with guiding the different departments in a corporation and laying out strategic plans for UCC?**

**A:** I actually don't see a parallel as far as comparing a school to a business model — that can be a dangerous comparison. Strategies are totally different for a business than a school. Our purpose at UCC is to educate and encourage qualities such as creativity, courage and caring in the boys. They are qualities that will lead them through life.

**Q: What have you learned from your experience of leading a major Canadian company that you can bring across to a major Canadian school?**

**A:** I think that in both cases it's important to find that delicate balance point between the daily or annual "issues" on the one hand and the big picture and the longer term planning and stewardship responsibilities on the other hand.

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**Q: Is there any one faculty or student who has really influenced you and made you who you are today?**

**A:** Yes, there was an important influence in my years at UCC. So often there is that one teacher who makes all the difference. In my case his name was Michael Carver and he taught English in the Prep. As part of the English program, he introduced the Grade 8 students to film by having us make little animated films with bits of coloured paper. That stirred my interest and by the time I got to the Upper School I had become captivated by the idea of making films. I spent a huge amount of time after school in the afternoons down at the Prep working on my films; I was probably supposed to be doing other things. Michael Carver was often helping me and always encouraging me. I know that people often claim that UCC just turns out lawyers and investment bankers, but my experience was different. I was allowed and encouraged to pursue my own unusual interests. I enjoyed this so much that I then attended Queen's University specifically because of its Film Studies program. Michael Carver had a profound influence on my life.

**Q: What are your feelings about single-sex education? Is there still a place for it in today's modern society?**

**A:** There is definitely a place for it. Upper Canada College is in an urban setting. The day boys come here on a daily basis, but then go home to their families, their siblings, their friends and neighbours which include girls and women. They are part of a busy Toronto and are not isolated from the outside world. This applies to both boys' and girls' schools.

**Q: If, upon leaving the Board of Governors, you are asked what your most important accomplishment was during your tenure as Chair, what do you hope to say?**

**A:** I'd like my tenure to be associated with ensuring that UCC continues to offer its students the most wonderful faculty — which it already has in place — and also give the boys who want to study here the best possible opportunity to do that. Again, the chance for students from a different socio-economic background to play a part in the school would be a nice legacy, too.

**Q: Name the one thing that no one at UCC knows about you yet.**

**A:** I am a partner in a Prince Edward County vineyard and winery, Closson Chase Vineyards in Hillier, Ont. We make a great Chardonnay. Hold on... does that count as a free plug in *Old Times*?!

**Q: Tell us about what "community" in Toronto means to you.**

**A:** This brings to mind a physically small but metaphorically large anecdote. In the '70s there was a large wooden fence surrounding the grounds of the College. You couldn't see in or out. It was very isolated from the surrounding area. That was eventually replaced by a chain link fence and opened up the view. It was symbolic to UCC re-joining the community and I liked that. I also like the College's Horizons program that provides tutoring and mentoring for students in Toronto's inner-city schools. That, to me, is a great example of what "community" can be.

**Q: When you were a student at UCC what were your best and worst subjects?**

**A:** Easily the worst three for me were physics, chemistry and math. I really enjoyed languages and history.

**Q: What personal life goals did you set yourself as a young man? How many have you achieved so far?**

**A:** I always say it's easier to set goals for oneself with the benefit of hindsight! But seriously, in my late teens I decided to try hard and to not be a spectator in life. I decided I'd show up and participate. I really enjoy the whole feeling of being challenged. You know, it's the age-old truism — better to attempt and fail than never to have tried.

**Q: How would you define success?**

**A:** That's a broad question! Well, I'd say that real success is often much more than reaching the goal that is "officially" set. Success is often not about a tangible, specific prize. Rather, success is often found in the experience that one takes away from a process or a situation. In this context, if a young man leaves UCC having had a challenging time, has learned how to work with others in solving problems, has made good friends and is capable of nurturing honest and close relationships, has developed his curiosity and character — then that to me defines success.

**Q: What's the last great book you read, and why did it affect you so much?**

**A:** Not the last one I read, but one that struck a chord with me was *The Jungle* by Upton Sinclair. It was published in 1905 and is set amongst the workers in Chicago's meat packing industry and the squalid conditions of that time and place — not the most glamorous of subjects. But it is a powerful and human story with emotions worth remembering.