

Century 21 franchisor still going '120mph'

Nathan Vanderklippe, Financial Post

VANCOUVER - Here's what you need to know about Gary Charlwood: he runs more than a marathon a week and swims more than 500 kilometres a year. For a good nine months of the year, he shows up at the office wearing a suit jacket and shorts, a look he calls "elegant."

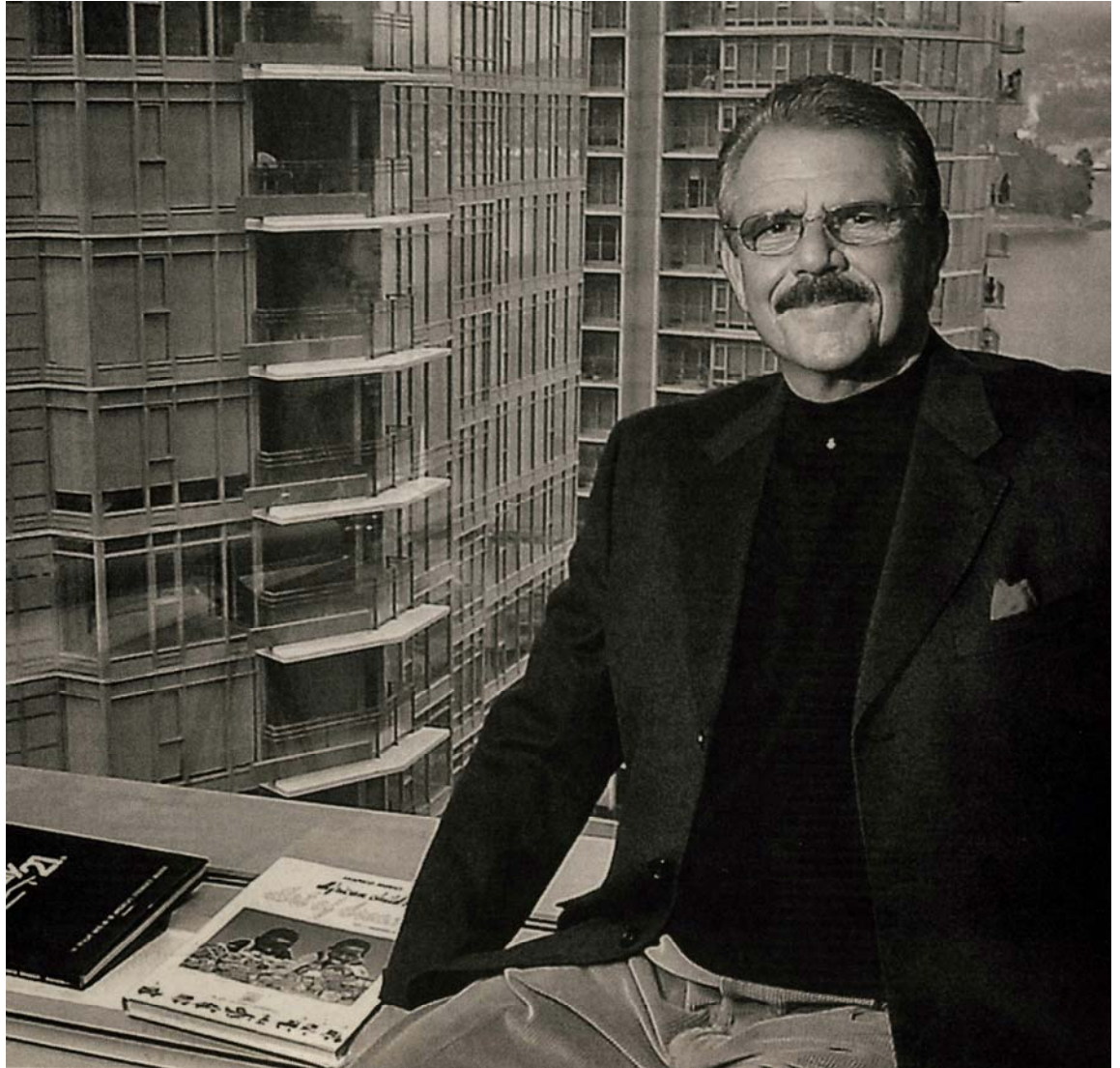
That, and he is quite possibly Canada's most successful franchisor.

From a rocket ride through the ranks of the airline industry when he has in his twenties, to a stint selling houses in which he went from obtaining a real estate licence to being British Columbia's top seller in just 15 months, it was obvious early on that the one thing Mr. Charlwood would never lack was success.

Thirty years later, he sits atop an empire that includes the master franchise over all Century 21 locations in Canada as well as the Uniglobe Travel and Centum mortgage broker franchises, which he founded. But as he mused on his entrance yesterday into a hall of fame studded with the likes of McDonald's messiah Ray Kroc, Mr. Charlwood, who is 66, couldn't help but wonder: What's next?

"There's a big one yet," he said. "I just have a real feeling. I want to try and do something else."

That's on top of his plans to create a property management business out of his Century 21 holdings and leverage his mortgage brokerage franchises into his own bank. Together with his sons and several partners, he already presides over



Gary Charlwood controls an empire that includes the Century 21 master real estate franchise for all of Canada.

an extraordinary international franchising network that oversees 1,700 locations in nearly three dozen countries. In 2006, his company's total sales hit \$2.7-billion, along with placing a substantial value of mortgages.

His franchising abilities have been so remarkable that yesterday he became the

first-ever Canadian inducted into the hall of fame of the International Franchise Association, which represents the world's most powerful franchising companies.

"It's kind of amazing," he said, although he admits that -- as with most of his accomplishments -- he had aimed for this honour. "I did say on

a walk about a year ago that one day I'd like to be a candidate for that. I just never thought it would be now. I thought it would be in four or five years."

No one ever accused Mr. Charlwood of being short on ambition. Born in Germany and educated in England, he immigrated to Canada in the

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mid-1960s with \$2,000 in his pocket and dreams of becoming an airline sales representative. It did not take him long to figure out that he wanted a bigger salary than he could make by working for someone else.

At 30 years old, he turned down an offer to take an airline vice-president position, instead beginning work as a real estate agent. Working 18-hour days seven days a week, he quickly rose to be best in British Columbia. It eventually cost him his marriage, but he quintupled his salary. And it was not long before he bought his own realty company, then became owner of the Century 21 franchise rights to Canada.

In less than a year, Mr. Charlwood had 30 franchises

signed up. He now has 400 in Canada and another 420 around the world. "He's a salesman's salesman. He can sell people virtually anything if he sets his mind to it," said Don Lawby, who has worked for Mr. Charlwood for nearly 30 years and now serves as president and chief operating officer of Century 21 Canada LP. "Terrible person to argue with; he always wins. But at the same time people love to be around him."

Early in his career, Mr. Charlwood mulled a considerable purchase offer for his Canadian franchise rights, but decided that, rather than take the cash and reinvest in another company, he would start another one of his own. Travel had "pizzazz," and he had experience from his air-

line days. In real estate, he had learned the benefits of narrowing his focus. He took the same principle to the travel business when he created Uniglobe, focusing on a single airline or single car rental company and promising to bring them significant business in exchange for favourable pricing.

"Our motto was minimize product, maximize profit. A first in the industry," he said. It's a philosophy he has applied to the mortgage brokerage business, too. In five years, Centum has grown to 170 locations across Canada.

Yet if there is one thing that stands out to his colleagues, it's not so much his business acumen as his fanatical fit-

ness. He writes down every kilometre he exercises -- last year he walked 1,102 kilometres, ran 1,207 and swam 484. "He goes at 120 m.p.h. all the time," said Bill Blackall, the general manager of Century 21 Prudential Estates in Richmond, B.C., which is Mr. Charlwood's oldest surviving franchise location.

"I've seen him jog in Toronto, Quebec, Calgary, Newfoundland, Halifax and Vancouver. You look out your window and the stupid guy's out there jogging at 6 a.m. It's like, 'Gary, what are you doing?' But that's how he keeps his mental and physical edge."